

Dealing with Difficult Personalities in the Workplace

People are different, and that sometimes causes conflict. However, part of the process of an evolving professional relationship is understanding and accepting personality differences. This publication explores strategies for dealing constructively with personality characteristics that create conflict or simply make it difficult to accomplish work goals.

Some otherwise nice, normal people can become difficult people under certain circumstances. Common triggers are feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. The root of their problems may be a lack of social, personal, or even technical skills.

There are others, however, who are simply difficult. They are downright loud, mean, and contrary to everyone they meet in every situation that arises. Some difficult people are aggressive, while others may be passive in their aggression. Openly aggressive people are easy to identify because often they are loud, intimidating, argumentative, and even hostile.

Others, however, may appear quite pleasant on the surface but be covertly hostile. Passive-aggressive actions include verbal potshots and backhanded compliments. Passive-aggressive people may be pleasant and cooperative on the surface but are never able to make a decision, take a risk, or complete an assignment. From their perspective, the problems are always external. Their behavior can be toxic to you, your success, and your happiness.

Dealing with Difficult Personalities

First, recognize that you should not take the behavior of difficult people personally.

Second, realize that you are not going to change or fix them, and it is not your job to do so. People don't change their behavior unless and until they want to.

Third, accept that the only person you can change is yourself. Focus on changing your pattern of emotional and behavioral responses to the difficult people so that you make healthy and productive choices that benefit you now and in the long term.

Fourth, manage your emotions when you deal with difficult people. Learn not to take their behavior personally. Avoid becoming defensive because this will only make things worse.

Finally, as with anything in life, recognize that dealing with difficult people is a skill worth learning, and it takes practice. Assess past incidents and learn from them by asking yourself the following questions:

- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- How did I feel?
- How did I respond?
- How do I wish I had responded?
- What could I do differently in the future to have a positive outcome to a similar incident?

Dealing with Aggressive-Difficult People

Be clear with aggressive-difficult people about how you wish to be treated, and do not allow them to treat you otherwise. If you are upset by something the aggressive-difficult person says, you can respond with a comment such as, "That wasn't nice/productive/professional. Please do not speak to me like that."

If you anticipate unpleasantness with an aggressive person, meet them in a neutral location where you feel safe. If the aggressive person uses indirect or covert tactics, bring them out into the open by naming the offending comments or actions, and directly question them about their verbal attacks.

If appropriate, consider asking a friend, colleague, or supervisor to be present when you meet with this person. Do not enter into a situation that makes you feel unsafe or threatened.

Dealing with Passive-Difficult People

Passive-difficult people often crave approval but feel unqualified and, therefore, are unable to earn the approval and respect they seek. Because of this, they may be noncommittal or feign agreement when asked to perform a task or work with others. However, they will likely be among the first to blame other people when things don't work out.

The best strategy for dealing with passive-difficult people is to address their misbehavior directly and bring it out into the open. For example, if the person misses an important deadline,

offer to meet with them and inquire why. They may feel unable to perform the task assigned and unable to acknowledge this openly. If this turns out to be the case, offer to help them in order to complete the assigned task.

As in any relationship, it is unproductive to simply ignore the difficult person. Following is a breakdown of the most common aggressive- and passive-difficult personalities, along with strategies for dealing with them in a positive manner.

Personality Type	Characteristics	Coping Strategies
Evil Ruler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullies and intimidates • Is constantly demanding • Can be brutally critical • Often lets others do the work, but tries to take all the credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let them talk until they run out of steam • Get their attention • State your point nonaggressively • Don't allow interruptions • Ask them to leave or walk away
Timid Mouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never offers ideas • Won't let you know if they agree or disagree • Avoids conflict at all cost • Uses emotions and guilt to their advantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold them accountable • Shift the guilt • Identify specific behaviors or conduct that are unacceptable • Specifically describe desired performance and outcomes • Follow up regularly
The Professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-timer and may know a lot • Can be arrogant • Has an opinion about everything • Gets defensive if wrong • Can become loud and hostile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State your point nonaggressively • Don't allow interruptions • Help them see other perspectives or alternatives • Don't single them out or alienate
Thumbs-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agrees to any commitment, yet rarely delivers • Can't be trusted to follow through • Poor time-management or organizational skills • Can eventually create resentment among colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish clear weekly, monthly, and quarterly goals within the framework of the individual's responsibilities • Hold them accountable • Offer a reality/sanity check
Negative Nelly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is quick to point out why something won't work • Does not like change • Can be inflexible • Exaggerates others' mistakes • Encourages gossip/rumors that stimulate hard feelings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stick to the facts • Don't allow yourself to be sucked in to the gossip • Don't let it get personal • Calmly and consistently insist on positive behavior • Deal with issues immediately
Grumpy Cat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nothing is ever right • Prefer complaining to finding a solution • Often unproductive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Really listen to what they're saying • Offer feedback and possible solutions (if you think they're open to hearing them) • Be up-front and don't facilitate dependence

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