



How to handle difficult people

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Perhaps one of the biggest sources of stress in our lives is other people. Often many of us don't struggle that much with having a lot to do. We get down and do it. It is the interactions with people, especially those we consider difficult, that really take energy. But, being human and living in this world means that we do have to interact with people. Often, lots of people. While as social beings, our happiest moments come from good times with those we love, our worst times also come from being with people. Those people who drive us up the wall with frustration. Given that we have no choice but to deal with difficult people in our lives (and who knows, you may be one yourself), let us consider some ways to try and make the process easier and less stressful.

1. Know yourself. Self-awareness is the start of mastering all relationships. Know what sort of people you get on well with, and which types set your teeth on edge. **Know your triggers.** What is it that people say and do that gets you really steamed up. If you know how you are likely to react in different situations and you practice managing yourself so you don't sabotage your position in those situations, you can help yourself a lot.
2. If you are poorly **emotionally regulated** (which means your emotions flounder all over the place all the time), or you are very impulsive (you don't think things through before you speak or act), then do some work to improve. Coaching and therapy can help with emotional regulation and impulse control for most people. When you are engaged in a difficult conversation you need to stay calm. You want to think through what you say rather than blurt out inappropriate words that just escalate conflict.
3. **Set and keep firm boundaries.** If you need to think about what your boundaries are before you engage then do so. If you know this is someone with poor boundary management then you can discuss boundaries up front as to what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. If it is apparent during conversation that this is someone who does not respect boundaries, then step in and clearly communicate what is acceptable. Be consistent with your boundaries. Enforce consequences if necessary.
4. Do show some **empathy**. Try and understand the issue from their point of view – not so that you agree with them, but so you can deal with conflict better. If someone feels that they are listened to, truly listened to, they are likely to tell you the whole story and they are likely to be more amenable to hearing a different point of view.

5. Be assertive and stand your ground. **Be polite and respectful, but also firm.** Don't get swayed from your standpoint to the extent that you end up agreeing to what you don't want. You will not be happy if you walk away from a meeting feeling you have not been heard, and feeling you have been forced into something you really don't like. In fact you may need several more meetings to sort things out. So right up front, make sure you know what you want out of the encounter when you leave.
6. Don't take their words to heart. **Don't take anything personally.** It is hard not to be affected by people who are aggressive or rude or manipulative, but remind yourself that they are behaving the way they are because of who they are, not because of you. If someone else was standing there they would get the same treatment. So, try and detach emotionally and listen to what is being said. Don't take the bait and guard your peace of mind. If you remain calm, you remain in control.
7. **Check that you understand what they are saying.** Unless someone is very clear in their communication we often misunderstand what they are trying to say. Usually when people communicate they leave out part of what they are thinking and assume we have understood their words in the same way as they meant. If you are unsure at all as to what they mean then check back with them. You could say something like, "If I understand you correctly, you are saying...."
8. **Focus on the facts.** While it is easy to get distracted with the emotions and tone, while keeping your boundaries in place, pay attention to, and sift out the facts of the conversation. And deal with facts. Assumptions and opinions are hard to debate.
9. Strategically and deliberately use **silence and pauses for best effect.**
10. Know when to **disengage** and step away and when to get a third party such as a **mediator involved.** Also know if the meeting would be better if you went with support.
11. Know when to involve others for **expert advice** and when you need to **debrief** with others after a meeting.

For as long as you and I are alive we will be dealing with people daily in our personal and working lives. We will be meeting new people all the time as our personal and occupational circles change. Some of those people we will immediately get along with. Some of those people we will be able to have a pleasant and productive conversation with. And some of those people will rub us up the wrong way. Personalities differ and no matter where you end up socialising or working, you will meet people of all types. To the extent that you take the time to learn how you deal with different types of personalities and learn how to better engage with them, you will lead a far less stressful and more productive life.