



Dealing with difficult people



Your ability to successfully contribute to a project team depends a lot on your ability to relate effectively to people. Managing relationships is the core to managing; managing your managers, managing your team and managing other stakeholders. There are no neutral relationships; every relationship you have influences you and can lift you up or weigh you down; move you forward or hold you back; help you or hurt you. The good news is you have a lot of say in how each relationship works!

Positive and supportive relationships can propel you to success; whereas unmanaged dysfunctional relationships can destroy you. If you mismanage a dysfunctional relationship with a difficult person, the fall-out will affect your productivity and quite possibly the success of your project.

You know you are in a toxic professional relationship when the other person:

1. Stifles your talent and limits your opportunities for advancement
2. Twists circumstances and conversations to their benefit
3. Punishes you for a mistake rather than help you correct it
4. Reminds you constantly or publicly of a disappointing experience or unmet expectation
5. Takes credit or withhold recognition for new ideas and extra effort
6. Focuses solely on meeting their goals and does so at your expense
7. Fails to respect your need for personal space and time

To successfully manage difficult people, you need to set boundaries that encourage mutual respect and keep the focus on productivity. Boundaries remind people of what's acceptable to you and what's reasonable to expect from you, and prevent difficult people from taking up too much of your time and energy. Failure to set these boundaries simply allows a toxic relationship to develop.

Establishing boundaries isn't easy, however. Difficult people don't like boundaries. They want to shift responsibilities according to their mood and create work environments that mirror their personal environments.

Here are some ways you can set boundaries:

1. **Manage Your Time.** Set a limit on the amount of time you spend beyond the hours needed to complete the project work. For example, you should politely but firmly decline an invitation to a peripheral meeting.
2. **Express Yourself.** Reveal aspects of your personality that reinforce your values. Sometimes it's a matter of letting people in a little bit to help keep your boundaries intact. If aggressive behavior offends you, say so (in a firm, but non-aggressive way), but you also need to consistently act in an assertive (rather than aggressive) way.
3. **Build your reputation,** and do it carefully and consistently. Everyone plays a role at work: the victim, the star, the slacker, the go-to guy. Your co-workers should know what you stand for and what to expect from you. Then, don't waiver. Integrity and authenticity¹ are the keys - behave in the

¹ For more on the power of authenticity and integrity see, *Integrity is the key to delivering bad news successfully*: <http://stakeholdermanagement.wordpress.com/2014/01/09/integrity-is-the-key-to-delivering-bad-news-successfully/>



way you expect others to treat you.

4. **Change the Conversation.** Stay focused on the project and away from nonproductive behavior. Avoid gossip, criticism and other negative conversations by simply stating: *“I don’t really have time to discuss that just now, but I really do need your input on this project issue”*. If the attack is on you personally, ask to *“take the conversation off line and focus on this important project matter now”*.

Effective relationship management is not for the faint-hearted, and is definitely not a ‘soft’ option. But when you know how to handle difficult relationships appropriately you will be in a much stronger position to achieve your objectives and succeed.

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