The art of managing difficult people

Categorise the difficult ones then tailor your behaviour to manage them, says Colleen Wedderburn Tate

Difficult people are everywhere, but when they are work colleagues we all need to develop skills and behaviours to minimise disruption.

Robert Bacal (2000) writes: 'You can't smack them or sack them but you can... manage difficult people and ensure you don't become a victim.' Here's how:

Develop key skills

- Separate the person from their behaviour. Remain objective and look for patterns of behaviour.
- Do not blame the other person for the problem. Two people make a working relationship so examine your own role in creating the difficult behaviour.
- Avoid being a victim, but don't avoid dealing with them or react in ill-considered ways. That makes difficult behaviour even more difficult.
- Focus on the effects of poor behaviour on the work environment rather than on your subjective feelings about what is happening. Then act.

Difficulty personified

People do not see life as it is - they see life as they are. So, difficult people see others as difficult because they are. They can try to provoke a reaction, even if it will be negative. Characterising them can help separate the person from the behaviour:

- The wild cat is often unseen at work. They may have a history of poor performance about which they can be defensive. They may refuse to do given work, even sabotage the work of others and reject being managed by anyone. They can attract undue management time and cause colleagues stress and frustration.
- The snake can gossip about or criticise others' personal lives or engage in inappropriate public disagreements. This can pollute personal relations and the work environment, and bring the organisation into disrepute.
- The shark can display similar characteristics to the snake but acts subversively - such as withholding information, advancing nonsensical excuses for incomplete work and harassing colleagues.
- The hyena can be rude, aggressive, domineering and negative about people, always blaming others and never taking responsibility for their own actions. There can be complaints about them, colleagues become tense and disaffected, and sickness and absence rates can rise.

There are three direct management interventions that you can deploy:

- Encourage the person to improve their performance.
- Mediate by bringing the aggrieved parties together.
- Problem-solve as a team.

Home front

Managing yourself, however, is a much more practical approach:

- Note and control your own reactions.
- Communicate clearly and openly with the difficult person about the problems.
- Handle conflict positively and constructively.
- Be assertive not aggressive.
- Be able to say no without feeling guilty.
- Be a good negotiator.

The key is to never ignore difficult behaviour and always address it as early as possible. Finally, do not become bogged down in why the person is difficult - you are not on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Focus on what can be done, and do something NS.

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Reference
