

Quick Tips for Dealing with Difficult People

By Margaret Meloni, MBA, PMP

Your hands are sweating; your stomach is in knots. Once again you need to sit down and discuss your project requirements document with that obnoxious team member. The one who just drives you crazy. If you say left, they say right. But that's OK because you put it off until the very end of the day.

You immersed yourself in other work and did not bother to think about this conversation. After all why waste time on a no-win situation? You are going to stop by their desk, tell them how it will be and then go home.

But what if there were another way? It is not likely that the difficult person will change for you, but you can change the way the two of you interact. You can take more control of the situation and work towards a positive outcome on your project.

Consider this approach:

- Prepare for the conversation in advance. Identify what you hope to gain from the interaction and begin with this end in mind.
- Be flexible; do not be so focused on your end goal that you cannot take a detour in the conversation. This detour may help you understand the perspective of your difficult person.
- Select a time that is convenient to both of you. A time when you can both listen and exchange information without additional pressures or distractions.
- Listen; really listen to what they are saying. If they say something like, 'I cannot do that' or 'That will not work'; ask them why. Whatever issue they have may not be about you. Try to get the real problem out in the open.
- Maintain emotional objectivity. Remember, whatever drives them to be difficult is about them, not about you.
- An individual who is upset may become defensive and verbally attack you. Stay calm, take a deep breath and pause before responding.

If the discussion gets too heated, recommend that you both take some time to cool off. Then agree upon a time when you will reconvene. No matter how difficult, deal with the situation. Agree to stick with the situation until you have both been able to understand one another. You do not have to agree, but you want to work toward a relationship where you can respect each other as individuals and professionals.

It is quite possible that your difficult person is reacting to a quality in you that they can't deal with. Are they this way with other project team members or are you the only one?

If no one else has problems with them, that's a tip-off that you may unwittingly be contributing to the situation. It's a rare person who doesn't share some blame for a rocky relationship and you are no exception. A little introspection may be the key to turning a difficult person into one who is cooperative and pleasant to work with.

If your difficult person is viewed this way by others, it would be doing him or her a favor to sit down and frankly discuss the situation. This can be tricky, of course, but you really don't have much to lose. They probably don't know that they are being difficult or that people dread having to stop by their desk and talk with them. Having a private discussion with them in a calm and rational manner might be all that's needed to turn your difficult person into a valuable project team member. The secret to a successful discussion, however, is to keep it objective and avoid making accusations. Telling someone they are hard to work with is insulting and counterproductive; telling them that you'd like to get rid of the friction between the two of you and then offering your help will get better results.

If all else fails, you may just have to resign yourself to the fact that you must work with a difficult person. Doing so with grace and good humor will set an example for others as well as making the situation a bit less stressful for you.

About the Author

Margaret Meloni, MBA, PMP, is an executive coaching consultant for IT professionals.

She helps project managers and teams work together better by improving their soft skills. Learn how to successfully combine your technical and soft skills in her lectures at PM Lectures (www.pmllectures.com) and Meloni Coaching (www.melonicoaching.com).