

Dealing with Difficult People

You know, this would be a great business if it weren't for having to deal with people all the time...

OK, so maybe I've exaggerated things a bit, but we've all certainly heard that saying before. Why does that sentiment ring true for so many folks? Obviously it's because of all the people challenges we're presented with in our business. Virtually every one of my clients over the years has brought up the subject of dealing with difficult people. There's no escaping the fact that they come into everyone's lives at one time or another. Sometimes they come in the form of an unhappy or hard-to-get-along-with client, customer, or co-worker. Sometimes they're a person we report to or someone who reports to us. And sometimes they're just someone we happen to come in contact with like a store clerk. Whoever they are, they can cause anxiety, frustration, concern, or anger in us and can even cause us to become like them – someone difficult to deal with.

Sometimes the best way to deal with a difficult person is to avoid them altogether – give them wide berth. But often we don't have that option. The difficult person is someone we simply have to deal with. Most people would say that in those situations, we have three options. These options are: 1) Try to change ourselves, 2) Try to change the other person, and 3) Resolve to tolerate the situation – basically decide to put up with them. I'd like to suggest that there's a fourth, very effective option as well – perhaps the most effective of the four options. Let's spend some time discussing these four options.

1) Try to Change Ourselves

Your first instinct might be, "Why should I be the one to change?" In fact quite often you'll find that to be an appropriate response! Often we are not the catalyst for their behavior, but sometimes we are. If you've had people in your life who cause you to become difficult or obstinate, then doesn't it stand to reason that you may be causing that same reaction in someone? It's in situations like this that we have to examine our own behaviors and reflect on whether we're the cause. Frequently however, we're blind to our shortcomings. We don't see what we don't see. How do you find out whether you're the cause of the other person's difficult behavior? Option 4 holds the answer.

2) Try to Change the Other Person

In Option 1 our initial response was to ask, "Why should I be the one to change?" Our first reaction was one of justification. Basically saying, "I'm not the one with the problem..." Guess what happens when we try to change the other person? You got it. They have the same reaction we would have had. Everyone feels justified in their behavior. No one intends to behave arbitrarily or irrationally. We *always* have a reason for acting the way we do. Attempting to force the other person to change just doesn't work. Just ask any spouse! No one will change anything about themselves until and unless they choose to do so. Option 4 holds the answer.

3) Decide to Put Up with Them

“Tolerate it.” “Just deal with it.” The only thing that accepting things the way they are accomplishes is to postpone a confrontation. Although this course of action (or inaction) appears to avoid a confrontation, in fact what it does is eliminate any chance of dialogue and replaces it with a certain confrontation down the road. Even though this path is frequently taken, it has some far-reaching unhappy consequences. Let’s talk about how it affects you, the other person, and your team.

You

You end up spending valuable energy by deciding to tolerate this person. It takes energy to tolerate a poor situation – energy which you need for other, more positive and productive efforts. In addition, by tolerating this person, your attitude suffers. Although we decide to tolerate it, we don’t ignore it. Tolerating something that reduces our level of energy and our attitude is unacceptable.

The Other Person

If you reflect back to a time when you became complacent, lost interest, and experienced a drop in attitude (as we all have experienced at one time or another), you’ll find one of two reasons for this shift. One reason is that the work you were doing really didn’t interest you - work was unfulfilling. One of the great revelations in life is that ***just because you’re good at something doesn’t mean you enjoy it***. The other reason we might have become complacent, lost interest, and experienced a drop in attitude is that we became disillusioned with someone or something. In situations where the reality of the situation is different from the one we first imagined, is there a way to make things better? Maybe. Option 4 holds the answer.

Your Team

A manager tolerates a difficult person for an extended time, hoping they’ll “come around” and thereby avoid a confrontation, until something happens – some event or challenge - and they feel they have no choice but to confront and often terminate them. Subsequently, the manager is surprised at the number of team members who come forth and comment on what a drag on the team that person had been. They’ll speak up about their poor attitude or poor work ethic, and often add, *“I don’t know why you kept them so long!”* When you don’t address a difficult person - when you decide to tolerate them - your whole team is affected. In addition, ask yourself this: When you keep a difficult person on, what does it say about you as a leader and what does it say about your values and your integrity? Tolerating a difficult person doesn’t work in the long run.

4) Work to Understand Their Motivation

Option 4 is the key to success. This option is about being a leader and being an effective communicator. It’s about being compassionate and strong at the same time. It’s about being good for someone rather than being good to them. It’s about understanding rather than telling.

This solution is about taking the time to understand the other person’s motivation for acting the way they do. If you’re effective at this, you’ll be able to either help them change their perspective on things or, in the alternative, help them to move on to something that better suits them. This solution is about helping people grow and maximize their talents.

How do you come to understand the motivation for their actions and attitude? Just ask. Ask why they act the way they do. Usually they’ll be more than happy to tell you. If their answer seems odd or incorrect you need to keep asking questions to get at the heart of the issue so you can either shift their perspective or help them move on. Once you’re at the core issue you have the ability to make a

difference in their life. It's amazing what can come out of a sincere desire to help. How would you have felt if, at those times when you felt complacent with a poor attitude, someone took the time to listen to you and offer some other perspectives? How would your life be different today if someone had helped you see yourself and/or your life differently? As a leader, you have the ability to make a difference in someone's life.

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