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Dealing with Specific Types of Difficult People

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Tim McClintock, PMP, Global Knowledge Instructor

Introduction

About 10% of the typical workforce falls into the "Difficult People" category. Some people are "surprised it's so little!" Sometimes it feels like they are everywhere! What is a difficult person? Perhaps the better question is: what is a difficult person for you? Perhaps it's someone who is disruptive. Or . . . it might be someone who is too quiet and hard to draw out; not a good listener and always interrupts; someone who bullies and is very abrupt.

The effects they have on the organization vary greatly, but usually involve the following: Low moral, increased conflict, group attitude goes as their attitude goes, intimidation, insults, team demoralization, decreased productivity, rising costs, increasing project risks, need for additional resources, etc.

What happens to you when you deal with a Difficult Person? Everyone has a slightly different reaction, but some common reactions include a rise in blood pressure, racing heart, lump in the throat, "fight, flight, or freeze" syndrome, or getting red-in-the-face.

One thing you can be sure of: If you don't do something about the "thing" that someone is doing that makes them difficult for you, you'll continue to get more of it.

What Are the Different Types of Difficult People?

There are many types of difficult people. In general, they can be rolled into these main groups:

The Steamroller

This is the bully of the group - always interrupting, insulting, and yelling. We all know those types.

The Sniper

These are the folks who hide in the back of room, always sniping - taking shots at everyone, constantly nit-picking back at you, sending out comments, etc. They always want to do this from "under cover." If you call them on it they say, "Oh, I'm just kidding," or, "Can't ya take a joke?" or, "I didn't say anything!" They always have a comment.

The "Can't Say No" Person.

Will not say no to work. The problem is they won't say no, they won't say no, they won't say no . . . and then they finally just collapse!

The Know-It-All

Do I have to say anything else? Need I say more? They know it all!

The Complainer

Chronic complainers! Chronic whiners! To them, life is one big complaint!

The Staller

The Indecisive Staller. This is the person who just will not make a decision. They will not commit to anything; they are always stalling.

Time To Take Action!

No matter which one of these personality types is the difficult person for you, you must learn to effectively deal with them.

Dealing with Specific Types of Difficult People

So that leads to the question: How do you deal with these difficult types of people?

Dealing with the Steamroller

When dealing with a steamroller, also known as the verbal "big bully," stay calm. Typically, they are trying to "rile you up," wanting you to elevate your emotions to their level. Don't let them do it. Keep eye contact with them. Remain assertive. Let them go on and on, let them unwind. Then when they spool down a bit, interrupt them!

When you interrupt them, you will have the chance you need to become assertive. That's when you pick up the ball. One effective approach is close to Muhammad Ali's Rope-A-Dope! Muhammad Ali was known to have the ability take a great many punches to his mid-section. He would lean against the ropes, and let his opponent "box himself out"/get tired. He would wait for his opportunity, and then, BAM! He would knock them out. In a similar fashion, you should do the same thing verbally when dealing with the steamroller. Allow them to verbally wear themselves out, and then, when you see your opportunity, BAM! You take your turn.

Call them by name, and then say, "OK, now wait a minute, I have something to say. I've been listening to you, now you listen to me." You will start, and what will happen? They will interrupt! What should you do? Be assertive! Say, "Hey, I said wait a minute. I listened to you, now it's my turn." Don't back down! That's what they expect! Also remember to keep eye contact. Just don't back down. You may not "win" the argument or discussion, but once you stand up to them, they typically will become your best buddy. It only takes one time! They may still bully other people on your team, but they won't bully you any longer. By going "toe to toe" with them, you may have just earned their respect.

Dealing with the Sniper

Again, these are the folks who hide in the back of room, sending out comments, always sniping, taking shots at everyone, constantly nit-picking back at you. Think back to your high school classroom days. What would your teacher do with these guys? Most of the time, the teacher would call them out. For example, the teacher may say something like, "Excuse me, did you have something to say? Something to share with the entire class?" Of course they would rarely, if ever, stand up and say anything; they would always back down and say something like, "Oh, no, I was just kidding," or, "No, I don't have anything to share."

This approach works most of the time. Call them out; don't let them get away with it. Clarify: "Excuse me, but I thought I heard something in that comment. Do you have something to share with everyone in the meeting?" One word of caution: be careful. Most of the time they will stop their sniping behavior, but occasionally they will shift gears and become the bully - the "Steamroller." But now you know what to do with a bully. Simply switch tactics, do your own version of the "rope-a-dope," wait for your opportunity, and then when it's time, seize the moment.

Dealing with the "Can't Say No" Person

This is the person who has a hard time saying no, especially as it relates to work assignments. They will attempt to undertake any assignment, even those given to them by people other than their own boss.

Why would they do this? Some people really are afraid to say no. They are afraid to be seen as incompetent or unable to carry enough of the load. Some people simply do not know their limits, or worse, they ignore them.

In other situations, it is because the employee is a rookie on the team and doesn't want to let the others down; for others it is a personality issue, or even the result of the culture in which they were raised. In some cultures, saying no is highly discouraged. As a result, people raised in this environment have a hard time when it comes to balancing the work-load effectively.

In dealing with the "Can't Say No" person, the first thing you want to do is to build a relationship with them. You need to earn their trust and get them to be comfortable with you. Then, let them know what you are concerned about.

Once you have built a good level of trust, you can begin by asking questions that are designed to help them understand that they are out of balance. Be careful, though, as they will often be very sensitive. In their mind, they are doing a really good thing. From their point of view, if they were not doing the work, it really would not get accomplished. Quite often though, even if they do manage to complete all of the work that they have taken on, the quality of that work will suffer.

Occasionally you will find the "Can't Say No" person who is able to accomplish all the work with an acceptable, and even excellent, quality level. The problem here is that rarely will they be able to maintain that momentum, and they will eventually burn out. At that point, they will be of no use to the team, but more importantly, they will have done harm to themselves. Recovery from a true burnout stage is more than difficult. Our goal is to prevent the "Can't Say No" person from ever reaching anything close to that stage.

There are several things that you, as the boss, can do that will be helpful.

You can make suggestions for alternatives; there may be many people who can do the work that they have taken on, but they will not see that. You can point out the obvious, but quite often you will need to become their work filter. You will tell them that they are only allowed to take on work assignments that are passed through you. No one is allowed to give them an assignment that does not come by your desk first. They will resist this, because they will feel it to be an embarrassment. They will try to stall you and put you off. Just be firm, and reassure them that things will be fine, but they must continue to trust you.

You will need to keep on top of them, continually getting agreement that this is the best approach. You need to be their sanity checker. You can do a workload histogram to show them exactly how much work they have

been doing. This will show them exactly how much they have been out of balance. It's almost like a 12-step program. They need to learn in baby steps that it's okay to say no, at times, and the world really will continue. The work really will get done.

Dealing with the Know-It-All

In dealing with the Know-It-All, here are some bottom-line items to be aware of.

Typically, they have been around a long time, and they do know a lot. So, make sure you know your stuff, because if you don't, they will point it out very quickly. Recognize it, and respect it, but show them that maybe their ideas aren't always the right answer or the right way.

The typical Know-It-All tends to be a bit of a bully as well. They have their idea, and they just won't let it go. You can try saying things like, "That's a really good point, but have you thought of this? What if this or that happens?" Basically, you need help them see the alternatives. Will they ever admit they are wrong? Typically, not. It's like trying to catch a greased pig. Most of the time, it's not going to happen.

If you find yourself dealing with a Know-It-All in a meeting, ignore the temptation to make them look bad. Do not alienate them. Throw an idea out there, and let it sit for a minute. Sometimes they may actually come around to it, but quite often, they will want to spin it so that it will seem as if it were their idea. And you know what? That is okay sometimes. Occasionally, selling an idea someone else wants to take credit for, once in a while, is okay. Your job is done, and the elimination of conflict will be better in the long run.

Dealing with the Complainer

Understand that to them, life is one big complaint. Complainers typically come in one of two delicious flavors. The first type of Complainer really doesn't care about solutions; they just want someone to listen to them. They will come into your office in the morning, and they will talk, and talk, and talk, until you finally chase them out! Here's what you can do. Listen for a while, and then move them to a problem-solving alliance. Acknowledge their feelings, deal with the emotions if necessary, but try to push them toward finding a problem-solving solution. You can say something like this, "Okay, I hear your dilemma. Let's see if we can solve it." The secret is when you move into problem-solving, they will typically leave. Very quickly. They really don't want to solve anything. They just want to complain!

With the second type of complainer, it's a little bit different. These are the folks who complain because they are paralyzed - they really don't know what to do. When you move to problem-solving, you really will help them. One thing to be careful of though: don't facilitate their dependence on you, otherwise they will come back again and again for the very same issue or problem. As the saying goes, you can feed someone, or you can teach them to fish for themselves. If you fail to do that, it is now you who has an additional problem, one of time management. Learn to be upfront. Say, "Okay, I will show you this one time. Here's a pen and a sheet of paper; I'm going to talk, and you will take notes. I will show you this one time. I will stay here all day if necessary, but when we leave, I expect that you will really have 'gotten it'. I expect that you will be able to do this for yourself after this conversation, so make sure to pay attention and ask as many questions as you need to understand."

Use a tone that is gentle, yet firm at the same time. By having this conversation, you will actually have helped two people, you and them.

Dealing with the Staller

Ah, the Indecisive Staller. They don't want to upset anyone, which really means that they want to please everyone. In their mind, the way to accomplish this is never to make a decision that ends up upsetting everyone! They don't want to take a stand. Instead, they take the attitude that if they just leave the issue alone, it will go away. Yes, quite often it will go away, but only because someone else will have done the work, and now they're mad too!

One way of helping them is to discuss the benefits of deciding. Talk about all the good that comes through getting off the fence and making a decision: work actually is accomplished, people are happy, morale will go up, projects will be able to move forward, and they get to continue drawing a paycheck! Another thing you can do is discuss a few options with them. This is basically the old salesman's trick. Instead of saying, "Would you like to buy the vacuum cleaner today?" you say, "Which of the vacuum cleaners will you be buying today, the red one or the blue one?" What you are doing is narrowing down their options, and forcing them to make a decision.

Summary

From our short analysis of difficult people, one definite conclusion can be drawn. If you don't do something about the difficult people in your life, you will simply continue to get more of their problematic behavior. Whether it is the Steamroller, the Sniper, the Can't Say No person, the Know-It-All, the Complainer, or the Staller, you must take action. Be gentle, but be firm, and remember they are human, just like you are. But, after all, it's a place of business, and work needs to be accomplished. And in the accomplishment of that work, sometimes the more difficult conversations need to take place.

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About the Author

Tim McClintock, PMP, has a multitude of years of experience working with Fortune 500 Companies in the IT, service, and banking sectors, Tim is a gifted speaker and presenter, and consults with executives in all areas of leadership and management. Tim has worked with executive teams in the areas of portfolio, program, project, and continuity management, providing strategic planning and development, coaching, project management consulting and training, and IS and Project consulting to all levels of professionals. Tim holds the Project Management Professional certificate from the Project Management Institute.