



Work Smart Live Smart

Stop Letting That Difficult Person Ruin Your Day

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It's the end of the day and you're exhausted, frustrated and wondering if this is what your life has come to. You hear yourself describing your day as if it were someone else using those words. If someone talked to you like that, you'd wonder why that person continued to work where they do. Why are you letting one difficult person ruin an otherwise good day?

Understanding why some people become more difficult or negative, and when they are more likely to act that way, can prevent you from obsessing about that one difficult person to the exclusion of all the others who were quite pleasant and appreciated your work. By reflecting on your role in these difficult interactions, you will be in a better position to learn strategies to head off and/or counteract the stressful effects of these encounters with difficult clients.

So why are people difficult? Why do some people see the cup as being half empty instead of half full? 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 enter our offices with complaints in hand and 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 clients may be hard for us to work with, because they are often indecisive, resistant to change or have difficulty expressing their opinion.

For other clients, 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. The next thing you know, *we ourselves* complain, grow stubborn and more negative or

difficult. This bad attitude then ripples out to those around us, infecting them and becoming entrenched in the workplace.

Fraught with difficult people and negative attitudes, our work environment becomes a daily scene of excessive finger-pointing, backstabbing and gossiping, higher rates of absenteeism, lower productivity and decreased quality of customer service.

Can we stop negative attitudes and difficult behaviours from rearing their ugly heads in our workplace? Unfortunately, the answer is no — but we can control how we respond and desist from (inadvertently) rewarding behaviours that shouldn't be encouraged.

The main premise to work from is that difficult people use negative behaviour to get what they want. It has worked for them before and they are counting on it to work for them again. 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. Staff should still be responsive to clients' needs and concerns, rather than caught up in red tape and "by-the-book" procedures.
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.
3. Try and remember details about the person. Write them down and mention them the next time you're chatting. It is hard to be difficult with someone who makes us feel special.
4. 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? Ask clients if there is anything you can do to improve their visit – even when you don't want to hear their answer.

5. Give clients as much information as you can. I was recently waiting in an emergency room with my son. When the doctor arrived and began her assessment, she received an emergency page and quickly left. I was very annoyed, as my son grew restless. A nurse came by and said that the doctor had to deliver a baby and would be back shortly. That information was all that I needed to hear to make me feel better about the situation.
6. Look at the procedures that the person has to work their way through. Are you keeping them waiting, but expecting them to be on time? Make a realistic schedule, but if you are running behind, leave a message even if they may have already left for their appointment. It shows that you respect them and regret causing them any inconvenience. Can you offer them an extra service or a small token of appreciation for their patience — *before* they become annoyed by the delay?
7. 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, they may be just the things that clients remember. If you say you cater to families, does the environment of the office really convey that when clients with children walk in? There is nothing more stressful to a parent than to try and occupy a child in a confined space. Even being a few minutes behind schedule can upset the calmest of parents. To decrease the incidence of difficult behaviours and negative attitudes, make your workplace a visual, auditory and aromatic haven in their hectic day.
8. 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.”
9. 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 (and not the client) who needs to move into problem-solving mode.
10. 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. And if you find yourself saying that what I am recommending will never work – well then, it may be time for you to reflect upon the negative vibes that you may be sending out.

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 for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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