

Dealing with Difficult Situations

Handling Difficult Interactions

Throughout the course of our personal and professional lives we will be faced with interactions with other people that will prove difficult to handle. This CareNote provides a brief overview of how these relationships impact us and how we can navigate them successfully.

Relationships - It is generally understood that interactions with other human beings constitute relationships. These can be single encounters that never recur, multiple but limited encounters with the same individual(s), or ongoing interactions like those we have with family members and co-workers. Some of the variables involved in handling relationships when they become difficult are discussed below.

Mission - Relationships often have missions and reasons for their existence. In our personal lives we have friendships, families and romantic associations. Ideally, we keep these in our lives because we care about the people involved and value involvement with them. Professionally, we consistently deal with customers, bosses, supervisees, and co-workers. Why we maintain a relationship has a lot to do with how we handle difficulties when they arise.

Politics - We will probably take more care in dealing with our boss than with

an acquaintance that we see occasionally. If we do not, we could find our job, and consequently our livelihood in jeopardy. As we determine how we will manage a particular relationship it is wise to look at the mission and politics involved. What are the potential consequences for me if this relationship goes awry? What do I lose that is important to me if I cease to have this relationship? Where there are little or no consequences our decisions are fairly easy, when the opposite is true significant care is in order.

Emotions - Simply put, how we handle our emotions determines the quality of our relationships. People will do and say things that give rise to anger, frustration, resentment, sadness, hurt, and a host of other feelings. Please accept as fact that all of us will experience the entire range of emotions in our encounters with others. Many times we have absolutely no control over our feelings about a situation or person when they negatively impact us. We usually react emotionally to the things that happen to us. For instance, if someone were to purposefully and maliciously damage your brand new car, or your new clothes, there is no way you could stop yourself from feeling anger. You might not act on that anger, but you will definitely feel it.

Emotional Management - The first step in handling difficult people is to manage our own emotions. The process is very simple, but not easy without consistent practice:

1. Identify your emotional reactions to the situation. (Usually multiple feelings)
2. Talk through these feelings with someone you trust.
3. Discuss options for action with that same trusted someone.

Talking to the same person in steps two and three is important because it prevents us from shopping for answers until we get one we want. When we choose our support person wisely we can generally diffuse our feelings and get them out of the way of our decision making process.

Addressing the Situation (or person)
With our heads now clear of our reactive emotions we can move into action.

PLAN, PLAN, PLAN how you intend to approach the matter. Consider:

- How much change are you looking for the other party make? (Be realistic)
- Are there levels of influence available to you that will facilitate change?
 - Are you their boss or supervisor?
 - Do you have something they want? Do you have something they need?
 - Can you make something better for them? Or worse?
 - Do you have any sense of how valuable the relationship is to them?
- What are you willing to change to make the relationship better?

Prior to talking to the other person try to see the situation and issues from their point of view and realize that your understanding of their side may be limited. (Please do not assume that you

know how they perceive the situation.) Begin the healing process of working through the situation by personally taking responsibility for your part in improving the relationship.

Relationships are like a scale, if one side changes the other will react to the change. However, understand that we have no control over whether or not we get the reaction we are looking for or want - all we can do is try our best. During your meeting to address the issue(s) let your experience of the situation and what you would like to see happen serve as the foundation for your discussions.

Talk to the other party about:

- How the situation makes you feel (anger, resentment, etc.)
- How the situation has effected you (I now avoid talking to you)
- Your ideas for improving the relationship or resolving the situation (I'm not OK with what you did, my suggestion is to try it this way....)

Let your suggestions serve as a starting point for negotiation. Listen intently to the other person's responses to your suggestions, and compromise where you can. Keep working until you've come to agreement. If things get emotionally heated, stop negotiating and try to talk again in the future, at an agreed upon time.

When you can't come to positive agreement, work out how you will co-exist (especially at work). An example

would be to agree to stop talking behind each other's back and to only deal with each other regarding work issues.