How to Deal with Difficult Situations at Work

BY:
LEEANN POUNDS
Employee Relations Manager
WINTHROP UNIVERSITY
The Major Reason for Difficult Situations at Work is also One of the Best . . .

- A major cause of stress at work - other people.

- Up to 80 percent of all difficulties in organizations stem from strained employee relationships. (According to Business News Daily)
  - **Dealing with Difficult people can leave us:**
    - Frustrated or Angry;
    - Feeling Hopeless;
    - Emotionally Drained;
    - Scrambling to Recover Productivity and Time Lost and/or
    - Conflicted about wanting to help others and feeling used.
People are People and Don’t Change. So Why Talk About This?

- You can vastly improve your own work environment and morale when you increase your ability to deal with the people at work.
- Not knowing how to deal effectively can stifle your talent.

"Show respect even to people who don't deserve it; not as a reflection of their character, but as a reflection of yours."

Dave Willis
Evaluate What Degree of Difficulty You are Dealing With In The Situation

First know how to distinguish between 3 types of work environments:

- **Hostile Work Environment** – HR matter
- **Unacceptable Work Environment** – Elevate to Supervisor
- **Inappropriate/Unprofessional Environment** – Communicate concerns directly to co-worker, whenever possible. If no resolution, involve your supervisor.
Hostile Work Environment – HR Takes the Lead

- A Hostile Work Environment exists when:
  - Words or actions relate to a person’s protected class (Ex: race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation and gender identity);
  - The hostile conduct is severe or pervasive; and
  - The surroundings to unreasonably interfere with their ability to do their job.

- Pervasive – can relate to how often and how widespread.
- The more severe the conduct or comments, the less pervasive it has to be.

ANY CONDUCT BY A CO-WORKER OR SUPERVISOR MEETING THIS DEFINITION SHOULD BE IMMEDIATELY REPORTED TO HR.
Unacceptable Work Environment

- Comments, actions or a failure to act that impact the workplace or a co-worker in a manner that may violate Winthrop policies or laws.
  - **Examples:**
    - Severe outburst of anger/threats
    - Failure to accurately and truthfully report leave and time
      - *Exception: FMLA/ADA may prevent all facts from being apparent*
    - Suspected Use of Alcohol or Drugs At Work or Still Impaired
    - Unauthorized disclosure of confidential information
    - Rude, offensive comments

These types of situations should first be brought to the supervisor’s attention. If an employee feels like the supervisor is not appreciating the severity or seriousness of the impact on that employee, then contact HR.
Signs of an Inappropriate/Unprofessional Environment

- Issue resolution starts by a direct conversation to seek a reconciliatory result with the co-worker. Don’t be combative or contentious.
  
  Reality Check: Your purpose should be to stop not start conflict.

  “There are some people who always seem angry and continuously look for conflict. Walk away; The Battle they are fighting is not with you. It is with themselves.” (MEDIABABSAPP.COM)

- If the situation involves a supervisor and the employee is not comfortable addressing directly, consider discussion with HR or escalate.

- **Examples:**
  - Personal habits of co-workers, sounds or smells that annoy others;
  - Actions that disregard others or make you feel devalued – like the way one is spoken to;
  - Unequal sharing of joint duties;
  - Refusal by co-worker to share the load if things not done “their way.”
TYPES Of Pernicious EMPLOYEES

- Demanding Doris
- Andy Automaton
- Vivian Victim
- Clueless Clay
- Mary Manipulator
- Indecisive Ian
Demanding Doris

- Needy: “It is all about them all the time!”
- Rigid, not willing to bend or change to assist team or an individual co-worker;
Demanding Doris

- Unwilling to accept change – Ex: as job assignments/ responsibilities evolve;
- Constantly have drama going on because upset not being done as they would like;
- Resistant to accept direction or agree to assist with special projects.
How to Deal with Doris

- Accept she will not likely volunteer, so if help is needed ask directly or
- If have to share coverage/a project with Doris – be direct about what allocation of responsibilities looks like to you. If Doris not willing to carry her load, talk to the supervisor;
A Supervisor to Doris should:

- Explain to Doris why coordination is important – already have vacation request that day, new demands on department;
- Try to find a niche for Doris that she can take personal pride for and be somewhat autonomous;
- Assign Doris a distinct role on a project;
- Keep track of when Doris’s rigidity inconveniences others and intervene if Doris not being fair and responsible;
- When changes occur, give lots of lead time and support—Ex: training and phase-in new responsibilities
Andy Automaton
(A person who seems to act in an unemotional or mechanical way, without thinking or feeling)

- One who is disinterested about others, making them feel not supported;
- Seeks no human connection with co-workers or community being served;
- Not a participating member of the team or minimum at best;
Best Methods to Deal with Andy

- Be direct when you need assistance, input or cooperation;
- Set boundaries – when cover for each other or as to space;
- Ask repeatedly to join in with group discussions/lunch (but accept without taking it personal if he declines);
- Respect the differences:
  - Accept Andy may not speak to you in the Hall or notice when you need someone to hold the door or step in and help with your work load – It is not personal!
  - Observe Andy and look for times when he does respond favorably and try to identify the best way to engage him.
Vivian Victim
Vivian Victim

- Often jealous and envious of others,
- Spend time regularly bemoaning their bad fortune and others’ good fortune;
- May abuse substances, remain in unhealthy relationships outside work or harm themselves in other ways;
- Leave you with a sense of personal responsibility for improving their situation
- Unwilling to establish personal accountability to try and bring about change;
RESPONDING TO VIVIAN VICTIM:

- Accept that likely nothing you say or do will magically change their mind about their plight in life;
- While it is good to show compassion, do not own their burdens and disappointments/ avoid letting those be projected onto you;
- Evaluate your situation objectively, independent of Vivian’s perspective;
- Set boundaries as to time spent listening and ways you can assist;
CLUELESS CLAY

Fails to respect co-workers' needs for personal space and time;

Does not listen;

Sends abrupt sounding emails;

Not aware of social cues or subtle suggestion

• Deal with Clay by:
  o Setting space/time boundaries;
  o Reinforcing message in different forms – calendar reminders, voicemail, memo, etc.; and/or
  o Reading abrupt emails to him aloud and explaining likely reaction by others.
MARY MANIPULATOR

Manipulator – one who controls or influences others to their own advantage in clever, often unfair, ruthless or unscrupulous ways; an exploiter; a puppet master; one who “uses” others.
MARY MANIPULATOR’S METHODS

- Mary may use emotions (guilty, duty, loyalty) or thought patterns (avoiding failure, tight deadlines or confrontation);
- Often charming and well-liked, engaging;
- Uses one’s weaknesses against them
  Ex: diverting the focus from the problem they helped create to something personal about you, such as, your voice tone or words.

- Time pressures – wants an answer right away;
- May use lying, passive aggressive behavior and playing martyr.
How to Avoid Manipulation

- Self-respect and confidence:
  - There are justified reasons to say **No** to a co-worker without feeling guilty;
  - Self-care and the ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance is reasonable;
  - Mary may have different ideas and opinions on how you should spend your time and energies, but you are in charge of prioritizing your time/work/life.

- Watch for patterns and when recognize them proceed with caution or disengage when possible. (At times, it can be hard to recognize that you are being manipulated.)

- Ask probing questions to make Mary explain why or how that is reasonable for you to do what she expects.
Indecisive Ian

I am 100% certain that I am 0% sure of what I’m going to do.
Why So Indecisive?

- Often they are people pleasers and afraid everyone will not be ok with the decision.
  - **REALITY CHECK:** Almost never will there be important decisions where everyone is happy about the outcome.
  - Value making an informed decision so much – use a process to collect a lot of feedback from many people/perspectives.

- May have an acute ability to recognize details and subtleties which made decisions more challenging.

- Research suggests indecisiveness is often associated with excess worrying.
Indecisive Ian

- Offer to help them get needed information or confirmation to move beyond their stumbling block.
- Ask what can I do to help you get this decided?
  - Ex: Pro/Cons list, summary of options in writing

- Identify a smaller decision that can be made now to allow the required immediate action.

- Suggest a timeline for upcoming decisions working backwards and explain what all relies on a decision being timely made.
- Go ahead and do your part, outlining different scenarios – check first to see if they can give you odds.
- Turn up the heat – don’t let them change the subject of avoid the decision when possible. Catch them when not overtired.
Dealing with Negativity

- Distinguish between those who are always negative and those who are only occasionally negative;
- Set limits. Do not allow yourself to become drawn into negative discussions. Tell the negative coworker, you prefer to think about your job positively.
- Short term advice that points a person in a positive direction is welcome. But, your role is not to provide therapy or counseling.
- Realize that the co-worker may just want someone to listen and not necessarily seeking a solution.
Definitions from both the Cambridge Dictionary and Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online;

- [https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/02/28/whats-a-toxic-person-how-do-you-deal-with-one/](https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/02/28/whats-a-toxic-person-how-do-you-deal-with-one/) (Tartakowvsky); and

Best Practices To Avoid Being “One of Those” Seen as Difficult

- Take time to compliment, recognize, praise, and notice others’ contributions. This helps co-workers find their strengths and moments of greatness. [You don't have to be a manager to help create a positive, motivating environment for employees.]
- Share Credit - Take the time, and expend the energy, to thank, reward, recognize;
- Keep your commitments. Realize often your work is interconnected with others. So if you fail to meet deadlines and commitments, you affect the work of other employees. Always keep commitments, and if you can't, make sure all affected employees know what happened.
- Seek out positive people and bring your department up not down.
Best Practices To Avoid Being “One of Those” Seen as Difficult

- Don’t blind side/ambush a coworker or supervisor - Always discuss problems, first, with the people directly involved who own the work system. Avoid a person hearing about a problem for the first time in a meeting around others.

- The way you talk to others matters as much as what you say: avoid talking down to another employee, using sarcasm. Saying you are “just kidding” or “having a bad day” does not undo the damage done generally.