

The Art of Dealing with Difficult People

Emotional Intelligence (*e-mo-tion-al in-tel-li-gence*) N

The capacity to be aware of, control, and express one's emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically.



Managing your emotional intelligence is the key to diffusing uncomfortable situations with co-workers, members, and board members. Here are a few tips to help you stay in control while reducing stress in the process.

BE A GOOD LISTENER

Everyone wants to be treated with respect. It's important that people feel they are being heard and their thoughts and feelings are being acknowledged. Focus on the person and resist the urge to interrupt.

"I don't have to attend every argument I'm invited to."

~ Unknown

KEEP YOUR COMPOSURE

Losing your temper won't get you anywhere. Regardless of how you're being spoken to, keep your responses respectful and use a calm tone of voice. Don't add fuel to the fire by arguing or being defensive. By allowing the other person to vent and while keeping your cool, the other person will likely be more open to what you have to say.

SAVE JUDGMENT

It's impossible to know what other people are going through. Try putting yourself in their shoes and avoid judging them based on their reaction/behavior to the situation. Separate the person from the issue.

UNDERSTAND THE TRUE MOTIVE

Is there an underlying need that's not immediately apparent? By identifying what the person is actually trying to gain or avoid, you will be one step closer to resolving the situation.

AVOID PERSONALIZING

Chances are that whatever the person's issue is, their reaction likely doesn't have to do with you on a personal level. Depersonalize to maintain objectivity and control your emotions.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO APOLOGIZE

Offering an apology and a willingness to work to fix the situation can go miles toward moving in the right direction. An apology can be empathetic vs. taking ownership: "I'm sorry you're having to deal with this" recognizes the person's feelings but doesn't require you to take blame.

EXPLAIN YOUR POSITION

If an interaction reaches a point where the other person is willing to listen, explain your actions. There may be background information that they were not privy to that will help them understand why you've done what you've done and what your intentions are.

"The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress."

~ Joseph Joubert

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WORSE COMES TO WORST

Avoid conflict by distancing yourself from the person physically and/or emotionally. If you've given it your best shot and a negative interaction is spiraling out of control, consider asking the person not to speak to you in that manner or, if necessary, simply walk away. If worse comes to worse, simply ignore them unless interaction is critical.

REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL

Avoid confrontations in front of others and resist the urge to complain to others about your issues with the difficult person. Doing so will reduce potential awkwardness when things get back on track.

KEEP MOVING FORWARD

Focus on what can be done to fix the problem instead of dwelling on what has happened so far. Also, take time to think about how you can deal with the person next time the situation arises.

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

Work to establish a stronger rapport with the person over the long run. With the amount of electronic communication today, the human touch can be lost.

KEEP AT IT

Over time, you'll recognize the person's triggers, which will allow you to proactively diffuse the situation.

STAY FLEXIBLE

Different people have different triggers and responses to those triggers. Staying adaptable will help you save energy and avoid stress.

KNOW WHEN TO ESCALATE

As a last resort, approach your manager about the situation. Be prepared to list the techniques you've tried in an effort to diffuse the situation. And stress the fact that this is not the way you wanted to handle it, but you've got nothing else to try.

VALIDATE YOUR EMOTIONS

It's healthy to talk to someone confidentially about what you're feeling after dealing with a difficult person. Going for a walk or taking time to connect with a friend or loved one can help diffuse some of your frustration. Don't forget to give yourself a pat on the back. You deserve it.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

Not every difference in opinion needs to turn into a confrontation. Ask yourself if the situation is truly worth pursuing.

You're more in control than you think. You can't change people. But you can change the way you deal with situations that involve difficult people. Keep these tips in mind. Use the techniques that work for you and you'll find yourself ready to handle whatever is thrown your way. ☰

“The difficult people who we encounter can be our greatest teachers.”

~ Eileen Anglin

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