

Network to Work Meeting

August 2018

RESOURCE DOCUMENT #2 – *WORKPLACE WELLNESS*

COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT PEOPLE & CONFLICT

The ability to manage your emotions and remain calm around difficult people can help you to cope and to keep difficult people at bay, minimizing the negative impact of stress on your work performance. The following tips can help.

Tips for Managing your Mindset and Behavioral Response when dealing difficult people:

1. **Keep Conversations Neutral**

Avoid discussing divisive and personal issues, like religion and politics, or other issues that tend to cause conflict. If the other person tries to engage you in a discussion that will probably become an argument, change the subject or leave the room.

2. **Accept the Reality of Who They Are and Rise Above**

Difficult people drive you crazy because their behavior is so irrational. Responding to them emotionally will get you sucked into the mix. Don't try to beat them at their own game and don't try to change the other person; you will only get into a power struggle, cause defensiveness, invite criticism, or otherwise make things worse. It also makes *you* a more difficult person to deal with.

Distance yourself from them emotionally and approach your interactions with curiosity like they're a science project. You don't need to respond to the emotional chaos -- only the facts.

3. **Establish Boundaries.**

Just because you work with someone doesn't mean you have no way to control the chaos. Once you've found your way to rise above a person, you'll begin to find their behavior more predictable and easier to understand. This will allow you to then think rationally about when you have to put up with them and when you don't. For example, even if you work with someone closely on a project team, that doesn't mean that you need to have the same level of one-on-one interaction with them that you have with other team members.

You can establish a boundary, but you'll have to do so consciously and proactively. If you set boundaries and decide when and where you'll engage a difficult person, you can control much of the chaos. The only trick is to stick to your guns and keep boundaries in place when the person tries to encroach upon them.

4. Know what's in your Control; Focus on Solutions, not Problems.

Where you focus your attention determines your emotional state. Quit thinking about how troubling your difficult person is, and focus instead on how you're going to go about responding to and handling them. Changing your response to the other person is all you have the power to change.

When it comes to toxic people, fixating on how crazy and difficult they are gives them power over you and creates prolonged negative emotions and stress. However, when you focus on what you can do to better yourself and your circumstances, you are putting yourself in control. This creates a sense of personal empowerment that produces positive emotions and reduces the amount of stress you would otherwise experience.

5. Stay Aware of your Emotions and Respond Accordingly.

Maintaining an emotional distance requires awareness. You can't stop someone from pushing your buttons if you don't recognize when it's happening. With awareness you can recognize when you are in situations where you'll need to regroup and choose the best way forward. Don't be afraid to buy yourself some time to do so; sometimes it's best to just smile and nod rather than engage. If you're going to have to straighten them out, it's better to give yourself some time to plan the best way to go about it.

6. Squash Negative Self-Talk.

It's okay to feel bad about how someone is treating you, but your self-talk can either worsen the negativity or help you move past it. Negative self-talk is self-defeating and should be avoided; it will send you into a downward emotional spiral that is difficult to escape.

7. Use your Support System.

It's tempting, but ineffective, to try to tackle everything by yourself. To deal with toxic people, you need to recognize the weaknesses in *your* approach to them. Tapping into your support system can help you gain perspective on a challenging person. Identify those individuals in your life who are on your team and seek their insight and assistance when you need it. Something as simple as explaining the situation can lead to a new perspective. Most of the time, other people can see a solution that you can't because they are not as emotionally invested in the situation.

8. **Set Limits.**

Complainers and negative people are bad news because they wallow in their problems and fail to focus on solutions. They want people to join their pity party so that they can feel better about themselves. People often feel pressure to listen to complainers because they don't want to be seen as callous or rude, but there's a fine line between lending a sympathetic ear and getting sucked into their negative emotional spiral. Know when it's time to distance yourself and do so.

A great way to set limits is to ask complainers how they intend to address or fix the problem. They will either quiet down or redirect the conversation in a productive direction.

9. **Get some sleep.**

Sleep is crucial for increasing your emotional intelligence and managing your stress levels. When you sleep, your brain recharges, resulting in better self-awareness and self-control. Sleep deprivation raises your stress hormone levels, even without the presence of other stressors. A good night's sleep makes you more positive, creative and proactive in your approach to toxic people, giving you the perspective you need to deal effectively with them.

10. **Break Unhealthy Response Patterns**

Conflict is virtually inevitable in relationships and it is frequently due to a *dynamic* between two people rather than one person being unilaterally "bad." Stress can be reduced and interpersonal dynamics can be improved by choosing healthy responses to conflict and breaking unhealthy patterns such as those below.

a. **Avoiding conflict altogether.**

Avoiding an argument usually causes more stress as tensions rise, resentments fester, frustrations build and a bigger argument usually results. Learning to be assertive in communication can help.

b. **Being Defensive**

Steadfastly denying any wrongdoing and avoiding the possibility that one may be contributing to the problem shows an unwillingness to be objective or understand the other person's point of view. This creates long-term problems when people don't feel listened to and unresolved conflicts continue to grow.

c. **Overgeneralizing**

Making a sweeping generalization with terms like "you always" and "you never" tends to blow things out of proportion. This stands in the way of true conflict resolution, and increases the level of conflict.

d. Needing to Be Right:

It's damaging to decide that only your way of seeing things is right because there's not always a "right" or a "wrong;" two points of view can both be valid. A differing opinion isn't a personal attack, so try to find for a compromise or agree to disagree.

e. Psychoanalyzing:

Deciding you already know what the other person is thinking or feeling based on faulty – and usually negative - interpretations of their actions creates hostility and misunderstandings.

f. Forgetting to Listen:

Interrupting, rolling your eyes, or thinking about what you're going to say next instead of truly listening and attempting to understand the other person makes it difficult for either to see the other's point of view.

g. Playing the Blame Game:

Criticizing and blaming the other person may minimize the risk of appearing weak but it also precludes the opportunity to analyze the situation objectively, assess the needs of both parties and come up with a solution that helps you both. Also, remember that sometimes personalities simply do not fit together well.

h. Trying to "Win" The Argument:

Making a case for how wrong the other person is will prevent parties from reaching a mutual understanding and coming to an agreement or resolution that respects everyone's needs.

i. Making Character Attacks:

Remember to respect the person, even if you don't like the behavior.

Adapted from:

How to Deal with Difficult People and Avoid Conflict, By Elizabeth Scott, MS, Updated June 29, 2017

<https://www.verywellmind.com/reduce-stress-conflict-difficult-people-3144965>

How Smart People Handle Difficult People, by Travis Bradberry, TalentSmart; Guest Writer for Entrepreneur.com, March 14, 2017,

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/290372>

Conflict Resolution Mistakes to Avoid, By Elizabeth Scott, MS, Updated July 26, 2017

<https://www.verywellmind.com/conflict-resolution-mistakes-to-avoid-3144982>