



# Work Smart Live Smart

## Dealing With Difficult Employees

By  
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**There are a few employees at my store who are great workers, but who really create tension among other staff members. How should I address this situation?**

Understanding why some people become more difficult or negative, and when they are more likely to act that way can prevent that build up of tension from happening.

So why are people difficult? The answers may lie in different areas, some related to the environment and some related to the “payoff” of using certain behaviours.

Some people learn very early on that the more noise they make, the more likely those around them will respond to their “squeaky-wheel” or “my-way-or-the-highway” approach. These are the people who use their bodies and voices to intimidate.

Some people feel so hopeless and powerless in their life that they may develop the attitude of “what difference does it make?” These people may be hard for us to work with, because they are often indecisive, resistant to change or have difficulty expressing their opinion.

For others, negative attitudes and behaviours are expressed when they are stressed out and just don't have the energy to use better communication skills, judgment and manners. Being stressed out is chronic in today's society. We often have too much to do, are running behind schedule or working with incomplete information. It takes a lot of energy to be positive, to keep things in perspective and to actively look for the good in someone.

The difficulty behind these attitudes and behaviours is that they are highly “toxic.” We may be functioning just fine when we suddenly have to change gears and deal with someone else's difficult behaviour or negative attitude. This brings us down, makes us feel grouchy and out-of-control. Before you know it, *we ourselves* start to complain, grow stubborn and get more negative or difficult. This bad attitude then ripples out to those around us, infecting them and becoming entrenched in the workplace.

Our goal is to stop rewarding these irritating behaviours. To do this, we must understand what people expect to gain from being so difficult. Some want to feel more in control. Some want to

feel important and listened to, and some want to avoid outright conflict, but will act out their annoyance or disagreement through other negative behaviours.

Here are a few tips on ways to stop difficult behaviours and reduce the impact of negative attitudes that we encounter in our daily affairs.

1. How can we help someone to feel more in control? Well, we need to ensure that we have clear job descriptions, are not overloaded and have realistic expectations for what we can accomplish.
2. Even though it is very easy to give the impression to those we are talking to and interacting with that they are important to us, we often forget or ignore these simple strategies. We need to start with our body language. Have you ever been in a hurry and talked without looking directly at the other person? What message does that convey? Turn and face the person. Make eye contact. Be in the moment and treat each person as if they are all that matters. It is hard to be difficult with someone who makes us feel special.
3. Watch how you are communicating. Bring potential or recurring problems out into the open. Are you listening to people or are you formulating your answer while they are still talking? Are you raising your voice or becoming agitated? Give as much information as you can.
4. What does your workplace environment convey? Is it comfortable, peaceful and engaging? Though the “extras” may seem unnecessary in accomplishing the business of the day, to decrease the incidence of difficult behaviours and negative attitudes, make your workplace a visual, auditory and aromatic haven in their hectic day.
5. Get a feel for some typical reactions and attitudes that you may face and prepare yourself in advance to deal with them. Be sure not to reward difficult behaviours by giving in or backing off. For some personality types, you need to keep your composure, be assertive and know exactly what it is you want to communicate. Get comfortable with people who need to vent and express themselves – however, do not tolerate abuse. Try using the person’s name to gain their attention when they are on a rant. Sometimes, you will get more useful information if you ask the person to write out the issue that concerns them, as there is less chance of the situation escalating into a “big production.”
6. Move difficult people away from problem identification and into problem-solving. Help them generate ways to improve the situation. When we are stressed out, we often have difficulty looking forward. However, if you hear the same complaints time and again, it may be that it is you who needs to move into problem-solving mode.

7. It is essential that you take care of yourself. Dealing with difficult people requires extra energy and focus. Maintain balance in your life – be sure to have other pursuits that you can count on for pleasure and distraction. Eat properly to control mood swings and to feel more energetic. Cut out caffeine, which heightens our responses and makes us more sensitive to those around us. Get plenty of sleep – probably more than what you are getting now. This too will give you the energy you need to think on your feet and provide the extra attention that some people need. Have someone to vent to – but not so often and for so long that you alienate that person. Lighten up, have fun and remember to smile. All of these positive behaviours will buffer you against the effects of dealing with tough situations.

To sum up, by understanding what people expect to gain from using undesirable behaviours, we are in a much better position to deflect and defeat the difficult behaviour and move the person from problem identification to problem-solving. We need to help people feel more in control, more important and listened to. And we need to ensure that we are taking care of ourselves and maintaining our own sense of humour and balance. By using these tips, we may be able to stop difficult behaviours and reduce the impact of negative attitudes in your workplace.

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit [www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com](http://www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com) for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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