

## *Dealing With Difficult People Takes Practice*

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No one ever looked forward to dealing with a difficult person, whether it was an employee, customer, or co-worker. But inevitably, problems arise, and at some point, it will be your turn to address them. All employees should receive some kind of training in communication skills, and it is helpful to keep a "tool box" of techniques you can use to address difficult situations. Here are a few from my toolbox:

- **Step back from the situation.** When faced with a difficult situation, people often think they need a quick comeback or make assumptions about the issue at hand. Step back and try to get the other person talking. Find out what their style of communication is, and try to accommodate it. The other person isn't exactly like you; take time to find out more before you address the problem.
- **If you can, practice your response.** When situations don't have to be dealt with on the spot, take the time to practice your response. Try to think like the other person. Practice out loud so you can hear what you could be saying to the other person. Anticipate their responses and adjust your delivery. Practice helps us avoid mistakes beforehand and can reduce misinterpretation.
- **Stay in "adult" mode.** According to Dr. Eric Burn, there are three modes of communication: child, parent, and adult. When dealing with conflict, it's important to stay in adult mode. Don't act like a parent and be judgmental, or like a child and be defensive. Accept any responsibility that may be yours. Realize that it's okay to agree to disagree. Ultimately, if tempers begin to flare, you may need to take a break and reconnect later.
- **Try to find an agreement.** It is usually helpful to find some agreement on the situation at hand, even if it's only that the problem exists. Reaching an agreement conveys understanding and helps move the conversation along. It can also help to speak in positive terms, telling the person what you "can do" rather than what you "can't do".
- **Communicate and explore alternatives.** Never assume you can't help someone. By thinking about alternatives and offering possible suggestions, you keep the conversation on a positive note. You can also ask the person, "What would you like me to do?" Not only could you help solve their problem, but you might find that what they actually want is less than you initially thought.

**Action Plan:** *When dealing with people in difficult situations, keep the following in mind:*

- Make sure you understand the problem at hand before you start to solve it.
- Don't take the problem or situation personally.
- Treat the other person as they would want to be treated.
- Take time to practice your response.
- Accept your responsibility.
- Offer alternatives and tell them what you can do to help.

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