

Dealing with Difficult People

A challenge to anyone who works with groups, whether it be a PTO committee or a group of co-workers, is how to handle those folks who seem to always be creating conflict or undermining the progress of the group. They come in a variety of packages, from the chronic complainer to the smiling face who agrees to everything you say regardless of their true opinion. Here are a few suggestions for keeping the group on task despite that difficult person.

Complainers gripe constantly but rarely do anything to fix what they're complaining about. This may be because they feel powerless or because they don't want to take responsibility. To turn a complainer into a problem-solver:

- Listen attentively
- Paraphrase their complaints
- Pin them to specifics
- Summarize the facts
- Turn the conversation to problem solving

The last item is the critical step of going from a gripe session to a serious discussion of how the issue can be resolved. Be prepared to interrupt and take control of the conversation when your complainer starts rambling and to repeat the process many times.

Super-Agreeables are always supportive – at least in your presence. But they don't follow through with what they've agreed to do and may even act contrary to what they have led you to expect.

- Make honesty non-threatening – they're afraid you don't want to hear the truth
- Don't allow them to make commitments they can't possibly fulfill
- Listen to their humor – they often hide the truth there.

Silent Partners usually don't respond to your questions with anything more than a yes or a no, and then only when you force a response. To draw them out you might:

- Ask open-ended questions
- Use the friendly silent stare as you wait for a response
- Allow some silence, inviting them to fill the void
- Break the tension by offering a suggestion and then asking their opinion

Hostile – Aggressives try to bully the group into making the decision they want, making cutting remarks or throwing temper tantrums when they don't get their way. To cope with them:

- Stand up for yourself, without being threatening
- Give them time to run down
- Have them sit down; this will make them less aggressive
- Be prepared to be friendly; Hostile-Aggressives are often friendly once you stand up to them.

Know-It-All Experts think they know all there is to know about anything worth knowing. They are usually condescending and pompous and may make you feel like an idiot. To blunt their effect:

- Do your homework on the subject
- Listen to and acknowledge what they say
- Question them firmly, but don't confront them (they hate being wrong).
- Avoid being a counter-expert

No matter what type of difficult person you are dealing with, remember that they are a person with feelings. You can reject their behavior without rejecting them as a person. Stop wishing that the person were different and help them find an appropriate way to participate in the group. And finally, don't take their behavior personally.