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Research Cover Sheet

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AF Negotiation Center of Excellence Quick Tip Number Seven – Dealing with Difficult People

From *9 Useful Strategies to Dealing with Difficult People at Work*, Celestine Chua, Horst PSP.

At <http://www.dumblittleman.com/2009/07/9-useful-strategies-to-dealing-with.html> (accessed on 28 June 2011)

In the Military we may discuss this topic in leadership seminars when we think of a challenging commander from our past. We also discuss difficult people with respect to lower ranks as a good order and discipline issue. We will even work to solve challenging peer-to-peer relationship issues. One new challenge in our ever changing operational and bureaucratic environments is working with difficult people that are outside of and far beyond our span-of-authority. Options developed during professional military leadership training may not exist.

Celestine Chua developed nine simple tips for dealing with difficult people in a day-to-day or business setting. The fact, as she discusses it, is that you will deal with difficult people in all aspects of your daily routine. The list of challenges is long and familiar. In the operational military environment this list can become longer and more complex. Your negotiation partner may have a different cultural perspective, may not be trustworthy, may have higher priorities, or might just not show up. You need a strategy and strength of character to deal with this type of problem.

You have two basic options in dealing with this situation. You can fight it or you can work through it. Fighting it may not work, but if you dig deep and understand that your mission may depend on how you work with “difficult” people than you may find a path to success.

Here are the nine tips as developed by Ms. Chua. They are just the tip of the iceberg on how you might approach a difficult person and will help you start planning for mission success.

Be calm. Losing your temper and flaring out at the other person typically isn't the best way to get him/her to collaborate with you. Unless you know that anger will trigger the person into action and you are consciously using it as a strategy to move him/her, it is better to assume a calm persona.

Someone who is calm is seen as being in control, centered and more respectable. Would you prefer to work with someone who is predominantly calm or someone who is always on edge? When the person you are dealing with sees that you are calm despite whatever he/she is doing, you will start getting their attention.

Understand the person's intentions. I'd like to believe that no one is difficult for the sake of being difficult. Even when it may seem that the person is just out to get you, there is always some underlying reason that is motivating them to act this way. Rarely is this motivation apparent. Try to identify the person's trigger: What is making him/her act in this manner? What is stopping him/her from cooperating with you? How can you help to meet his/her needs and resolve the situation?

Get some perspective from others. In all likelihood, your colleagues, managers and friends must have experienced similar situations in some way or another. They will be able to see things from a different angle and offer a different take on the situation. Seek them out, share your story and listen to what they have to say. You might very well find some golden advice in amidst of the conversation.

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Let the person know where you are coming from. One thing that has worked for me is to let the person know my intentions behind what I am doing. Sometimes, they are being resistant because they think that *you* are just being difficult with them. Letting them in on the reason behind your actions and the full background of what is happening will enable them to empathize with your situation. This lets them get them on-board much easier.

Build a rapport. With all the computers, emails and messaging systems, work sometimes turn into a mechanical process. Re-instill the human touch by connecting with your colleagues on a personal level. Go out with them for lunches or dinners. Get to know them as people, and not colleagues. Learn more about their hobbies, their family, their lives. Foster strong connections. These will go a long way in your work.

Treat the person with respect. No one likes to be treated as if he/she is stupid/incapable/incompetent. If you are going to treat the person with disrespect, it's not going to be surprising if he/she treats you the same way as well. As the golden rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Focus on what can be actioned upon. Sometimes, you may be put into hot soup by your difficult colleagues, such as not receiving a piece of work they promised to give or being wrongly held responsible for something you didn't do. Whatever it is, acknowledge that the situation has already occurred. Rather than harp on what you cannot change, focus on the actionable steps you can take to forward yourself in the situation.

Ignore. If you have already tried everything above and the person is still not being receptive, the best way might be to just ignore. After all, you have already done all that you can within your means. Get on your daily tasks and interface with the person only where needed. Of course, this isn't feasible in cases where the person plays a critical role in your work - which leads us to our last tip.

Escalate to a higher authority for resolution. When all else fails, escalate to your manager. This is considered the trump card and shouldn't be used unless you've completely exhausted your means. Sometimes, the only way to get someone moving is through the top-down approach, especially in bureaucratic organizations. Be careful not to exercise this option all the time as you wouldn't want your manager to think that you are incapable of handling your own problems. I have done this several times in my previous job and I found it to be the most effective in moving people who just refuse to cooperate otherwise.

* NCE Note – Option nine may not exist in many military and operational negotiations, but there may often be a last resort appeal to higher authority. At a minimum, your chain-of-command may offer new options or authorize an approach that involves other aspects of power.