



CHALLENGE



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A Herff Jones IMPACT Resource for Students

Dealing with Difficult People

It seems like everyone has someone in their life who is difficult to get along with—someone whose behavior is often annoying, unpredictable, and troublesome. One of the challenges of being a student leader is figuring out how to deal with difficult people so you can get the group to work constructively together to achieve your organization's goals. Next time you are faced with an unproductive group member, try some of the following tips.

Stop wishing they were different.

We assume everyone thinks and behaves like we do and if they don't, we figure they're doing it on purpose to irritate us! Accepting who they are and learning to deal with their different way of doing things is more productive and is the first step in getting along with them.

Find some common ground.

Find something you can agree with the other person about, even if it's only to acknowledge that a problem exists or that you understand their perspective. Try to get the person to become a partner with you in solving the problem.

Brainstorm with a trusted friend or your adviser ways to address this person's behaviors.

Practice your response. Often, people think they need a quick comeback when faced with a difficult situation, and they become frustrated when they can't think of one on the spot.

Anticipate situations in which the difficult people in your life are likely to act up, and prepare your response ahead of time. Practice saying out loud what you would like to say to them; that way when it actually happens you'll be more likely to say something appropriate and will come away from the encounter feeling confident in your ability to handle situations.

Use I-messages. Instead of saying "you should" or "you must," which tend to put people on the defensive, try "I was expecting" or "I encourage you to..."

Criticize in private. If you're dealing with a critical issue, speak with the person privately. No one likes to be put on the spot in front of their peers.

Acknowledge their feelings. It's important to deal with the difficult person's feelings, then focus on the problem at hand. You don't have to agree with their feelings, simply acknowledge they exist by saying something like "I can

understand that you're angry," or "You seem frustrated by ..."

Don't let them get to you. We often allow the other person's attitude or behavior to get to us—we take it personally. Our tone of voice and body language then communicate our irritation, making the problem worse. Concentrate on listening non-defensively and don't respond emotionally to disparaging and emotional remarks. Remember the story about the Buddha where a verbally abusive man came to see him and starting hurling insults. The Buddha just sat there calmly until finally the man asked the Buddha why he failed to respond to the insults and abuse. The Buddha replied, "If someone offers you a gift, and you decline to accept it, to whom does the gift belong?" If someone is irrational, abusive, or annoying, you can mentally decline to accept "the gift." Let that person keep their negative feelings and behaviors and don't let them affect you.

Types of Difficult People

The most common types of difficult people often present special challenges. Deal with them in the following ways.

Irresponsible Irving. This is the member who doesn't follow through with responsibilities. He doesn't meet deadlines, doesn't do



things as well as they should be done, or constantly “forgets” to do things.

Try this: Check periodically to see how things are progressing when this person has a responsibility. Ask specific questions rather than a general “how’s the project coming along?” The person’s ability or lack of ability to answer the specific questions will give you an idea of whether or not he has done what should be done. If not, ask if you can help or have another group member partner with him to get the job done. Set deadlines early to allow time to finish anything not completed.

Dominating Donna. This person tries to force her ideas on everyone else, no matter what anyone says or does. She monopolizes discussions and is convinced that doing things her way is the best. Group members often avoid her, refuse to deal with her, or avoid implementing her ideas because they resent being forced into it.

Try this: Thank the person for the input and suggest getting the views of others in the group. Politely point out that others need an opportunity to participate and that there might be more than one “right” way of approaching the situation.

Bullying Bob. This person tends to be abusive, abrupt, accusatory, intimidating, arbitrary, and arrogant. He often demeans people who don’t exhibit high levels of self-confidence.

Try this: Be assertive, not aggressive, in handling the bully. Hold your ground by assertively expressing your own opinion.

Interrupt when you see a bully verbally attacking or physically intimidating another group member. Get their attention, firmly call them by name, and state that such non-respectful behavior is not acceptable in your group.

Stubborn Steve. Stubborn people resist changes that threaten their sense of security. They may become upset when someone wants to change the usual way of doing things. They tend to say no very quickly without listening to what is being asked of them. When pushed or rushed, they may get angry and dig in their heels even more.

Try this: A stubborn person often is afraid that you might want to change something he is attached to. Give the person extra time to adjust to whatever is changing. Ask him for input on issues, rather than telling him what to do, and give him options and choices. Don’t make sudden demands.

Complaining Connie. This is the person who finds fault with everything—nothing is ever done correctly or as well as it should be.

Try this: Instead of listening to a litany of complaints, ask the complainer to turn her attention to solving the problem. What would she do to fix it?

Unproductive Behaviors

Try the following suggestions if a group member appears to be keeping the group from being productive during a meeting.

If a group member

- Must always present the negative side of an issue
- Talks about all subjects, whether or not they are pertinent
- Distracts others by engaging in side conversations
- Acts superior to the group
- Picks on specific members
- States messages that are judgmental
- Is timid or insecure

You might ...

- Ask for group reactions to the expressed views, or alternate solutions
- In a non-judgmental way, recommend getting back to the subject at hand, or say that, because time is limited you’ll discuss other issues later.
- Call on the talkers by name and either ask an easy question, or restate the last opinion expressed by the group and ask their opinion. Try not to embarrass them.
- Ask for other views on issues after indicating the respect that the group holds for that person. Do not overdo this or else the group will resent it.
- Ask that personalities be omitted; focus on the problem not the person.
- Thank member for one point of view. Ask the group for other sides of the issue that should be considered.
- Draw out the person next to her/him, then ask her/his opinion of the topic.