

Dealing with Difficult Behavior in Adults

Managing conflict to best serve the interest of girls

No one enjoys dealing with difficult people; however, ignoring situations involving difficult people or hoping that such situations resolve themselves is usually just wishful thinking. Dealing with difficult situations immediately and effectively is best for everyone concerned.

Regarding conflict, *Volunteer Essentials* advises, “Get those involved to sit down together and talk calmly and in a nonjudgmental manner. (Each party may need some time – a few days or a week – to calm down before being able to do this.) Although talking in this way can be uncomfortable and difficult, it does lay the groundwork for working well together in the future. Whatever you do, do not spread your complaint around to others – that won’t help the situation and causes only embarrassment and anger.”

Of course, not every difficult person presents as an out and out conflict. It may just be a difference of opinion or a clash of personality that presents a stumbling block to productivity and achieving positive outcomes with the group. This needs to be addressed to maintain a healthy positive experience for everyone involved.

It is helpful to understand the type of difficult person and customize your approach.

Types of Difficult People

The Silent Type: This person might respond with one-word answers (yes, no, maybe) and is very tight-lipped. Typically, they do not participate in conversations and will not reveal why they’re quiet even when asked. These individuals tend to be shy and afraid.

To work effectively with them, ask open-ended questions. Show appreciation for their positive work and praise the behavior you want reinforced. Also, allow enough time in conversations for them to respond; do not interrupt the pause.

The Pessimist: This person always sees a problem without a solution. Most likely, this volunteer has an extremely low self-opinion and feels powerless in most situations. They create power by making a mountain out of a molehill. This negativity can pull the morale down within an organization at a very rapid rate.

To work effectively with them, present the negative aspects before they do and then provide alternatives. Be optimistic. Do not be drawn into their negative opinions or argue and debate with the individual. Whenever possible, give the volunteer time to think through your discussion.

The Nod-and-Smile: This person can be overly flexible in their effort to be liked and get what they want. They can be personable, over-committed and a soothing delayer. They’re frequently an extrovert who will avoid disagreements at all costs.

To work effectively with them, be non-threatening. Ask for their opinion and solutions which will help them analyze a situation. Be aware of their over-commitments and help them monitor and manage their schedule. Make it non-threatening for them to be honest about their opinions and feelings. Hold them accountable for their commitments.

The Chronic Complainer: This person complains about others and whines constantly. They seldom take responsibility for their actions and will place blame for their failures on the shoulders of other people. They feel helpless to fix any problems and are a perfectionist at heart. They are not only critical of you and others, but also extremely self-critical.

To work effectively with them, listen carefully at first. Interrupt and ask for clarification and specifics, not generalizations. Guide the conversation toward resolution of the problems with specific alternatives and solutions. Acknowledge their feelings.

The Mean Coworker: This person is sweet to your face as they nip at your back. They can be manipulative as they smile at you. They will deny that they're playing games as they line up another attack that seems to come out of nowhere at your next meeting. They tend to have a rigid set of standards they believe everyone should conform to.

To work effectively with them, confront the individual. It's best if this can be done by a group of people they affect with their behavior. Reinforcement by several people that the behavior is unacceptable will help get the message across. Provide alternatives for their behavior. If possible, establish regular problem-solving meetings to allow the issues to surface in a healthy manner.

The Know-It-All: This person feels superior and tends to be condescending. They can be narrow-minded and stubborn. They tend to mistrust the ideas of others and will find a scapegoat if their ideas fail. They need admiration and ego-stroking. If they do not have the answer, they will make it up.

To work effectively with them, listen to their opinion and respect it. Be sure however, to respect your own opinion as well. Whenever possible, give them credit in front of others. Prepare for all meetings and discussions. If need be, provide them with a way out if it becomes apparent they're not the expert they conveyed.

The Space-Case: This person is always oblivious to the task at hand. They're in constant crisis; the car broke down; the babysitter didn't show or the computer crashed. They're focused on everything but the task at hand and are easily distracted by the crisis of the hour.

To work effectively with them, sit down and explain why the project, task, etc. is so important to the organization. Dramatize a bit to add urgency to your own needs or crisis. Outline the necessary step for completion of the project. Obtain their buy-in to the project and then monitor their progress with praise and recognition.

The Steamroller: This person is quick to anger, loves to intimidate others and throws tantrums when they do not get their own way. They believe they're right all of the time and will go to great lengths to prove their superiority.

To work effectively with them, stay calm during their outbursts and above all, stand up for yourself. Maintain good eye contact. Prepare ahead of time with effective responses, which you have rehearsed and clearly state you will not be the scapegoat or bear the brunt of their tantrum. Be friendly (everybody wants someone to accept them) and do not argue with them since that is part of their game.

Volunteers are encouraged to resolve conflict amongst themselves whenever possible. However, Membership Service staff members across the council are available to provide advice and are trained to act as objective third-parties. In severe situations, please refer to the policies outlined in the Volunteer Handbook.