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How to Deal with Six Types of Difficult Coworkers

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Introduction

Regardless of what stage you are in your career, you'll eventually encounter a difficult colleague. Sometimes they're hard to describe to outsiders, but we know them when we encounter them. More importantly, what makes an individual challenging to work with depends on your own pet peeves or personality traits. Perhaps a difficult person is someone who is disruptive or not a good listener. Or it might be someone who is too quiet and hard to draw out. And then there's someone who bullies, is abrupt, or interrupts you mid-thought.

The effects these individuals have on organizations vary greatly but usually involve the following: low morale, increased conflict, the group attitude goes as their attitude goes, intimidation, insults, team demoralization, decreased productivity, rising costs, and increasing project risks among other issues.

What happens to you when you encounter a difficult person? Everyone has a slightly different reaction, but some common responses include a rise in blood pressure, racing heart, a lump in the throat, "fight, flight, or freeze syndrome," or getting red in the face.

There's one thing you can be sure of. If you don't do something about the "thing" that someone is doing that makes them challenging for you, you'll continue to get more of it. It's crucial to figure out what makes them tick. Although coworkers may be perceived as challenging for any number of reasons, generally speaking, difficult people can be rolled into these six main groups:

- **The Steamroller**
This is the classic bully of the group. The Steamroller interrupts, insults, and yells at the slightest provocation.
- **The Sniper**
These are the individuals who hide in the back of the room and are quick to find ways of making comments or sniping. They take shots at everyone, constantly nit-pick, or make petty or condescending remarks. Snipers, as the name suggests, want to do this from "undercover." If you call them on their statements or behavior, they say, "Oh, I'm just kidding," or, "Can't ya take a joke?" or, "I didn't say anything!"
- **The "Can't Say No" Person**
This person simply will not say no to work. The problem is they won't say no, they won't say no, they won't say no . . . and then they finally just collapse from overexertion!
- **The Know-It-All**
Need I say more? They know it all and make you painfully aware of every detail of their knowledge.
- **The Complainer**
Chronic complainers! Chronic whiners! To them, life is one big complaint!
- **The Staller**
The Staller is indecision personified. This is an individual who simply will not make a decision. Because they will not commit to anything, they typically stall as a coping mechanism.

No matter which one of these personality types represents the difficult or challenging colleague in your workplace, it's vital you learn to effectively work with them.

So that leads to the all-important question: How do you deal with these types of challenging people and avoid conflict in the workplace?

Dealing with The Steamroller

When dealing with a Steamroller or bully, your first task is to stay calm. Typically, this type of individual is trying to rile you up and elevate your emotions. Don't let them do it. Instead, maintain eye contact, and remain assertive. Let them go on and on and slowly unwind in their thinking. Then, when they spool down a bit, wait for your moment to pounce, and politely interrupt them.

I know what you're thinking. Yes, interrupting is rude. In this case, however, it is justified. When you interrupt them, you will have the chance to become assertive. This strategy is similar to the one the boxer Muhammad Ali referred to as "rope-a-dope." Ali was known to for his ability take a great many punches to his mid-section. He would lean against the ropes and allow his opponent punch himself to the brink of exhaustion. Ali would wait for his opportunity and then knock his adversary out.

In a similar fashion, you should do the same thing when dealing with The Steamroller. Allow them to verbally wear themselves out, and then, when you see your opportunity, assert yourself.

Call them by name, and then say, "OK, now wait a minute, I have something to say. I've been listening to you. Please listen to me now." You will start, and what will happen? They will interrupt! So what should you do? Remain confident, calm, and assertive.

Say, "Hey, I said wait a minute. I listened to you, and now it's my turn to speak." Don't back down; that's what they expect you to do. Instead, maintain eye contact and remain firm. You may not "win" the argument or discussion, but once you stand up to them, they will typically become your best buddy. Standing your ground once will lead The Steamroller to respect you. They may still bully other people on your team, but they won't bully you any longer. By going "toe to toe" with them, you have earned their respect.

Dealing with The Sniper

Snipers lurk in the back of rooms or in the dark recesses of their cubicles. They tend to call out unnecessarily and "snipe" by taking shots at everyone, constantly nit-picking, or making petty comments about anything and everything.

Stop for a minute and think back to your high school classroom days. What would your teacher do with these difficult students? Most of the time, the teacher would call them out. For example, the teacher may say something along the lines of, "Excuse me, did you have something to say? Something to share with us?" Of course, they would rarely, if ever, stand up and say anything; instead, they would back down and say something like, "Oh, no, I was just kidding," or, "No, I don't have anything to share."

This approach works most of the time in the workplace as well. Rather than allowing side-chatter, mumbled criticism, and nit-picking to occur, call out The Sniper directly. Your best bet is to push for inclusion and clarification by putting them on the spot. Consider responding, "Excuse me, but I thought I heard something in that comment. Do you have something to add?"

One word of caution: be careful. Most of the time these individuals will stop their sniping behavior, but occasionally they will shift gears and become The Steamroller. However, you now have the skills and strategy to diffuse a situation in which you encounter a bully. Simply switch tactics, and do your own version of the "rope-a-dope." Next, wait for your opportunity, and when it's time, seize the moment.

Dealing With the "Can't Say No" Person

This is the person who has a hard time saying no, especially as it relates to work assignments. They will attempt to undertake any assignment including those given to them by people other than their own boss. At first, this might not seem like such a bad arrangement, but over time, there are consequences to this type of behavior.

Why would they do this? Why take on so much? Some people are afraid to say no. They are fearful of being viewed as incompetent or unable to carry enough of the load. Some individuals simply do not know their limits or worse—they ignore them. Establishing boundaries might be one of their weaknesses.

In other situations, the employee is a rookie on the team and doesn't want to let the others down. As a new hire, they might be fearful of being thought of as inadequate or uncooperative. For others, it is a personality issue or even the result of the culture in which they were raised. In some cultures, saying no is highly discouraged. As a result, people raised in this environment have a hard time balancing the workload effectively.

In dealing with an individual who can't turn down an assignment, meeting, or task, the first step is build a relationship with them or establishing a rapport. Earn their trust and get them to be comfortable with you. After you have established stronger ties, let them know about your concerns for them.

Once you have built up a solid level of trust, you can begin asking questions designed to help them understand that they are out of balance. The key is care because there is a strong likelihood they may be sensitive or defensive. In their mind, they are doing a beneficial or selfless thing. From their vantage point, if they were not doing the work, it would not get accomplished. Quite often though, even if they do manage to complete all of the work that they have taken on, the quality of that work will suffer due to being stretched too thin.

Occasionally you will find the "Can't Say No" individual who is able to accomplish all the work with an acceptable, and perhaps even excellent, level of quality. The problem here is that rarely will they be able to maintain that momentum. There is a high probability they will eventually burn out. At that point, they will be of no use to the team, and, more importantly, they will have done quite a bit of harm to themselves in the process. Recovery from a true burnout stage requires tremendous time. Our goal is to prevent the "Can't Say No" person from ever reaching anything close to that stage.

If you are operating in the role of supervisor or manager, there are several helpful things that you can do.

First, you can make suggestions for alternative arrangements; there may be many people who can do the work that they have taken on, but they will not see that. As a manager, you can point out the obvious and discourage them from taking on too much responsibility that, quite frankly, should be redistributed, but often you will need to become their work filter.

You may need to filter their assignments and instruct them that they are only allowed to take on work assignments that are passed through you. No one is allowed to give them an assignment that does not come by your desk first. They may resist this arrangement because they will feel it to be an embarrassment. They may attempt to stall and put you off. Just be firm, and reassure them that things will be fine. However, they must continue to trust you.

For the time being, you may need to keep on top of them and continually reaffirming this agreement is the best approach. Initially, you will operate as their sanity checker. You can do a workload histogram to show them exactly how much work they have been doing. This will show them exactly how much they have been out of balance. It's almost like a 12-step program. They need to learn in baby steps that it's okay to say no at times. The world really will continue, and the work really will get done.

If, however, you are a colleague as opposed to a manager of an individual who lacks the ability to say no, it isn't your responsibility to oversee their workflow or assignments. In this instance, your best bet may be to speak compassionately and kindly about the need for others to assume responsibility for the workload as opposed to allowing this person to carry an uneven workload alone. The key to delivering this message is to maintain an even tone and avoid excessive use of sentences beginning with the word "you," which may lead to defensive behavior. Remember, you are a friend and colleague, so speak candidly and honestly if you feel comfortable. You may wish to avoid speaking to your colleague at all if you fear any potential conflict.

Dealing with The Know-It-All

As the title implies, The Know-It-All is under the impression he knows everything there is about a topic. In dealing with The Know-It-All, there are some basic items to be aware of if you wish to avoid conflict or confrontations in the workplace.

Typically, they have been around a long time, and they do, in fact, know quite a bit. There's no denying this fact. However, it is in your best interest to ensure you know your stuff because if you don't, there's a chance they will point it out rather quickly. There's a sweet spot to recognizing their knowledge, respecting it, and showing them that maybe their ideas aren't always the right answer or the right way.

The typical Know-It-All may have some bully tendencies at times, too. They have their idea, and they just won't let it go. You can try saying things along the lines of, "That's a really good point, but have you thought of this? What if this or that happens?" Basically, you need help them see alternative points of action. Will they ever admit they are wrong? Probably not. It's like trying to catch a greased pig. Most of the time, it's not going to happen, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

If you find yourself dealing with a Know-It-All in a meeting, ignore the temptation to make them look bad. This will backfire and make you look bad instead. Plus, it's just not a good practice in general to partake in cutting down colleagues.

Throw an idea out there, and let it sit for a minute. Sometimes they may actually come around to it, but quite often, they will want to spin it so that it will seem as if it were their idea. And you know what? Accept it as a win. Occasionally, selling an idea someone else wants to take credit for, once in a while, is okay. Your job is done, and the elimination of conflict will be better in the long run.

Dealing with The Complainer

It's crucial to understand that to chronic complainers, life is one big annoyance or inconvenience. Complainers typically come in one of two flavors.

The first type of Complainer really doesn't care about solutions; they simply want someone to listen to them. They will come into your office in the morning, and they will talk, and talk, and talk, until you finally chase them out. Here's what you can do. Listen for a few minutes, and then move to a problem-solving alliance.

Acknowledge their feelings, validate emotions if necessary, but try to push them toward finding a problem-solving solution. You can say something like, "Okay, I hear your dilemma. Let's see if we can solve it." The secret is

when you move into problem-solving, they will typically leave very quickly. The reality is that they probably don't want to solve anything. Instead, they just want to air grievances.

With the second type of Complainer, it's a little bit different. These are the folks who complain because they are paralyzed. They don't know what to do and, as a result, spin their wheels with complaints or grievances. Unlike with the first type of Complainer, when you move to problem-solving with this individual, you will actually provide some much needed help for them.

One thing to be wary of: Don't facilitate their dependence on you. Otherwise they will come back again and again for the very same issue or problem. As the saying goes, you can feed someone, or you can teach them to fish for themselves. If you fail to do that, it is now you who has an additional problem—one of time management.

Learn to be direct and intentional. Say, "Okay, I will show you this one time. Here's a pen and a sheet of paper; while I talk, why don't you take notes so the next time this happens, you'll have the solution right there? I will stay here all day if necessary, but when we leave, I expect that you will be able to do this for yourself. Please be sure to pay attention and ask as many questions as you need to understand."

Use a tone that is gentle, yet firm at the same time. By having this conversation, you will actually have helped two people: you and them.

Dealing with The Staller

Ah, the Indecisive Staller. They don't want to upset anyone, which really means that they want to please everyone. In The Staller's mind, the way to accomplish this is never to make a decision that ends up upsetting everyone. As a result, they shy away from taking a stand or making any decision at all. Instead, they take the attitude that if they just leave the issue alone, it will go away. Yes, quite often it will go away but only because someone else will have done the work, and now they're mad too. The inability of one individual to make a decision has linger effects for colleagues.

One way of helping an indecisive person is to discuss the benefits of deciding. Talk about all the good that comes through getting off the fence and making a decision: work actually is accomplished, people are happy, morale will go up, projects will be able to move forward, and they get to continue drawing a paycheck. This is positive reinforcement.

Another thing you can do is discuss a few options with them. This is basically the old salesman's trick. Instead of saying, "Would you like to buy the vacuum cleaner today?" you ask, "Which of the vacuum cleaners will you be buying today: the red one or the blue one?" What you are doing is narrowing down their options and forcing them to make a decision. For some individuals, the possibility of multiple outcomes is overwhelming. Limiting their options operates as a public service.

Conclusion

From our short analysis of difficult people, one definite conclusion can be drawn. If you don't do something about the difficult people in your life, you will simply continue to get more of their problematic behavior. Whether it is The Steamroller, The Sniper, The "Can't Say No" Person, The Know-It-All, The Complainer, or The Staller, you must take thoughtful action. In all cases, kindness should prevail. Be gentle but firm. Remember they are human just like you are. However, it's a place of business, and work needs to be accomplished. In the process of completing that work and enabling success, sometimes difficult or crucial conversations need to take place in order to maintain a happy, healthy place of business. That's where these tips should come in handy.

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Tim McClintock, PMP, has many years of experience working with Fortune 500 Companies in the IT, service, and banking sectors. Tim is a gifted speaker and presenter. He consults with executives in all areas of leadership and management including portfolio, program, project, and continuity management. He has provided strategic planning and development, coaching, project management consulting and training, and IS and project consulting to all levels of professionals. Tim holds the Project Management Professional certificate from the Project Management Institute.