

# Dealing with Difficult People

This handout is based on work and experience of Tantra R.<sup>1</sup> and Brinkman, R., & Kirschner, R.<sup>2</sup>

In an ideal world, you would have the opportunity to choose who you want to work with. Preferably, you would have an understanding boss, colleagues who are your friends, reliable technical staff, etc. However, the reality can be quite different. You may end up with a boss who belittles you, colleagues who laugh behind your back, and arrogant technical staff with relationship problems. These are what are known as difficult people.

A key aspect of communicating with a difficult person is empathy. To do this, you must identify where the bad behavior is coming from and thereby understand his/her intentions. Once you understand the intentions, you can develop an appropriate strategy to help you deal with the difficult person.

Experts distinguish four types of difficult people with the following intents:

- **Get things done:** person has an inkling that things may not get done, his/her intention is to do whatever it takes to move things along, his/her goal is on achieving the final results
  - *Indicators:*
    - Controlling, often being outspoken and assertive.
    - Aggressive or abrasive.
    - Rude, possibly making sarcastic comments or irrelevant remarks.
    - Arrogant, to display his/her knowledge/expertise.
  - *Strategies:*
    - Stick to the main points/facts and be assertive.
    - Have the courage to stand up for yourself and speak up if your problem person is overstepping the boundaries. If you think this person is wrong, say so, but make sure that you are 100% sure.
    - Be careful if your problematic person becomes arrogant. It is best not to confront such a person directly, since this type of person does not like to have his/her authority questioned. Instead, you can listen carefully, not reject his/her ideas immediately, and be indirect when introducing new ideas into the conversation.
- **Do things right:** person has an inkling that things are not being done right.
  - *Indicators:*
    - Being a perfectionist.
    - Being a whiner.
    - Saying no to everything or saying nothing at all.
  - *Strategies:*
    - If he/she is whining, you must keep a positive attitude. You need to understand if the complaints are genuine and if there is room for improvement.
    - Do not agree or disagree with whiners. Be practical in your approach, so that you can come up with potential solutions, rather than magnifying the problem.
    - If you have a perfectionist on your hands, he/she often displays a negative outlook. Don't try to change his/her thinking right away, but give him/her time to think. Your tactic is to give practical advice, but first acknowledge that you understand his/her perspective. Then you must show him/her the future of what can happen if his/her approach persists, e.g. it can lead to the project not moving forward.
    - If this person simply does not make an effort to talk, then your best bet is to be patient. Your goal here is to break the ice. You can do this by asking the person open-ended questions, or introduce humour into the conversation.
- **Want to get along (with others):** this problem person has an inkling that he/she is not getting along with others.

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<sup>1</sup>Tantra R. (2019). A Survival Guide for Research Scientists. Springer.

<sup>2</sup>Brinkman, R., & Kirschner, R. (2002). Dealing with people you can't stand: How to bring out the best in people at their worst. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- *Indicators:*
  - The need to seek approval from others.
  - Over-committing, taking on far too much work: He/she will end up saying yes to everything and often not being able to deliver.
- *Strategies:*
  - Don't be rude or show that you are upset with the person. Instead, create a friendly environment and discuss the problems. Such a person needs reassurance the most.
  - Do not push your problem person into a decision, if he/she is indecisive.
  - Give practical advice, especially if he/she starts procrastinating. This type of person needs support more than anything else, in order to reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed. For example, you can help him/her to plan for things, explore different options together and then write pros and cons, to identify future actions.
- **Be appreciated (by others):** this type of problem person has an inkling of not being appreciated
  - *Indicators:*
    - Becoming arrogant or explosive.
    - Talking about stuff that he/she really knows little of.
    - Making snide remarks at your expense, so that he/she can feel more superior.
  - *Strategies:*
    - Ask probing questions. In this way you can reveal to others that your difficult person really does not know his/her material. Once you have discredited this person, you must resist the temptation to isolate or make fun of him/her. Instead, extend the hand of friendship.
    - Stay calm if your difficult person becomes explosive, e.g. you can show compassion by reassuring that you have understood his/her concerns. The worst thing that you can do to this person is to lose control and get angry yourself.

If you can not identify an intent there is a big chance you are dealing with **bullies**. Here are typical "bulling" signals:

- This person is showing a clear effort to cause you harm, e.g. by insults, humiliation, spreading gossips, belittling, shouting, dishing out unfair criticisms, removing suitable work from you, giving unreasonable targets/deadlines and ignoring your opinions.
- The demonstration of persistent negative behavior, i.e., his/her bad behavior is not a one-time occurrence. It is persistent, often worsening over time.

Do not try to understand where the bad behaviour is coming from, as you are neither a psychologist nor a psychiatrist. Your main goal is to identify the options and to eventually **save yourself!** Dealing with bullies can make you more emotional, develop low self-esteem, make you less efficient at work, and even cause mental illness!

Here is a list of potential actions you can do dealing with bullies:

- Log everything (events, dates, what he/she did, how you felt, witnesses, etc).
- Talk to a professional (lawyer, HR manager) to not only clarify your position but also establish if you indeed have a case.
- Consider seeking internal help to voice your complaint.
- Consider finding another position within the company or look for a job elsewhere.

The world of work can be a tough place, as we do not have the luxury to pick our colleagues, boss, etc., it is inevitable that we will need to deal with troublesome people at some point in our lives.

But you can strive to the **general strategy** to deal with conflict person:

- Empathise and identify intent.
- Change your own attitude/behaviour.
- Develop and adopt a suitable strategy.
- Realise that the nature of any conflict is unique. As such, your first attempt to deal with the conflict may not work. It is imperative that you adopt a flexible approach on how you want to proceed, until you find a formula that works.