How to Deal With Difficult People

You can choose a constructive approach to challenging colleagues and constituents. Here’s how.

BY BRUCE FEUSTEL

I
n the midst of the legislative session, irritating behavior can drive you crazy. Maybe it’s the complaining citizen who won’t stop whining, the staffer who blames others for her mistakes, or the supervisor who won’t listen to your ideas.

Legislative work can be exciting and fulfilling, but some people just push your buttons. It’s not hard to find these challenging people—the trick is knowing how to handle them.

There are various approaches to dealing with difficult situations caused by co-workers and constituents.

No matter how you normally respond, there are intentional steps you can take to improve your skills in turning these encounters into positive learning opportunities. And what you learn will serve you well your entire life, because, as we all know, there is no shortage of difficult people.

What’s so Difficult?

What defines difficult? Although a challenging co-worker for you may not be for others, in general, these people are aggravating, disruptive and time-consuming. They exhibit an abundance of negativity, anger, bullying, gossip, disrespect, complaints and more. They are the know-it-alls, the co-workers who take credit for your work, the constituents who constantly demand your attention or the acquaintances who talk at length about only themselves.

OK, by now you probably have a couple of people in mind. Here are some ways to deal with them.

1. Keep Calm and Carry On
Outbursts and difficult behavior from colleagues and others may seem to come out of nowhere. It may take you by surprise and make you feel personally attacked or threatened, which can make you want to respond with anger, sarcasm or disrespect. Don’t. It most likely will only make things worse. Take a few seconds before responding, even taking a couple of deep breaths to maintain self-control and to gather your thoughts. Pause long enough to get a handle on what’s happening and to stay objective about the situation. But don’t avoid confronting the issue altogether. Left unaddressed, it usually just gets worse. The most important thing to remember is that you can’t control others, but you can control yourself.

2. First Things First
Take a mental step back when difficulty arises to focus on the big picture. Ask yourself: What’s the most important goal or priority in all of this? For example, if a problem arises with a troublesome colleague when working on a memo for a legislator, the priority is to get the legislator a timely and high-quality memo. If you make sure that is accomplished first, you can then set about creating a better working relationship with your co-worker. Likewise, with an angry constituent, the priority is that you understand his problem and what he’s tried to do about it. If you first concentrate on doing your job well, it may become clearer what the next step should be in dealing with the problem person.

3. Channel Good Role Models
To help you form the attitudes and exhibit the actions you would most like to have, think of some good role models in your life—people who have a reputation of being kind, fair, respectful and well-prepared. How would they react? What kind of responses would they show in difficult situations? Can you emulate those? Most likely they refused to take the bait, remained calm and responded respectfully, which diffused the situation. Focus on those good examples when confronted. Reacting constructively is a skill you can develop by planning, reflecting and practicing appropriate responses before they are needed.

4. Listen Actively
Long-winded constituents or chronic complainers can drive you to distraction, but they often just want a sympathetic ear.

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This is where active listening helps. It involves reflecting and restating the facts and the feelings you believe are being expressed by the frustrated, angry, hurt or anxious co-worker or constituent. “I hear you saying you can’t find anyone to help you. That must feel frustrating.” In other words, clarify that what you are hearing is actually what they are trying to express. It can help move the conversation in a more productive direction. Develop good questions to help them focus on what they want you to do. What is the problem? What is their solution? What are they suggesting you do about it?

Seek Advice

We often hear that you should deal with problem people directly, without complaining about them to others. However, talking through a difficult incident with a trusted friend or colleague can give you a different perspective and a fresh assessment of the problem. But choose carefully. Talk with someone who is supportive and trustworthy, but willing to give you objective and constructive feedback. Brainstorm together ways to deal with the situation.

Talk it Through

If your difficulty is with a colleague, the two of you may need to talk things out. After some time of reflecting on your concerns and deciding what you need to say, find a time and place to have the hard conversation. You need to stick up for yourself and be clear about what you want and expect. Be calm, professional and well-prepared to express the problem and offer a solution. However, listen closely to the other person and be open to whatever he or she may suggest will improve your working relationship.

Protect Confidentiality

Workplaces, including legislatures, are often gossip havens, where stories and rumors fly from person to person and office to office. Gossips take a little truth and turn it into a bigger-than-life reality. Avoid getting pulled into these conversations, as they are often unproductive and unfair to the subject. The best way to deal with gossipers in the workplace is by not becoming one yourself. Respect confidential information, and refuse to pass it on to others who don’t need to know. If gossip is a big problem in your work environment, consider whether co-workers are getting enough appropriate information, since a lack of information often breeds speculation and distrust.

Take it to a Higher Level

There’s a natural tendency not to run to your human resources personnel for every difficult situation. And we shouldn’t. We need to develop the ability to be assertive and stick up for ourselves. There are times to bring in HR, however, especially if there is violence or the threat of violence, a criminal or unethical act, sexual harassment, or a reoccurring and persistent problem. Human resources professionals have experience with all sorts of workplace issues, large and small. They can serve as good sounding boards, offering a neutral perspective, and they can document concerns and provide remedies when necessary.

Good Luck

Dealing with difficult people can be disconcerting. Encounters with these people can make you mad, frustrated, distracted and unproductive. The key is to build your own stockpile of ideas, tricks and yes, even gimmicks, to use when these inevitable encounters occur. Consciously preparing for situations before they occur can keep you focused on productive responses when they do.

A final piece of advice: If you find yourself encountering difficult people wherever you go and more often than your friends and colleagues, take some time for self reflection—the problem may be facing you in the mirror!

To listen to the webinar, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.