



Releasing the potential of people in business

SEVEN HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

By Jeremy Cassell, MD, RTPLegal

It's tough dealing with Difficult People! It can be a real challenge which faces many firms, large and small – these 'difficult' people could be suppliers or customers, direct reports, partners or bosses. As if that's not enough, it's also a very emotional issue and can be time consuming.

You could be faced with avoidance, anger, intolerance, intransigence, personal attacks, swearing, bullying or sarcasm. You may have your own story...

Many people choose the easiest option – evade the issue. Here are some examples of evasiveness:

- *Doing nothing and feeling worse*
- *Leave it till the end of the day*
- *Make sympathetic noises with what other people are experiencing at the hands of the person - but do little*
- *Only see what they are very good at and 'park' the rest*
- *Promote them out of your team*
- *Think it's you, not them – start taking it personally*

The problem with this approach is that the issue can escalate, creating stress, tension and in the worst cases a complete breakdown in relationships.

Some choose to fight back and become 'difficult' themselves. Maybe not the best policy.

Does all this ring a bell?

If so, here are some answers – seven ways that can help you navigate through the troubled waters of tricky relationships. Pick the ones that you think will make the biggest difference and feel free to circulate this to colleagues in your firm if this is appropriate. You may just notice the difference immediately!.

"Every moment that you spend upset, in despair, in anguish, angry or hurt because of the behaviour of anybody else in your life is a moment in which you have given up control of your life."

Wayne Dyer



Releasing the potential of people in business

1. Avoid judgements

We are all meaning making creatures – some of us find it very difficult not to judge. So it may be that you are defining someone as difficult and they may just be having a bad day/week/year. Perhaps they have personal problems that are never revealed. The reality is that I have never met anyone in a law firm who wakes up wanting to be difficult. Often people are just 'difficult' from your perspective. From their perspective they are rational and sensible. So – avoid rushing to judgments and notice how you are forming beliefs about the other party. For useful information about how beliefs are formed take a look at Peter Senge's ladder of inference.

2. Seek to Understand

As Steven Covey says in his 'Seven habits of highly effective people' - seek first to understand, then to be understood. The best exponents of this skill appreciate the 'difficult' person's point of view. They recognise that issues are real to them and honour that. They focus on understanding why the person is exhibiting what might be described as 'negative' behaviour. We are more than our behaviour!

3. Avoid taking it personally

The 'difficult' person does not have a personal issue usually with those who deal with them, they are 'difficult' with everyone! So avoid thinking that you are being targeted. Recognising the potential of 'difficult' people is half the battle. They are a value and flicking the switch that truly turns them on is a worthwhile challenge.

4. Pace Pace Lead

'Difficult people' behave the way they do usually out of some sort of fear. Focus on building a better relationship – attempt to establish rapport. This will help pace people and lead them to a place where you can more easily influence them. An easy way to do this is through matching and mirroring – in essence copying some aspect of what you see, hear and feel. This could be the body language, the voice or the words. Look for consistent patterns, match and notice that you can establish and build rapport with almost everyone. If you meet anger, match the energy by adjusting your voice and demonstrating that you understand their frustration. Through building a better relationship with them the best at dealing with difficult people are able to get closer to the source and hence move towards resolution.



Releasing the potential of people in business

5. Remember the basic communication skills

Go back to basics – listen actively (summarise, take notes, nod, reflect, etc) and ask open questions. It is tough to think rationally and still remain 'difficult'! Sometimes we are able to find simple and easy clues to what is irritating the 'difficult person'. And then they fairly and reasonably fix the problems – you can even create a **champion** out of a 'difficult person'!

6. Adjourn

Sometimes people just need space – so adjourn the meeting or telephone call. A few minutes to calm down is all that some people need to become a lot more pleasant to deal with. Similarly if you can take an issue 'offline' it will save someone from public embarrassment. The bottom line is that you have a department to run or a job to do. When you have adjourned think about what your goals are and put yourself in the other party's shoes and think about his or her goals.

7. Build trust and find a solution

Those best at dealing with difficult people develop a sense of trust with their 'difficult person'. They look for a win-win. Often the behaviour of others will have tainted their experiences and cause serious mistrust. This can be changed. When you are very capable of dealing with difficult people it is sometimes the simple acts which have the most effect. Just asking them what it is they want can often be an easy solution. It's just that no-one ever asked before!

There are many ways to build trust – however focus on 3 areas:

- make sure the difficult person knows you are competent
- be benevolent
- ensure you act with integrity.

"In the school of life, difficult people are the faculty. They teach us our most important spiritual lessons, the lessons that we would be most unlikely to learn on our own."

Mark I. Rosen

If you would like to find out more about our range of courses for the legal profession please email info@rtplegal, or call us on 01903 813897.