Dealing with a Difficult Boss

Dealing with difficult people usually creates a situation in which we feel frustrated, powerless and ill-equipped to find an acceptable solution. This often leads to negative attitudes, and these attitudes and the behaviour that results can interfere with our ability to get along with our colleagues, or get our work done effectively or on time.

Working and living in this kind of environment takes its toll on our physical and mental health. We become more emotionally reactive; headaches increase; blood pressure rises; our focus, concentration and creativity decrease; and our attitude may become more and more negative over time.

Communication in the Workplace

Your boss is someone you must deal with on a daily basis, and your ability to communicate effectively with him or her may be imperative to your career success. Knowing when to be assertive and press your point, and when to back off and follow instructions, may be the difference between opportunities for promotion or earning a reputation as a difficult employee.

Rather than letting your boss—or any other difficult person—create stress and control the relationship with their difficult behaviour, you can learn to handle these people in new and effective ways. Here are some tactics that you can use to more effectively manage this situation:

Believe in yourself. No matter how the situation around you seems, don't lose hope and don't let the difficult behaviour of someone else erode your self-esteem. Have faith in yourself and keep your frame of mind positive.

Clarify job expectations. Make sure your work goals match what your boss wants from you. Many disagreements between employer and employees stem from unclear expectations. Rather than blaming your boss for not being clear with what they want, take the initiative to clarify your common goals to ensure you're on the right track.

Change your perspective. As long as you see your boss through the "difficult boss" filter, that's exactly what they will be. Let go of your expectations and try to see your boss as just your boss. Period. Don't make judgments or put labels on the boss. Realize that your boss is what he or she is, and that you cannot change that. Shifting your perspective will help you to begin to shift the energy around how you think and respond to your boss.

Be professional. Do your job without obvious grumbling or comments to your co-workers, as this will be noticed by your boss. Don't confront your boss in front of your co-workers or other management. You will put your boss in a position where he or she does not feel able to compromise, and will need to assert his or her authority. It may be more appropriate to meet with your boss one-on-one and avoid putting him or her on the spot.

Improve your skills. Assess your strengths and weaknesses. Do a self-audit from time to time. This will help you understand your work style better. Try to match your output to your boss's expectations as best you can. Expand your conflict management skills. Find ways to disagree without destroying key relationships.

Keep your cool under pressure. If an attack feels personal, keep the interaction on a professional level. "Take the emotion out" by asserting yourself and stating your positions clearly and factually. Give in on unimportant issues; if the issue is important and you believe your boss has been abusive or has contravened company policy or the law, look into other resources within your organization and outside of it to support you. Decide how far you want to or can take the issue, keeping your career goals and personal integrity intact.

Documentation. Documentation will support you so that you do not forget the facts, should you be questioned at a later date. Keep detailed records about the interactions (the what, when, where, who and how) with your boss, the work you are doing and anything else that may seem important.

Change what you can change, live with what you can't. Life is not always fair, nor is work. There are times to compromise and there are times to stick to your guns. Know which is which, but keep in mind that the only one you can change is you.

Above all, don’t be afraid to seek outside help. If you have legitimate complaints with your boss, and can't seem to compromise or come to a conclusion, you always have the option of consulting with Human Resources or your union representative. Remember, it’s best if you try to resolve your conflicts with your boss first.

Remember that you have the power. Don't let anyone take it from you. Control your actions and attitudes. As long as you are in control, you are better able to manage the situation and make the best choices.