

## Giving feedback to “difficult people”

Difficult people can show up anywhere. You may have co-workers, family members, community members, or complete strangers that fit the bill. Here are a few thoughts and tips to help you convert difficult relationships into productive ones.

- **Look inward first.** Is it possible that you are overreacting? Sometimes folks push our buttons unintentionally, especially if we are already irritated or overwhelmed. Before you confront the “difficult” person, be sure your gripe is legitimate, and is not a case of misdirected frustration about something or someone else.

It is also important to note that most difficult relationships are the result of the dynamics at play between two people. It is rare that we run into someone who is unilaterally bad. So, look at your own behavior, and decide if you are contributing to the difficulty of the interaction.

- **Remember that you get to choose your interpretation of and response to other people’s behavior.** There is a parable about the Buddha that starts with him sitting calmly while being deeply insulted by another man. After awhile, someone asked how the Buddha remained peaceful throughout the verbal attack and he replied, “If someone offers you a gift, and you decline to accept it, to whom does the gift belong?” When someone is being disrespectful, dismissive, or rude, you can mentally decline his or her “gift.” Recognize that the anger belongs to the other person, and decide whether you want to participate.
- **Deal with your concerns directly.** Sometimes you can solve the problem by managing your own response, but sometimes you will need to take action to address the situation. If you have determined that your frustration is legitimate and clearly defined, you owe it to the other person to start with a direct conversation. Many of us withhold feedback because we are concerned about hurting another’s feelings or we are afraid of conflict. The result is that small problems fester and grow ... and large problems stay large. It is possible that the “difficult” person does not even realize that his or her behavior is causing you stress. Your only hope of solving the problem starts by getting it out in the open.
- **Do not try to change the other person.** Since the only person on this planet you can control is yourself, trying to change another person is a game you cannot win. You can explain how his or her behavior affects you, and you can choose your response to his or her future behavior, but you cannot make him or her change, so resist the temptation to try.
- **Assume a noble intention.** When you approach your antagonist, start from the assumption that he or she is not trying to be difficult. The person may be in the dark about the effect he or she has on you. Or, your conversation may cause him or her to consider his or her behavior in a new light. Worst case? It is possible that he or she has been difficult on purpose and might deny it or try to explain it away. Even if you learn through the course of your conversation that he or she has been intentionally difficult, you will have lost nothing by starting with the assumption of good intentions on his or her part, and – from a purely selfish standpoint – you are

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more likely to be successful if you start with this positive assumption than if you begin the conversation with hostility.

- **It is okay to have people in your life who are not your friends.** Sometimes people are so damaged that they really are being difficult on purpose. When this is the case and you have to continue to deal with them, due to either work or family circumstances, polite distance may be the best way to deal with your antagonists. In these cases, look for ways to minimize your interactions with them. One strategy that can help in a work environment is to communicate via e-mail when feasible; this minimizes the opportunities for “misunderstandings” (intentional or unintentional) and gives you documentation of requests and commitments. Just remember not to attempt to use humor or sarcasm.

### **Feedback in 60 seconds**

In her book, *Fierce Conversations* (Viking Penguin, 2002), Susan Scott suggests that many of us withhold critical feedback because we want to avoid messy interactions. She proposes that we are more likely to take on a task we perceive as unpleasant if we know the task can be done quickly, and she provides the framework below as a way to give feedback about almost anything in a minute or less. Even if you do not follow the steps exactly when you approach a person to whom you need to give feedback, this framework will help you clarify your thinking as you prepare for the conversation.

- **Name the issue.** The problem named is the problem solved. Name the behavior that is causing the problem and the area the behavior impacts.
- **Select a specific example** that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change. No long stories, just a recent example of the behavior you are addressing.
- **Describe your emotions about this issue.** Telling someone what emotion his or her behavior evokes in you is intimate and disarming. You are letting the person know that you are affected by what he or she is doing.
- **Clarify what is at stake.** Describe what is at stake for the individual, you, others, the customer, the team, the organization, the relationship, etc. Use the words “at stake”; they reinforce the importance of this conversation.
- **Identify your contribution to this problem.** No long confession is needed – this is just a brief acknowledgment that you recognize any role you may have played in creating the problem and that you intend to do something about it.
- **Indicate your wish to resolve the issue.** Use the word “resolve”. It shows there is no firing squad waiting outside the door and communicates your good intentions to see the issue brought to conclusion.
- **Invite the other person to respond.** You have stated the situation from your point of view. Now bring him or her into the conversation.

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