

Dealing with Difficult People

Techniques to turn those frowns upside down.



I think we have all been there... You communicate, you have a set policy, you train your staff and then something just flies at you sideways. Enter the "difficult" person. They take a ton of time and energy, can destroy moral and thanks to modern technology they can instantly share their utter disdain for you and your organization with the entire planet with a few taps on a mobile phone. I know that some of your vivid imaginations conjure up all sorts of elaborate scenarios of what you would LIKE to do with these individuals, but below are some scenarios of what you actually CAN do with these individuals (saving yourself time, energy and potentially your reputation in the process).

1. Understand that you cannot control all people, their thoughts, their actions or how they conform to your business/organization. The "I just want them (the client) to come in, grab what they need and go" attitude is problematic on a variety of different fronts. Successful businesses have rules and standards to ensure quality, consistency and a positive consumer experience. Those rules are in place to help your organization conform TO THE CONSUMER and create a consistent customer experience NOT to force the consumer to conform to you.

2.- No one actually lives under a rock (that I am aware of). Few things are as frustrating to businesses or organizations as hearing the dreaded customer phrase "well, I didn't know anything about this". Sometimes, that statement is an indication that a marketing program may need some tweaking, and sometimes it is just an indication that people aren't always paying attention to what you communicate. This is an invitation to ask questions about what specific media an individual uses, how they feel about e-mail marketing, do they find direct mail helpful, are they on social media, etc... During that conversation, you can gently remind individuals of the steps you took to inform them of the existence of your business, an event, a special or a new product/service.

3.- Although it is always good to practice a little empathy, your job generally consists of making (or not loosing) money. Aggressive negotiations that take place because of customer's "limited budgets" typically result in businesses building extra margins into their initial asking price. In English, that means that businesses that allow negotiations generally mark something up so that they can mark something down. If your industry norm allows for price negotiations, keep mark up in mind. If your industry does not normally negotiate prices, some education will not work with every customer, but it will help with a few. Remember,

competing solely on the basis of price eventually leads to an erosion of margins that eventually makes business unsustainable. Emphasize your other values to ensure long term success.

4.- Everyone has to occasionally deal with someone that I call "personality kryptonite". You know the type: they physically embody your pet peeve in life. The pseudo expert, the chronically late, the individual that will never give you a straight answer, the side-seat-driver that can always do your job better than you (in their own mind), the indecisive individual that drags a simple process on & on... Some of these people you may get along with very well, while others make your hair stand on end. The important thing for all of us to remember is, we probably won't change these people. Take a breath and use basic strategies to work with your kryptonite individual. Create due dates with a built in buffer for the chronically late, create limited (A, B or C) options for the indecisive WITH A DEADLINE, put the side seat driver in charge of something with clear goals and benchmarked objectives. And, force yourself to adapt. My personality kryptonite is "the hugger". People that have to engage in way too much physical contact that I don't know very well kind of creep me out. But, in my position sometimes I have to just suck it up (that's why hand sanitizer was invented). By realizing my need to adapt to others, I've become a little better at dealing with certain personalities, but we are all a work in progress.

5.- Don't expect others to do things you aren't willing to do yourself. A lot of the difficulties in dealing with individuals simply comes from a misunderstanding or lack of communication, but nothing will enflame a difficult situation quite like insinuating someone has a less important role than you. Remember, difficult people still care (which makes working with them easier than apathetic people), but you have to work WITH them and realize their importance in their role as a consumer, client, partner or staff. You also have to find individuals willing to work with YOU, because the world has an abundant amount of individuals willing to talk about or "market" to solve issues, and significantly less people willing to work. The people not willing to work with you aren't difficult, they just aren't invested in the process, which is rarely fixable (i.e., cut your losses and move on). Maybe it's just the former farm kid in me, but I find it a lot easier to execute difficult tasks shoulder to shoulder with someone than to just fire random thoughts into the air and hope someone does something with them.



Emporia Main Street understands your need to capitalize on the human resources around you. Labor is a limiting factor in many types of organizations. I know I often wish for more hours in the day... That's why learning to deal with difficult people is so important. It is rare that we all get to enjoy working with the perfect personality every day, and by learning to adapt OUR behavior, we can expand our available labor and get more done. The upcoming Kansas Main Street training in Coffeyville has a session on "Working with people that don't have to play by your rules", which will

provide a nice companion piece to this article. Check back for more information in future editions!

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