

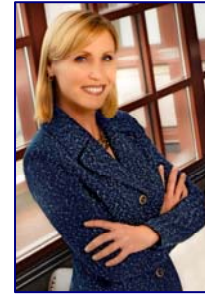


Dealing with Difficult People

Hotheads in the Headlines

By Connie Dieken

You're surrounded by difficult people every day—in check-out lines, at family reunions, even at four-way stop signs. Most encounters with surly citizens are brief: you bite your tongue, possibly demonstrate your frustration with a gesture, and move on. But in the workplace, it's a different story. You may be stuck with chest-thumpers, grenade-tossers, and whiners at close range for years. Conflicts can simmer and eventually erupt into a disastrous mess if you don't address these situations. Difficult relationships carry a high price: increased employee turnover (good people often leave to escape hotheads) and plummeting morale.



In my years as a communication advisor and media professional, I've probably encountered almost every toxic type, but recently I've been struck by how many people are comparing their leaders to hotheads they've seen in the headlines. They're likening their bosses to Meryl Streep's abrasive fashion editor character who berates and belittles in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Or they're fantasizing about *just once* managing a difficult person as French soccer star "Zizou" Zidane handled it—by countering a nasty verbal taunting with a ferocious head-butt.

Every workplace is peppered with difficult people and poisonous situations. It's important to solve the problems they create *without* dismissing them with the wave of a hand or drawing a red card like the hotheads in the headlines.

Think about this scenario: its nine o'clock Monday morning. You're in the office. The toxic person just stepped away to refill his cup of coffee, and you're fuming. "If he would just stop interrupting me (treat me with respect, meet deadlines, or stop hovering over my desk), this place would run much more smoothly!"

So how do you approach sticky situations at work? Keep this in mind: people are much more likely to meet you in the middle if they feel acknowledged, understood, and appreciated. Don't let a difficult person derail your workplace. Here are some tips on how to take the bully by the horns:

- **Keep them in the loop.** Beneath their bluster, difficult people often lack confidence and fear being left out of the loop. Better to over-communicate important messages to them than risk their wrath if they feel slighted. This can

prevent them from blindsiding you with accusations and temper tantrums.

- ***Transfer ownership.*** Narcissists crave control and often react explosively when they feel something's being imposed on them. Whenever possible, present a narcissist with at least two options to choose from, so he'll feel in control. He's more likely to buy into an idea if he believes he made the decision.
- ***Don't hit and run.*** If you decide to push back, don't accuse and duck. Instead, express your opinion honestly and be ready to accept responsibility for your viewpoint. Don't camouflage your feelings or backpedal. This assertive response often stops a bully in his tracks.
- ***Keep discussions private.*** Don't involve others in a soap opera without first trying to address the issue privately. If you whisper and gossip, you will only magnify the problem, make it more complicated, and risk losing credibility. Often, tensions can be ironed out with one private, candid discussion.
- ***Don't try to change her mind.*** Your goal is to work together productively and get along – *not* to change the other person's opinions. A difficult person may not be aware of the effect her words or actions have on you. Explain your opinions and be open to her outlook.
- ***Listen and wait.*** If you are bearing the brunt of a tirade, allow the accuser to vent completely before you respond. Fight the urge to jump in too early, or you will find yourself in a shouting match. Bullies love to escalate because they are addicted to the urge to win.
- ***Explain without excuses.*** Long-winded explanations invite critics to challenge you. Difficult people often lack the patience gene. Don't filibuster. Reveal your reasoning and move on.
- ***If the bully is your boss, drop the rope.*** You can't win that tug of war. Instead, study what kinds of situations set him off, stop doing those things whenever possible, and learn coping strategies to handle the inevitable flare-ups. Separate the behavior from the person. It may be healthier to feel sorry for someone with a terrible temperament than it is to waste your energy being irritated.

When you are faced with a difficult person, it's natural to feel anxious. But if you are constantly conflicted at work and just waiting for turmoil to blow over, *you* might eventually be labeled as the difficult person. No matter how thorny the issue, productive, forward-thinking people don't wait and just *let* things happen—they *make* things happen.

Connie Dieken is an executive communication advisor and coach. She's the president of onPoint Communication, winner of a 2006 NAWBO Top Ten Women Business Owners Award, an inductee of the Radio & TV Broadcasters Hall of Fame, and the co-author of Communicate Clearly, Confidently & Credibly. She conducts workshops, keynotes, and coaching sessions and can be reached at 800.505.9480 or via e-mail at connie@onpointcomm.com.