



How to Deal with Difficult People



You're sure to be glad you have advanced communication skills if you're ever face to face with this clown! This is why we encourage you to practice!

Situation: You propose an important new idea to your colleague. Your colleague flies off the handle and says, *"Are you nuts?!? What a stupid idea! That'll never fly upstairs!"* Now what? He's called you nuts and your idea stupid. Problem is, your colleague is needed on board if your idea ever has a chance.

Here's what to do:

- Listen for positive intent. Many times people get upset because they need to protect themselves. So the intent is not necessarily to attack you; it's merely their defense response. In our example, your colleague may have recently had a chewing out from management, and he/she is worried about ever looking good again. Of course, you have no way of knowing this is going on. But you can infer that this person is worried about looking good even if you don't know the recent history.
- So, instead of defending your idea, or expanding with more details about your idea, shift your focus from the idea itself onto your colleague. You do this by paraphrasing using your positive inference about looking good with management. A good paraphrase can help calm people. (Careful not to "parrot-phrase" as it may aggravate the situation.) Try: *"What I heard you say is that management won't buy in to this idea (your own words based on your inference)... Is that right?"*
- Or you might paraphrase like this, *"What I'm hearing you say is **how to get management to buy in on this. Is that right?**"* Here you are paraphrasing someone's concern and, at the same time, you're using "how to" language to frame their concern as something to be figured out instead of it being an obstacle to moving forward. "How to" language frames a problem as an issue that can be addressed.

Your first instinct may be to defend yourself. Or, start defending your idea, expounding on your idea and why you think it's so good; why it will work, how to make it work, etc. The problem with this approach is that you are cranking up the emotion — and it's negative emotion because it's defensive. Negativity promotes negativity — we see it all the time when two people argue, don't we? One person starts defending; the other defends their position, and so the dance spirals downward. So don't engage your urge to defend. It may be difficult to shift to a positive inference, but the pay off can be huge.

Here's why:

Your conscious decision to make a positive inference has a profound effect: First of all, it gives you a chance to ask yourself, *“Is this truly a threat to my personal survival?”* Clearly it's not so since you're not in serious danger, there's no need to jump to defense.

Secondly, choosing to respond with a positive inference has a calming effect not only on you, but also on the other person. You spend your energy on reflecting what you're hearing rather than reacting with how it impacts you.

And thirdly, because you're moving to a positive place when you state your positive inference, you have a better chance to shift the climate to a more productive space.

But how do you do this when someone's called your idea stupid and you nuts? **The answer is to hit the pause button.**

Don't assume the person knows how they are coming across or the impact they are having on you. Try to think of him as a good person doing things you don't like. Slow down and choose your words wisely— slow down your thinking, your response, and your speaking. This allows you to interrupt the negative flow, and turn down the stress volume.

Jean-Francois Manzoni, professor of human resources and organizational development at INSEAD, recommends you slow your cadence and pause before responding to the other person because it, *"gives you a chance to find the right words"* and tends to *"defuse negative emotion"* from your counterpart.

Always, always crank up your empathy. If you can't come up with a positive inference, try probing for more of his thinking: *"Tell me more about your thinking."* Or, *"What parts are stupid?"* Or, *"What makes it stupid to you?"* Or, *"How is it stupid?"* (Avoid *"Why?"* because it can prompt defensiveness in some people.)

The idea is to find out what's going on in his mind in response to your idea. This simple act of finding out how he sees it actually helps you reduce your own need to defend your idea. Keep yourself intact and focus on understanding the other person and how he's thinking and feeling about your idea. This opens discussion.

What about if this person is simply insulting with everyone? It appears to be his style — he wants to exert power over others. Realize that this may be to make himself feel strong and safe by attempting to make others feel weak and vulnerable. Think about it — his need to protect himself is so strong that he needs to behave one-up, one-down with people. His need to defend himself needn't invoke your need to defend. Keep your cool.

And what about if someone is in a rant? Same rules apply: The rant you see is a big (often loud) defense move that may or may not have anything to do with you. Recognize the person's need to defend; do not engage when someone is ranting. Remain calm and let it pass.

Overall, when faced with difficult people, **focus on remaining calm.**

Anxiety is very contagious, so it's best to resist joining into negative emotions. Anxiety speeds up our brain, our cadence, and cranks up the emotions. So cool it; get a grip, slow it down.

When you master the art of the positive inference, you will find yourself in control of what's happening and how people respond to you. Even if they aren't good communicators, your ability to keep things cool will be striking. Your relationships will be much more successful and effective. People will really be impressed with how you deal with difficult situations.

Most important: Always keep in mind, your colleague's behavior is not about you. When people are difficult, it's because some aspect of their defensiveness is in control. You may have done something to spark the response, but you are not the cause. So keep in mind: It's probably not about you.