

Taking control: dealing with difficult people

Difficult people in the workplace – aggressive bosses, unhappy clients, unhelpful colleagues – can cause much stress and agony. Attempting to please, avoid or understand these people can leave you drained at the end of the day.

The first session in the 2012 LIV Young Lawyers' Health & Wellbeing Series was titled "Dealing with difficult personalities". Michael Licenblat, a resilience expert at Bounce Back Fast, delivered some useful tips that we can all use to deal with difficult personalities in the workplace.

It's not about you

Remember that when a difficult person blows up in your face when you have done nothing wrong, it's not about you, it's about them. Their reaction is about other things behind them – events, their energy, history and "baggage". You don't have to wear that, so don't take it personally.

Speak their language

Some people just don't seem to get each other's point of view. A way to get your view across is to adjust your style of communication to meet them halfway.

People can be grouped into four modes of interaction (listed below and discussed at the session) – see if you can identify what mode your difficult boss/client/colleague operates in.

Here are some tips to have more pleasant interactions at work.

Control the conversation

Taking control of a conversation can help you achieve positive outcomes when dealing with difficult people. Control conversations by using the following five steps:


- 1. Protect** – set the rules. If they are emotional or aggressive, tell them you are happy to help once they have calmed down.

- 2. Connect** – ask what's going on. If they are unhappy, make sure they feel heard before moving to the next step.
- 3. Reflect** – concisely summarise what they tell you and get their confirmation that you have understood and identified the issue.
- 4. Direct** – clearly state how you will deal with the issue.
- 5. Eject** – you need to eject yourself from the situation at this point, otherwise you'll drain yourself by stewing over something that is not your fault.

Take action

Don't change who you are, just change the way you think and act in a certain situation. Remember: nothing happens without action, so use these tips during your next encounter with that difficult personality. ●

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	INTERACTION MODE		ACHIEVE A POSITIVE OUTCOME
AVOIDERS	The Avoider: efficient, good at multi-tasking, handles pressure, doesn't stop to answer calls or questions, can sometimes be short and abrupt. The person in the office you don't want to interrupt.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is key – push them. For example, the next time your boss drops a task in your in-tray with no instructions, ask them: "What do you mean?" Understand that their reaction is designed to be efficient, so make them understand what you need from them.
PLEASERS	The Pleaser: loves helping, efficient, wonderful team player, committed and thinks about work all the time. Struggles with work/life balance.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear boundaries, including what assistance you need and don't need. Give acknowledgment and appreciation – the currency of a Pleaser is being noticed.
ASSERTERS	The Asserter: knows what they can and can't do, focuses on getting the right outcome. Can come across as inconsiderate (and sometimes nasty).		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GTTP – Get to the point. If you waffle they will zone out. Be clear but don't show emotion when dealing with aggressive Asserters. If they see you become emotional, they'll know they've gotten to you.
PARTNERS	The Partner: master of the open-ended question, wants everyone to work together, listens more than talks, people trust them, they love meetings, can take forever to make a decision and even longer to get things done.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't let them dictate how long a task goes for. Try to understand where they are coming from so you can communicate with them as a "Partner".