

Techniques for Dealing with Difficult People

Complainers gripe incessantly, but they never try to do anything about what they complain about. This is either because they feel powerless to do so or because they refuse to bear the responsibility for a solution. Use this strategy to turn a complainer into a problem solver.

- Listen attentively even though it will be very difficult.
- Acknowledge what the complainer says by paraphrasing the complaints.
- Don't agree with the complaints.
- Be prepared to interrupt and take control of the situation. Complainers love to ramble.
- Use limiting responses that will pin the complainer to specifics.
- Avoid the accusation-defense-re-accusation sequence where you defend an accusation and then are re-accused. This can be like an error loop in a computer program that goes on and on and on.
- State the facts without comment and without apology.
- Switch to problem solving.
- Be prepared to begin this strategy from the beginning several times.
- Complainers are slow learners.

Super-agreeables are always very reasonable, sincere and supportive. At least in your presence. But they don't produce what they say they will produce, and sometimes they even act contrary to what they have led you to expect.

- Make honesty non-threatening. They are afraid you don't want to hear the truth.
- Be personable if you can and only if you mean it.
- Don't allow them to make unrealistic commitments when you know they couldn't possibly fulfill them.
- Be prepared to compromise so that you are both in a win situation.
- Listen to their humor. They often hide the truth there.

Negativists object to everything. They assert that whatever you propose won't work or is impossible. All too often their effect on you is to completely deflate any optimism you might have for a project.

- Avoid getting drawn into their attitude.
- State your own realistic opinion.
- Don't agree with them.
- Don't hurry to propose solutions.
- Use their negativism constructively. It never hurts to have a devil's advocate.
- Be prepared to take on the project by yourself if you can't change their mind.

Silent-unresponsives answer every question you might have and every plea for help that you make with "yep", "no" or a grunt, and sometimes, a "don't know." A longer answer you will not get. You can:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Use the friendly, silent stare.
- Pause for long periods, inviting them to fill the void.
- Comment on what is happening in the discussion.
- Recycle the conversation if necessary.
- Break the tension by helping them to say what they are thinking.
- Set time limits on the length of the discussion.

Indecisives can ruin a program because they put you off until it is too late to do anything about it. They put off making a decision until the decision is made for them. They also won't let go of anything until it is perfect, which it never is. To get around them try to:

- Bring the issues out in the open and make it easy for them to be direct. Pursue all signs of indecision.
- Help them solve the problem(s).
- Place all the alternatives in rank of importance.
- Emphasize the importance of quality and service.
- Give them lots of support after they have finally made a decision.
- If it is at all possible, keep control of what you are working on.
- Watch for signs that they are being overloaded by the pressure to make a decision.

Hostile-aggressives try to bully and overwhelm you by bombarding you. They make cutting remarks or throw tantrums when they don't get their own way (which they are convinced is the only way). To cope with hostile-aggressives:

- Stand up for yourself, without being threatening.
- Give them time to run down.
- Don't worry about being polite, just charge in and make your point.
- Get their attention, but carefully; don't startle them.
- Have them sit down; this will make them less aggressive.
- Speak for your own point of view; don't attack them.
- Avoid a head-on fight.
- Be prepared to be friendly. Hostile-aggressives are often very friendly after you have stood up to them.

Know-it-all experts believe and want you to believe that they know all there is to know about anything worth knowing. They are usually condescending, imposing, or pompous. And, in all likelihood, they will make you feel like an idiot. You can blunt this effect if you:

- 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.
- Let them be the expert they think they are.