



## Managing Difficult People

One of the most frequent questions that I am asked is “how do I manage difficult people?” In this short article I’m going to reveal my three step process for managing difficult people, but before I get into the process, let’s explore some of the psychology behind difficult people.

### What is a difficult person?

The best answer is that “you know one when you meet one!” Difficult people are the small percentage of the population that just can’t seem to get along with anyone. In fact, many times people will go out of their way to avoid interacting with them because they are so unpleasant.

Sometimes difficult people know that they are difficult and sometimes they don’t. I have had more than one person who I thought was difficult ask me why other people were so hard to get along with!

To me it was obvious that they were the problem, but to them it wasn’t.

### Types of difficult people

Starting with Robert Bramson in 1981, there have been numerous attempts to classify difficult people into groups and provide guidelines for managing each group. However, my experience working WITH difficult conflict resolution situations has taught me that it is best not to put people into categories because it removes their individuality and can lead to prejudices caused by misclassification. Sometimes it can even be used to provide a comfortable excuse for your own failure to be flexible enough to adapt to individual idiosyncrasies.

The best approach to managing difficult people is to understand the universal psychology behind being difficult and provide a framework that works in all situations. Let’s start by understanding why people are difficult.

### Why difficult people are difficult

There are two common reasons why people exhibit behaviors that others find to be difficult. The first reason is that they simply don’t realize how much their actions irritate other people. Many times this type of problem can be corrected simply by explaining the problem to the person and perhaps providing some training. Once they understand what they need to do, they implement the changes and the problem goes away.

The second reason that difficult people are difficult is because by engaging in the behavior that make them so hard to get along with, the person gets something important that they want or need. While this reason is the most challenging it is also the most common and it can be managed if you know how. Here is my three step process.

### Three step process for managing difficult people

Step #1 - Find the gain. Ask yourself the question: “What are they getting out of this?” Keep asking the question until you come up with the answer that reveals the benefit that they get from their actions.



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While you are asking the question, keep in mind that to you the benefit may seem to be small, but to the other person what they are gaining is important enough to justify the rejection and hard feelings that result. Look at the world through their eyes, not yours.

A good example of a gain is someone who gets angry and uses their anger to control people and situations. They may even threaten you with it. Once you realize that anger is their method for meeting their need for control, you are on your way to managing your difficult person.

Keep in mind that many times the benefit of the bad behavior is so great in the mind of the difficult person that they are willing to endure bad side effects. An angry person can easily alienate family, friends, and coworkers, and many times they will feel depressed when they calm down from their anger, but they will do it time and time again because at an unconscious level it meets their need for control.

Step #2 – Break the strategy. Once you have determined the need that is being met by the difficult behavior, the next step is to make sure that they no longer get the anticipated benefit when they use the behavior. Using the example of the angry person, you must be prepared to not give in to them no matter how much they turn up the heat.

When you do this two things will happen: (1) they will do the bad behavior even more because they are confused as to why it is not working, and (2) when they realize that it no longer works, they will begin to look for a new way to get what they need. This is where you come in with step #3.

Step #3 – Fill the vacuum. When their previous bad behavior stops meeting their need it creates a vacuum, so it is important for you to have a plan in place that will provide them with a better way of meeting their need. They still have the need even if they are now confused about how to get it.

You may even elect to tell them that what they were doing will no longer work, but they can get what they want by doing something different. Continuing with the anger example, you might say: “Joe, I am no longer going to allow you to get your way by being angry. But if we can discuss this calmly, I think I can grant your request.”

Being ready to fill the vacuum is crucial to your success in managing difficult people because if you don’t fill the vacuum and give them what they need in another way, they will quickly revert back to the old habit because they don’t know what else to do.

Used together these three steps give you a method of managing difficult people that will benefit everyone, including the difficult person.