

How to Thrive Among People Who Ruin Your Workday

The best of Business Management Daily's advice

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Difficult people: They've been a part of every workplace you've ever known. Bad bosses can drive you crazy quickly—and aggravating co-workers just add fuel to the fire.

In this special report, we've collected the best of Business Management Daily's advice on how to navigate the troublesome moods, annoying habits and unreasonable demands that damage your morale. We've included many bits of advice in the form of Q & A's from 'Z', an anonymous executive who tells it straight from 30+ years of corporate experience at the highest levels.

Responding to difficult people

By Joan Burge

As long as you are in the workplace, you will interact with people who challenge you. An underlying truth to keep in mind is that people are just being themselves. Just like you are yourself. Most people are not trying to intentionally be difficult. Use these strategies for success.

1. **Control your attitude.** When dealing with difficult people, the most important thing to remember is that you have ultimate control of your attitude. You always have a choice as to how to respond to a given individual. You can get upset and frustrated, or you can remain calm and handle that person with tact.
2. **Stay calm, cool, and collected.** Try counting to 10, taking a break, walking away from the situation, or even putting the person on the phone on hold for a short time. These techniques work because they break you away from the situation, giving you time to think what to do.
3. **Use your brain and not your heart, but have heart.** In other words, do not use emotions to handle a difficult person. When you use emotion, you are just reacting. Instead, use your mind to deal with the negative person or situation. When you do this, you are in control.
4. **Weigh the situation and consequences.** Evaluate the situation and think about the consequences of your actions. See beyond the immediate. Anticipate what could happen and whether you can live with that. Then act in a positive, confident manner.
5. **Attack the problem and not the person.** It never does any good to attack people. Obviously something happened that caused the conflict. Get to the issue and focus on it rather than on the person.
6. **Listen.** Listen carefully in order to understand the other person's point of view. Block out your own thoughts, judgments, and priorities and listen to the other person's concerns and feelings.
7. **Define the problem.** Are you clear on the real issue of conflict or is it just your perception? Ongoing communication helps clarify each person's perception of the situation, ensuring that the problem is clearly defined.

8. **Use facts only.** Stick to the facts when confronting someone. You will get more positive results when you deal with the facts than with the emotions around them.
9. **Maintain each other's self-esteem.** It's harmful to belittle others, and diminishes your professional image. When confronting colleagues, make sure you communicate in a way that allows them to save face.

Joan Burge is the 30-year pioneer of the administrative training industry. Learn more at www.OfficeDynamics.com. © Office Dynamics 2021.

How do I deal with a boss who won't meet deadlines?

Q: My executive is notorious for delaying, fussing, hedging and eventually missing deadlines. Then there's always a weak apology: 'Sorry, I got sidetracked.' Every time he does this, it inconveniences other departments. Are there any good ways to get him into a different mindset, one where we're not all scurrying around to make up the time he costs us?

A: It's important for the people setting the deadlines to lay out the ramifications of missing them. This doesn't have to be done in a heavy-handed way! Here's what I'm talking about:

Bad direction: "The copy is due to the Publications Dept. on June 11."

Firm direction: "The copy is due to the Publications Dept. on June 11 to give Marketing enough time to format and send it by June 14."

Hardcore direction: "The copy must be received by the Publications Dept. by June 11 to avoid customers seeing it too late to respond."

The first option above gives a deadline in a vacuum. So the copy's due June 11—well, so what? The second option lets someone know why the deadline exists. The third option shows the worst-case scenario, explaining how the bottom line might be hurt if a deadline is missed. That often gets more attention than the thought of inconveniencing the staff. Try applying the

bad/firm/hardcore model the next time a deadline is set. You should at least feel comfortable enough with your executive to send the “firm” option.

What to do with a chronic latecomer

Q: I’ve got a perfectly good employee with one annoying habit: He’s chronically late for meetings. I’ve repeatedly asked him why. I get excuses, not answers. I’ve started to disinvite him to meetings, but then he complains that he’s left out. Help!

A: First off, never wait for latecomers. That’s my cardinal rule for meetings. Begin punctually. Cover lots of ground up front. Better yet, give assignments right away and delegate the least appealing project to the person who’s not there on time. If that doesn’t work, establish disincentives (“punishment” sounds too harsh) and let everyone know what’s to lose if they arrive past, say, a five-minute grace period. Setting ground rules for the entire team—not just for the individual who’s always late—helps you adopt a fair strategy and avoid singling someone out.

How do I tell my co-workers they’re triggering my anxiety?

Q: “I haven’t shared my mental illness diagnosis with my co-workers or my boss. It’s something that’s manageable and I want to keep it private. But there are things my co-workers do that can trigger great, almost suffocating anxiety in me. Do you know of a good way I can let them know of the effect they’re having without making my mental health an open book?”

A: I wonder if a simple statement like, “Sorry, that particular (behavior/word/action) is hard for me to deal with. It makes me feel like ...”

The word “particular” lets them know this is not a problem with *them* per se; it’s a very specific instance. The second sentence is very important in letting people into your thoughts and making them see through your eyes. Another, more informal technique is to suggest a deal: You’ll adapt cheerfully to the situation they’ve suddenly thrust you into if they express themselves in a different way—by tweaking their wording or behavior just a little.

Deliver criticism the proper way

Whether you call it “negative feedback” or “constructive criticism,” telling employees that they’re doing something wrong is usually tricky. If you do it right, both you and the employee will learn from the experience and there will be no bad feelings. If you do it wrong, the employee may sulk for weeks, and your long-term working relationship could suffer. When you need to give a little criticism, follow these steps:

Choose the time and place carefully. Don’t cut into an employee’s work unless safety is involved. Make sure there are no deadlines looming. Don’t ask the person to stay after work or come in early. Also, never carry on the conversation (or even start it) when other people are around. Find a private place where you know you won’t be interrupted.

Start the conversation carefully. The way you open the conversation will set the tone for the entire discussion. Remember: You want to give constructive criticism. Stick with neutral statements such as: “I’m concerned about the Grossberg report; let me explain why.”

Be as specific as you can. If you start trying to criticize an employee without having your own thoughts in order, you lose credibility. Take a few minutes to go over what you want to say, and make sure you have several examples of what you are talking about.

Avoid negative ‘triggers.’ These are words and phrases that will put the employee on the defensive—such as “you always” and “you never.” Instead of using negative words like “sloppy,” for example, be more constructive by saying, “You need to pay more attention to details.”

Allow for two-way communication. Don't just criticize—have a real two-way conversation. By remaining open and letting the employee talk, you may find that he or she has problems that need to be worked out—or that more resources or training is needed.

Deal with the past, but focus on the future. Once you offer your criticism, move on immediately. Talk about the future; talk about the changes you would like to see. Make sure the employee knows the reason for the meeting was not to assign blame for the past—but to make sure things work more smoothly in the future.

How do I write a reluctant thank-you note?

Q: “I’ve been asked to write a thank-you note to one of our clients who put the company through hell recently. We’re thanking them for finally fulfilling their end of the deal without a lawsuit! The thank-you note is a tradition we have to follow. How do we grit our teeth and write a pleasant paragraph that won’t seem disingenuous?”

A: Because they finally came through on their end of the deal, you have some material to work with. You could write something like “We are grateful that because of X, Y will happen.” Touch upon the positive business effects of their actions in as much detail as possible, and before you know it, you’ll have gotten through the letter without having to add empty praise. Affix a simple closing like “Best wishes.”

Don’t tolerate sloppy writing

Q. My younger employees don’t seem to care about grammar or punctuation in their correspondence. I’ve asked them to proofread

their writing before sending it off, but I'm getting the impression that they don't feel that's important. What should I do?

A. In the age of texting and frantic internet posting, this is indeed more and more of a problem. Hand back unpolished work with a terse note about what needs to be fixed. And make it clear to all employees that at your organization, there's one job skill that never goes out of style, and will always be a key factor in considering who advances and who doesn't: attention to detail.

Is it them, or is it me? The problem co-worker quiz

This one's real simple to score—just circle every question to which you answer "False." Circle it again ... and then again ... and then one more time. And then take a moment to think...

- 1.** I know for a *fact* that my co-worker behaves in a way I know I never have or ever would.
- 2.** I know enough about my co-worker's home and personal life to be sure that *nothing* can explain the reason for their behavior.
- 3.** I'm *sure* my co-worker is the exact same aggravating person outside of the office as inside.
- 4.** I can't think of *anything* to talk about with my co-worker that we would have fun discussing.
- 5.** The time I spend being irritated and complaining about my co-worker is *worth it*.
- 6.** Just letting go of how I feel about my co-worker is *not* an option.
- 7.** Other people feel more hostile toward my co-worker than I do—I'm *not* the #1 complainer.

8. I am confident that no one I work with has *any* complaints about me personally.

Corner that rabble rouser

Q: It's come to my attention that one of my senior VPs has been posting strong political content on social media. Most employees are aware of this and many are resentful of his views. The talk has turned to what might happen if enough people find out where he works and decide to complain to us directly, possibly resulting in upset customers or even the loss of a client. What should I do?

A: I would bring this person into my office for a friendly exploratory conversation. There's no need right now to ask to see the posts, or threaten action against your employee. Just listen. By getting him to talk about his postings and share in the discussion about their possible effects, he should quickly come to see that no matter what his views, they indeed have ramifications.

There's always the possibility that you have a real renegade on your hands, someone who thinks the company has no right to intrude upon his private life on social media. He may even say he thinks the company should defend him to your customers and clients. If this is the case, thank him for his time and wish him well.

Then, unfortunately, you may have to begin to document any complaints against the company and any adverse *business* effects his postings may have involving client relations.

Talk to HR about the laws in your state regarding discipline for social activity. For now, what you want is the employee to give you a guided tour of his social media plan. Each word of self-defense will likely weaken his interest in continuing to post.

Haters gonna hate, askers gonna ask

Q. Lately, many of my employees have been asking me what I think are inconvenient questions. This is causing me to fire back with a snide remark, rather than a constructive answer. What can I do?

A. When employees ask inconvenient questions, it's easy to bark a rude answer. The downside is that these employees will then find ways to keep from delivering bad news—which cuts you off from the truth. Or, they simply leave, putting a distance between you and them. Keep your cool. Pretend you're talking to your best customer. It's not really so far-fetched: Who but your employees do you depend on to treat your customers right? And where will they learn how except from your example? In short, treat employees like customers—and keep them both.

Suffering a boss who doesn't suffer fools

Q. I just accepted a midlevel manager job. Yesterday, I met with a senior vice president who I'll have to work with regularly. He said, "I don't suffer fools gladly." I interpreted that as arrogant, especially given his pompous tone. How do you cope with fools like this?

A. Hang on a sec. You meet a guy once and you're flinging all kinds of judgment words around ("arrogant," "pompous," "fool"). You're an excellent name-caller! Seriously, withhold your verdict at least until your third or fourth meeting. He made the wrong first impression, but don't relegate him to the dungeon for good. Some of the colleagues who rubbed me the wrong way at first wound up becoming great friends and allies, and that's only because I tried to see the good in them and—when I didn't—I maintained my neutrality.

Wow, that colleague's got a loud voice!

We've all had moments of peace and perfect working rhythm disrupted by the boom of a co-worker who always hits uncomfortable decibel levels—and not because of anger or excitement. Some people are just ... loud.

Few of us can bring up the sensitive subject of a person's vocal force without seeming harsh or making someone feel self-conscious. And so it's best to pick your spots in which to deal with a boomer.

Try this: Whenever you're in one-to-one conversation with such a person, guide them behind closed doors or down the hall to continue the conversation with a simple "I don't want to bother anyone; sound travels in these hallways." And then keep at it. Every time a physical effort is made to isolate that voice, the more the message gets through that the volume level is something to think about.

You might also make a concerted effort to speak more softly to a boomer, creating a stark contrast that may eventually sink in.

Few of us really know how loudly or how softly we speak, so forgive the loud and try to admire what often creates such an outlier voice: inner confidence.

How do I deal with a bad delegator?

Q: My exec is a really lousy delegator, always taking everything on herself, even tasks that are far beneath her and could be handled by anyone. As a result, she's got too much on her plate and she's always stressed. How can I fix this?

A: Highly successful people often possess a paranoia about others making mistakes that will cost them. They feel that it's their own decisions and efforts that got them to their high position, so they begin to believe they must do everything themselves in order to get things right and continue their success. They'll always get everything perfect, they think, if they can just be

left alone and trusted with the details. It's more stressful to them to give up the reins of decision-making than to hand them off to others, regardless of how much time it costs them. Worry and doubt are their *true* stressors, more so than losing hours.

So while you should always offer to help with a simple "I'd be happy to do that for you," you might have to accept their poor delegation skills until you prove yourself hyper-capable and establish trust in the long term. One day it'll happen!

Oh, these people...

Q. Over the years I've become more annoyed by certain idiosyncrasies in others: fidgeting, casual tardiness, whispery voices, terrible grammar, etc. Little things like this make me seethe. How do I snap out of it?

A. Working with the same people for several years did this to me. I tried to see these triggers as aspects of an imaginary workplace comedy in which I was the noble protagonist, suffering fools left and right. It helped me see the lighter side of people's absurdities. But what helped most was seriously taking stock of my own. You see, I realized I'm a guy who can't stop saying "um" and "cool," who chews too loud, and who is too quick to share his own anecdotes in a conversation. Fact is, everyone's got three idiosyncrasies that might rub people the wrong way. Spot yours—and embrace them, they're part of you.

If you can't say something nice ...

Q. I've been watching my boss botch move after move for a few years now, and it's tough not to get swept up in the talk at work about his

errors. I'd like to play devil's advocate, but what argument can I make in defense of such a poor leader?

A. This error-prone boss must have some redeeming qualities you can point out if you feel the need to say something. There's no need to add to the behind-the-back chatter when there are obvious mistakes being made. Take the high road. In my long tenure I've learned not to hunt with hounds, especially when the quarry holds sway over my job. This bumbler will eventually catch wind of the negative talk and will feel compelled to defend himself, and you may find yourself a casualty.

Can't stand a co-worker? Here's why you might be the real problem

Same old, same old: Carl down the hall is late once again with his weekly spreadsheet when he clearly has nothing else to do, and good luck getting an answer from Donna about Friday's conference call—she's out of the office for the zillionth time this month (probably because of her kid's clarinet lessons). What is there to do but lecture your cubicle-mate once again on the shortcomings of these deadbeats?

Stop right there, rain cloud. The chances are very good that you're missing the whole picture of the colleagues who are causing you to gnaw on your stapler. Ask yourself these questions before you launch your next hissy fit:

1) Do I have any real idea what my co-workers' jobs are like? Unless you've observed someone for a full week as they wrestle with what's on their plate, you can't really know what they have to confront and resolve each day, and why your projects and priorities might not be as earth-shaking to them as they are to you. Try trusting that they're actually busy, and like you, go home every night worried about something work-related.

2) Who are they obligated to please? Many of the things we do are at the behest of someone with the power to fire us. The expectations of the people above us shape our schedules, our goals, our task lists—pretty much every decision we make while we're on the clock. If you're not quite getting what you want from someone, it could be that they're mired in the unfortunate

position of having to sacrifice efficiency, protocol and even logic for the sake of appeasing a higher-up.

3) Is what they want from a job simply different from what I do? Not everyone is after a promotion, and not everyone wants to be friends with the people they work with. Workaholics often resent people they consider undedicated, and vice versa. No particular type of worker is right or wrong; they all simply bring different attitudes about the importance of what happens between nine and five. These attitudes were shaped during the long, complex lives your co-workers lived before you came along to complain about them.

4) Am I imagining behavior that isn't really there? It's all too easy to infer a nasty tone from email, or to perceive a comment during a meeting as a personal slight, if you go into work looking for it. Don't fall into the common trap of slapping the "idiot" label on everything your enemies do in advance, causing you to spin their words and deeds negatively. That creates a permanently broken reality that makes it impossible for you to ever perceive someone accurately, and it rolls your emotional intelligence right back to the school playground.

5) Has their dependency on the paycheck distorted their behavior? Many of us are just in survival mode at work, acting not as we wish to, but as we must in order to make sure the money keeps rolling in to feed our families and pay the bills. Colleague behaviors that offend you would probably quickly disappear if the biggest decision they had to make during the day was which beach to lie on to soak up the best rays. The life of corporate toil is a mental crucible, so don't judge people too hard for doing what they believe they have to just to make it to the next drizzly Monday morning.

And if these five questions don't engender a little more empathy in your heart, you can always resort to this one: *Am I such a pristine jewel of a worker myself?*

'You're choosing sheet cake over us?'

Q. I just had a top person tell me he won't be attending an absolutely vital meeting next month because he'd promised to be there for his kid's birthday. When I pushed him a little, he said it was a thing he "really needed to do." Do I respect this guy totally or think of him as lacking in what it takes to bring him up to the higher levels?

A. When confused by a certain behavior, I start out by putting the most positive spin on it. In this case, I'd ask myself: What admirable traits might this guy be revealing? The ability to take a stand in the face of pressure. To assign an unshakeable value to things in his life. A tenacious belief system. I'm a business guy and I go all out all the time for it, but I have awe for those who draw the line between work and home life and fight for its preservation. Maybe there's a strength in this employee that could pay off for you big-time.

Get them to the point quicker

Q. I don't have time for ramblers who fail to edit themselves. How do I express to someone that the clock is ticking on my attention span?

A. Don't forget the role of body language in this. Slowly angling yourself away from someone or subtly moving away little by little tells them you're ready and anxious to go.

Con conversationally, I'll rely on the trick of forcing the big picture on them if they're slow in getting to it themselves. I'll say, "OK, what's the action plan then?" This lets them know that the talk needs to be about getting a result. Another useful sentence is, "What are you concluding from this?" This gives them the feeling they're teaching me something while forcing the issue to a faster conclusion.

What don't they get about 'urgent'?

Q. Lately, I've had two different colleagues fail to reply to my important emails. Both were marked "urgent" but were apparently ignored. One of my colleagues had the audacity to say, "I never got it," even though I'm sure she was lying. How can I get people to treat my emails seriously?

A. Let's step back and approach this from a wider angle. It's not the emails that are the problem. It's the fact that you need to find a way to communicate in such a way that people are compelled to respond promptly. So talk to your colleagues and find out how they want to receive urgent messages. Phone calls? Personal visits to their office? Perhaps they have an aide who can serve as your dedicated contact person? Determine their preferred mode of communication and accommodate it. If they still ignore you, you may need to involve higher-ups.

How to have those 'tough talks' with employees: 10 tips

A decline in employees' work quality ... slipping attendance ... complaints from co-workers.

No manager enjoys having to sit down with employees to talk about these difficult issues. Unfortunately, managers must address these topics head-on for both productivity and legal reasons. The good news is that tough conversations can actually strengthen relationships and help both parties grow personally and professionally—if you handle them the right way.

Here are 10 tips for having those difficult conversations from Quint Studer, author of the bestseller *The Busy Leader's Handbook*:

1. Stay focused on preserving the relationship. It's important to convey the difficult message while still treating the person with respect and

empathy. If you damage the relationship, you shut down future opportunities for collaboration and growth. In fact, tell the person up front that the relationship is important to you.

2. Consider that you might be wrong. Go in with an open mind. You may not know all the variables causing the work or behavior problem. You may hear something that totally shifts your perspective—or you may be completely wrong. Knowing this will help you be a better listener.

3. Schedule the meeting—don't pop in. Ambushing people creates anxiety and breaks down trust. Better example: "Chris, I'd like to chat with you about what happened with the Jones account. Can we meet at 2:30?" This gives the person a chance to gather their thoughts and prepare.

4. Meet on neutral ground. It's usually best not to call the person into your office. This shifts the balance of power to your side and puts the other person on the defensive. A neutral space—say a conference room—sends the signal that this is a solutions-centered discussion, not a dressing down.

5. Be clear and specific with your explanation. Express upfront what the problem is, how it's affecting others and what must change. Be prepared with hard data: "You missed the sales goals by 37% last quarter," or "You've been late 13 days in the past six months." Productive conversations are grounded in facts, not observations.

6. Be collaborative, not authoritarian. Outcomes are better when the person feels a sense of ownership for the solution. Ask positive questions like, "*What factors do you think led to this issue?*" or "*Do you have ideas on what both of us might do differently moving forward?*" Listen to the other person's perspective and compromise when you can.

7. When you ask questions, give the person time to gather their thoughts. Don't just talk to assert your point of view or fill the silence. That's especially important when you're dealing with an introvert who needs time to think before they speak.

8. Listen actively. Stay focused on understanding what the person is saying, both verbally and nonverbally. Summarize what they say and confirm it with them. Trying to understand where someone is coming from will show your empathy. It helps the other person accept what you have to say, even if it isn't what they wanted to hear.

9. Keep things civil. Never yell, insult, threaten or bully the person. If things start to escalate, end the meeting and reschedule when you're both calmer. A single episode of bad behavior can tear down a relationship that took years to build.

10. End with an action item. Ideally, the employee will leave the meeting with specific steps to improve on the topic discussed. Schedule a follow-up conversation to see if things have changed for the better.

When the trust is gone

Q. I've lost trust in one of my employees. He's acted in ways that make me think he's unreliable and possibly a liar. But he's technically very good at his job and I'd prefer not to lose him. Is it possible to have someone on your team who's proficient at his work, but untrustworthy? I mean, everyone lies sometimes, right?

A. Sure. You can doubt his every utterance as far as I'm concerned. The real question is whether he can do real damage to you or to others. I've learned that if someone lacks integrity—if you cannot trust him—you're inviting trouble. Ask yourself three questions: Can I leave him alone and know that he won't do anything questionable? Can he represent our organization proudly to outsiders? If he gives me his word, is that sufficient? If you cannot answer with a confident yes to all three, rethink keeping him around.

My boss, the hypocrite

Q: Our CEO is always telling us to be more open about our failures. He wants us to innovate, and he knows that means some botched experiments. But the few of us who have taken high-profile risks have not been lauded; in fact, he's privately (and publicly) shamed and embarrassed us. Is there a polite way to call someone a hypocrite?

A: No. But you can privately level with him. I once told a boss, “Look, you make a good case for urging us to be open to change. I’m with you. But if we screw up when trying to adjust to change, give us a second or third chance before you come down too hard.” He understood. So I suggest you tell him that you’re all for making bold bets that might not pan out. Just remind him that for best results, it helps to create an environment where everyone can learn and grow—and no one feels targeted for trying and failing to do something of value.

When employees ask for too much

Q. I’m amazed by the demands my employees make. It never stops. They want to work from home. They want more time off (one guy requested a three-month sabbatical!). I never expected being a supervisor would require fending off constant outlandish requests. What can I do?

A. Weigh each request with consistency. As a young CEO years ago, people called me “Mr. No” because I said no to everything. But I didn’t say no outright. I listened, researched our organizational policies, conferred with those with more expertise or institutional memory than I had, and reached a conclusion. If I rejected a request, I explained my reasoning in detail. People weren’t happy, but I like to think they respected my approach.

Do your emails create accidental politics?

You see them, and maybe even send them, all the time: emails in which several people are addressed directly and several others cc’d. Consider the problems such “group huddle” messages can create and the chaotic thought processes that can result:

1. Confusion.

- “Okay, should I reply now, or wait for Kyle to respond so I can see what he says and adjust to it?”
- “Should I be the one to answer, or is it really Maura who’s the focus here?”
- “Am I stepping on Jill’s toes if I jump in first?”
- “It’s been 45 minutes and only two people have responded. How long should I wait before I actually go ahead with the plan?”

2. Resentment.

- “Why am I only being cc’d? I know more about these things than Frank.”
- “Why am I in the ‘To’ field instead of Gary? He’s the one who should be taking action on this, not me.”
- “Oh, so Ed thinks Heather’s the expert on this now, eh? Yeah, right.”

3. Suspicion.

- “Interesting that Donna answered but John’s totally silent. Is he telling us he wants no part of this?”
- “Why does Glynn think I can’t deal with this on my own? Is she telling everyone else about this problem to point a finger at me?”
- “Wow, look at all these people Maurice is dragging into this—he must be really freaking out and angry.”