***What to do about Difficult People?!***

**M**ost of us encounter unreasonable people in our lives. We may be “stuck” with a difficult individual at work or at home. Difficult people come in every variety and no workplace is without them. It’s easy to let a challenging person affect us and ruin our day. How difficult a person is for you to deal with depends on your self-esteem, your self-confidence and your professional courage.

Dealing with difficult people is easier when the person is just generally obnoxious or when the behavior affects more than one person. Dealing with them is much tougher when they are attacking you or undermining your professional contribution. Some talk constantly and never listen. Others must always have the last word. Some coworkers fail to keep commitments. Others criticize anything that they did not create. Difficult coworkers compete with you for power, privilege and the spotlight; some go way too far in courting the boss’s positive opinion – to your detriment.

What can we do about difficult behaviors and people? First, don’t ignore the situation or believe it will fade with time – this rarely happens. These situations rarely get better when unaddressed. Don’t forget that many *difficult people* have never received the feedback about their behavior nor have they been held accountable to change it (mostly because they are aggressive, defensive, or retaliatory). Here are a few ideas for taking a more proactive approach:

1. **React** with aforethought and avoid angry confrontations. When you engage with anger and lash back at them, you become part of the problem and may be viewed as “just as bad”. After a difficult encounter, buy yourself some time to calm down, and consider your best plan of action that keeps you in control of your emotions and the situation.
2. **Don’t resist** as what you resist persists. Any push will result in push back. Accept what they say as true for them, acknowledge that, and ask them to consider accepting your perception as well. Remember that we too can be the difficult person for someone else, and we’d like an open mind instead of resistance.
3. **Listen** to them and let them see that you are doing your best to understand where they are coming from. It’s ok to validate their perceptions without agreeing with them. If you find a person repeats themselves over and over, reflecting back what they say can make them feel heard and understood and allow for better conversation.
4. **Empathize** with them – step into their shoes. If you were them, what would you want? What would you be afraid of? How would you have perceived things? Most of us only see our own point of view. Great problem-solvers can see others’ perspectives to find creative and successful solutions to tough problems.
5. **Set boundaries** around certain behaviors. After a confrontation, meet privately with the person when you are calm and voice your concern: “When you criticized my work in the meeting last week, you chose words that were demeaning and hurtful to me. In the future, I expect your criticism to be delivered in a constructive tone without the adjectives about my work ethic.” And then, if it happens again, you will feel more confident in stopping the attack, and you also empower others set appropriate boundaries. Consider departmental meetings to discuss how we support each other and communicate, and have consequences for behavior that is considered intolerable.