



ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH, INC

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STRATEGIES TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH

DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Developed by Nate Terrell, LCSW and Anita Foeman, Ph.D.

- 1) Difficult people often try to force you to give in to their position through their power plays, anger, etc. Rather than empower them by reacting in turn, detach and “go to the balcony” to control your reactions, objectively assess the situation and figure out your best, strategic response. Recognize that difficult people can’t “make” you angry, frustrated, etc. You create these reactions as a result of your thoughts and beliefs.
- 2) Sidestep or deflect power struggles or head-to-head battles with difficult people by “taking your sail out of the wind” and refusing to react to their provocative behavior.
- 3) Do not personalize the behavior of difficult people. It is likely they treat others the same way they treat you.
- 4) Disarm difficult people by providing them with unpredictable responses, finding points of agreement or simply listening. When they feel heard out and acknowledged, difficult people often let down their guard and become more receptive to the point of view of others.
- 5) “Change the game” with difficult people by identifying why their strategies are not working, suggesting better ways to interact, reframing their motives, asking them for advice, etc.
- 6) Induce the cooperation of difficult people by pointing out the advantages of finding agreement, getting them to side with you against the problem, etc.
- 7) Persuade difficult people to focus on problem-solving rather than arguing, getting involved in point-counterpoint, etc.
- 8) Use Socratic questions to gain information and/or expose fallacies in the logic of difficult people and meta-communication to force difficult people to examine their own attitudes and behaviors.
- 9) Speak directly and calmly with difficult people to make it harder for them to tune you out, question your own behavior, etc.
- 10) Reframe the motives of difficult people by acting “as if” they are trying to effectively communicate, solve the problems at hand, etc.

- 11) Appeal to underlying principles to create a basis for constructive dialogue and/or problem-solving with difficult people.
- 12) Make it easier for difficult people to agree with your point of view by allowing them to “save face,” responding to their unmet needs and identifying their “hidden” resistance to resolving the problems at hand.
- 13) Set and maintain viable limits so that difficult people are not able to take advantage of you.
- 14) It is often difficult to take on a difficult person alone. Therefore, it is often helpful to collaborate with others to develop and implement an effective strategy such as group intervention.
- 15) When negotiating with a difficult person, make sure you have a clear “walkaway point” and viable BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement). A solid BATNA provides you important leverage and protects you from being intimidated into giving away more than you really want.

Partially adapted from *Getting Past No* by William Ury, Bantam Books, New York (1991)

