

Application Guide

HOW TO LEAD DIFFICULT PEOPLE: A MUST-HAVE LEADERSHIP SKILL



BOTTOM LINE:

Encountering difficult people is unavoidable. The best leaders don't just react to difficult people—they respond with purpose.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- I. Dealing with difficult people is a tension that every leader will be faced to manage.
 - A. "Difficult" does not mean people with character or ethical issues that conflict with the values of your organization, it's simply the people you have a hard time interacting with due to personality differences.
 1. They may be contrarians, awkward, overly demanding, or naturally negative.
 2. They are often valuable contributors to the organization in spite of this, so you must learn how to handle interactions with them.
 - B. You may be a difficult person to someone else.
- II. Great leaders don't win by matching behavior, they win by managing their responses.
- III. Responding to difficult people:
 - A. Understand the goal:** The goal of leadership is not to change people, it's to help them be the best they can be.
 - B. Be proactive:** If you don't prepare ahead of time, difficult people can get into your head and gain a hold over you and your emotions.
 - C. Resist the urge to match behavior:** Difficult people throw us off balance, and it's easy to overcorrect and project their behavior back onto them. This won't solve anything because when a leader retaliates or reacts emotionally, they are letting that person set the tone for their leadership.
- IV. How to manage difficult people without losing your leadership edge:
 - A. Manage your own internal AND external responses.**
 1. Internally: Decide the goal is not to win something. Leaders are not here to convince, convict, or control someone. The win should be that the difficult person succeeds. As the leader, you have the tools to help them get there.
 2. Externally: We can only control ourselves, so as a leader you must manage your responses. When you respond through your emotions, you won't help the individual achieve their maximum potential.
 - B. Remind yourself of the end goal.**
 1. Enter every conversation with the end in mind.
 - a) What goal are you trying to accomplish?
 - b) What do you want your team to say about how you handled that situation?
 - c) What is required of you to make this happen?
 2. Prepare responses that fit the win. Remember, if you're reacting, you're not leading.
 - C. Release whatever you may be holding against this person.**
 1. When you hold onto things, they build up over time and will come out as an overreaction to a small mistake, causing more damage than good.

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2. When you believe the best about this person instead of expecting the worst, you give them the space to reach their maximum potential. If they don't believe you are for them and their success, they likely won't deliver the results you need.
3. This does not excuse bad behavior, it simply means you will not hold them hostage in your own mind.

D. Be honest, be direct, and be kind.

1. Clarity is kindness.
2. End difficult conversations by asking, *"What can I do to help?"* to maintain a positive and productive environment.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR TEAM DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think leaders are tempted to react emotionally rather than respond thoughtfully?
2. What are some common traits of people who are difficult to work with in your organization? How can you prepare yourself to engage with each of the traits you may encounter?
3. Have you ever been a difficult person for someone else to lead? What can you learn from that?
4. What steps can you take to proactively manage your emotions before engaging with difficult people?
5. Can you think of a past situation where being honest, direct, and kind would have led to a better outcome?

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