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3 Approaches to Working with Difficult People by Jimmie Flores

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Canâ€™t we just get along? Does it matter that we like our co-workers? What if we ignore the difficult people, and just focus one doing oneâ€™s job? In other words, is taking the high-road the best game plan to survive in my current position?

These are all tough questions, and the best answers can vary depending on oneâ€™s situation. However, there are effective approaches to managing difficult people. In some cases, you can ignore the difficult people, and do your work. However, you might be required to take action, and confront the problem. Your success will largely depend on the approach you take, and not so much on what you say or do.

#1: Focus on what the person does well.

Iâ€™ve found that many difficult people are generally smart, hard-working, and committed employees. These individuals are even harder to work with when they have many years of experience under their belt. That is, they are not only talented, but they also have a successful track record.

Good advice here is not to try and change someone to think and act like you. You shouldnâ€™t take the approach that your line of thinking is right. You are not going to change someoneâ€™s beliefs in a matter of months. It is best to praise the person for the work they do, and provide feedback in a non-confrontational manner, such as: â€œSteve, your work on the Kalamazoo data warehouse project was terrific. Do you mind working on the lessons learned this week? I received an email from the project management office asking for that information immediately.â€• Keep it simple, and focus on the requirements.

#2: Make sure that respect is not violated.

Disagreement and conflict are part of everyday business. However, we must never allow someone to disrespect another employee. Similarly, we cannot allow an agitated co-worker to insult us, either privately or publicly. We must stand up for ourselves.

Andrea was a day late with her portion of the project because a key stakeholder was tardy responding to her requests. Patricia, her project manager, shouted: â€œYouâ€™re late! Câ€™mon! This is ridiculous! In fact, youâ€™re ridiculous, too!â€• Andrea cannot sit idly, and take this abuse. She must defend herself, but must do it in a calm manner. If Patricia continues her unprofessional tactics, the issue must be escalated to either Andreaâ€™s line manager or to HR.

#3: Take a no-nonsense approach.

A no-nonsense approach is one where you are programmed on the deliverables that must get done, and you are unconcerned with the noise emanating from the difficult person. This individual might be complaining about the assigned work, expectations, and management team. You, on the other hand, have an assignment to complete, and youâ€™re going to make sure it gets done.

Avoid falling in the trap and believing the difficult person is justified in complaining about the work. You are aware this person will find something wrong regardless of the situation. When you hear the complaints, steer the discussion back to the deliverables. You donâ€™t have time to solve non-work-related issues.

Getting along with difficult people is important to your success. In most cases, they merely want to feel important, and you can praise them for doing good work. However, you should never allow someone to ridicule or embarrass you. By standing up for yourself, you will find that even the difficult co-workers will soon respect you, and will quickly switch their attention to work that is assigned to them.

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Jimmie Flores - About Author:
Dr. Jimmie Flores,PhD,PMP,ITIL,SSBB,SPHR,GPHR is a seasoned organizational development and continuous improvement professional with 20 years of experience. In 2006, he founded the Flores Consulting Group, a company based in San Antonio, TX. Dr. Flores is also an expert in project management, ITIL, Six Sigma, Entrepreneurship, and Sports Officiating. Please visit our website at http://www.jmbok.com

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