



[DR. SHIRLEY SAYS...]

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Dealing with difficult co-workers: Strategies for success

Long ago, Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrance; and one man in his time plays many parts."

So, the truth be told, we can probably all be difficult players from time to time, depending on the setting. But some people, it seems, are difficult most of the time with most of the people with whom they come in contact.

There are a number of techniques that I am going to discuss that should enable you to get a better fix on why people act the way they do, and what you can do to minimize your anger, frustration and helplessness as well as be able to accomplish more in the encounters with the difficult persons in your life.

Initially, remember that when attempting to get along with a difficult co-worker, you almost always have a choice. In fact, you have four choices.

You can stay and do nothing. That includes suffering over it, and complaining to someone who can do nothing. Doing nothing can be dangerous because anger and frustration with difficult people tends to build up and get worse over time. Also, complaining to people who can do nothing tends to lower your self-esteem, as well as lower morale and productivity, while postponing effective action.

You can walk away. Sometimes, your best option is to walk away. Not all situations are resolvable, and some are just not worth resolving. Walking away makes sense when it no longer

makes any sense to continue to deal with this co-worker. If the situation is deteriorating, if everything you say or do makes matters worse, and you find yourself losing control, remember that discretion is the better part of valor, and so, just walk away. Like Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You're nobody's victim without your permission."

However, before you decide to walk, you may want to consider your other two choices.

You can change your attitude about the difficult co-worker. Even if they continue to engage in difficult behavior, you can learn to see them differently, listen to them differently, and feel differently around them. There are attitudinal changes that you can make in yourself that will set you free from your reactions to problem co-workers.

You can change your behavior. When you change the way you deal with difficult persons, then they have to learn new ways to deal with you. The fact is, if you start to do something different, they'll have to do something differently as well.

In "Coping with Difficult People," a book written by Robert M. Bramson, Ph.D., he reminds us that our reaction and attitude toward a difficult person are the most important defenses we have, since we can control both. Dr. Bramson also suggests that we maintain a positive attitude, be direct, descriptive and nonjudgmental.

Other strategies and tips to help you cope with difficult co-workers include:

➤ Address the issue, rather than attacking the person. To do this suc-

cessfully, you should be prepared with facts, not gossip or rumors.

➤ Be aware of your body language, maintain good eye contact, and watch your tone of voice.

➤ Time the discussion appropriately. Timing here is just as important as in other aspects of life. When something unacceptable happens, we should usually take enough time to ensure that we don't blurt out things we will regret later.

➤ Listen rather than argue. Ask for clarification. Making sure you've heard the person correctly goes a long way in keeping communication clear. For example, "Just to be sure we're on the same page, are you saying that you ..." is a technique that gives the person you are speaking with a chance to confirm that you've heard them correctly, or to refine the message.

In addition to utilizing these strategies, we must also consider, or at least proceed on the premise, that the difficult co-worker will probably not change. We can ultimately only be responsible for our behavior and how the behaviors of others are allowed to affect us. This is crucial since the task that we have in dealing with difficult co-workers is more about "us" than it is about "them." We're the ones ultimately responsible for putting an end to the behavior that upsets us.

In the end, when we deal effectively with difficult co-workers, it helps us, it helps them, and it helps the clients we collectively serve.

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