

# Dealing with Your Difficult People

From

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by Terry Paulson

For leaders managing constant change, conflict is built into the very fabric of their organizations. When conflict is not dealt with well, it can create strained relationships and grow to sap the time, energy, and productivity of even the best teams. Dealt with positively, conflict can also be a catalyst that sets the stage for needed changes. You will never deal with conflict perfectly, but here are a few tips worth using in dealing with your most difficult people:

1. Talk to people instead of about them. Dealing with conflict directly may be uncomfortable and lead to some disappointment, but it cuts down the mind reading and the resentment that can occur when problems are not dealt with directly. Timing, tact, and taking distance will always have their place, but make sure you still keep conflict eyeball to eyeball.
2. We are taught from childhood to avoid conflict and often vacillate between the pain of dealing with unresolved problems and the guilt over not dealing with them. Such vacillation saps energy and time; it can affect morale and turnover. Be a problem solver not a problem evader. Problem solvers avoid avoidance; they learn to deal with conflict as soon as it even begins to get in the way.
3. Develop a communication style that focuses on future problem solving rather than getting stuck in proving a conviction for past mistakes. You want change, not just an admission of guilt. Winners of arguments never always win, because consistent losers never forget. You want results, not enemies seeking revenge. By focusing on future problem solving, both can save face.
4. Problem solvers deal with issues, not personalities. It's all too easy to abuse the other party instead of dealing with issues. Be assertive but affirm the rights of others to have different positions, values and priorities. When you personalize disagreements and attack back, you invite escalation. Keep the focus on mutual problem solving, not name-calling.
5. Honor, surface and use resistance. Attempts at threatening, silencing or otherwise avoiding criticism of change will only force resistance underground and increase the sabotaging of even necessary changes. Explored resistance helps build clarity of focus and action. Push for specific suggestions. If criticism is extensive and continues even after facing it, it may not be resistance – know when to admit that you are wrong!

6. Redefine caring to include caring enough to confront on a timely and consistent basis. Avoid labels that give you or others excuses for not confronting a problem – They are too sensitive or too nice, scene makers or people who have contacts, too old or too young, or the wrong race or gender. If you believe people cannot change or benefit from feedback, you will tend not to confront them. Instead, treat all equally by caring enough to be firm, fair, and consistent.

7. Avoid forming “enemy” relationships. The subtle art of influence is often lost in the heat of organizational battle. When interaction becomes strained or bias exists, the negative interaction coupled with the distance that often results invites selective scanning and projection. We see what we want to see to keep our enemies “the enemy”. If a relationship is limited to polite indifference and significant negative interaction, expect polarization and an “enemy” relationship. In such relationships everyone loses. Take seriously the words of Confucius, “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.” Even your most difficult people usually have some people they work well with. Make one of those people you. Don’t look for the worst; learn to look for the best in even difficult people.

8. Invest time building positive bridges to your difficult people. Abraham Lincoln reportedly said, “I don't like that man. I must get to know him better.” Don't be insincere; look for ways to be sincere. It takes a history of positive contact to build trust. Try building a four-to-one positive to negative contact history. Give specific recognition and ask for assistance in the areas you respect their opinions. Work together on a common cause and search for areas of common ground. By being a positive bridge builder, you build a reputation all will see and come to respect even if a few difficult people never respond.

Finally, don’t forget to spend some time looking in a mirror. Ron Zemke put it well when he said, “If you find that everywhere you go you're always surrounded by jerks and you're constantly being forced to strike back at them or correct their behavior, guess what? You're a jerk.” Influencing others starts by making sure that you’re not being difficult yourself.

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