

## Dealing with Difficult Behavior in Adults

Managing conflict to best serve the interest of girls.

No one enjoys dealing with difficult people; however, ignoring situations involving difficult people or hoping that such situations resolve themselves is usually just wishful thinking. Dealing with difficult situations immediately and effectively is best for everyone concerned.

Regarding conflict, *Volunteer Essentials* advises, “get those involved to sit down together and talk calmly and in a nonjudgmental manner. (Each party may need some time – a few days or a week – to calm down before being able to do this. Although talking in this way can be uncomfortable and difficult, it does lay the groundwork for working well together in the future. Whatever you do, don’t spread your complaint around to others – that won’t help the situation and causes only embarrassment and anger.”

Of course, not every difficult person presents as an out and out conflict. It may just be a difference of opinion or a clash of personality that presents a stumbling block to productivity and achieving positive outcomes with the group. This needs to be addressed to maintain a healthy positive experience for everyone involved.

It is helpful to understand the type of difficult person and customize your approach.

### Types of Difficult People

**The Silent Type:** This person might respond with one-word answers (yes, no, maybe) and is very tight-lipped. Typically she does not participate in conversations and will not reveal why she is quiet even when asked. These individuals tend to be shy and afraid.

**To work effectively with her,** ask open-ended questions. Show appreciation for her positive work and praise the behavior you want to reinforce. Also, allow enough time in conversations for her to respond; do not interrupt the pregnant pause.

**The Pessimist:** This person always sees a problem without a solution. Most likely, this volunteer has an extremely low self-opinion and feels powerless in most situations. She creates power by making a mountain out of a molehill. This negativity can pull the morale down within an organization at a very rapid rate.

**To work effectively with her,** present the negative aspects before she does and then provide positive alternatives. Be optimistic. Do not be drawn into her negative opinions or argue and debate with the individual. Whenever possible, give the volunteer time to think through your discussion. It is important for her to save face, and time to re-evaluate a discussion often lets her bow out of negative position without feeling that she's 'lost.'

**The Nod-and-Smile:** This person can be overly flexible in her effort to be liked and get what she wants. She can be personable, over-committed, and a soothing delayer. She is frequently an extrovert who will avoid disagreements at all costs.

**To work effectively with her,** be non-threatening. Ask for her opinion and solutions, which will help her analyze a situation. Be aware of her over-commitments and help her monitor and manage her schedule. Make it non-threatening for her to be honest about her opinions and feelings. Hold her accountable for her commitments and part of any project.

**The Chronic Complainer:** This person complains about others and whines constantly. She seldom takes responsibility for her actions and will place blame for her failures on the shoulders of other people. She feels helpless to fix any problems and is a perfectionist at heart. She is not only critical of you and others, but also extremely self-critical.

**To work effectively with her,** listen carefully at first (as difficult as it may be). Interrupt and ask for clarification and specifics, not generalizations. Guide the conversation toward resolution of the problems with specific alternatives and solutions. Acknowledge her feelings.

**The Mean Girl:** This person is sweet to your face as she nips at your back. She can be manipulative as she smiles at you. She will deny that she is playing games as she lines up another attack that seems to come out of nowhere at your next meeting. She tends to have a rigid set of standards she believes everyone should conform to; that is why she lashes out when things are not going her way.

**To work effectively with her,** confront the individual. It is best if this can be done by a group of people she affects with her behavior. Reinforcement by several people that the behavior is unacceptable will help get the message through. Provide alternatives for her behavior. If possible, establish regular problem-solving meetings to allow the issues to surface in a healthy manner.

**The Know-It-All:** This person feels superior and tends to be condescending. She can be narrow-minded and stubborn. She tends to mistrust the ideas of others and will find a scapegoat if her ideas fail. She needs admiration and ego-stroking. If she does not have the answer, she will make it up.

**To work effectively with this volunteer,** listen to her opinion and respect it. Be sure however, to respect your own opinion as well. Whenever possible, give her credit in front of others. Prepare for all meetings and discussions. If need be, provide her with a way out if it becomes apparent she is not the expert she conveyed.

**The Space-Case:** This person is always oblivious to the task at hand. She is in constant crisis: the car broke down, the babysitter did not show or the computer crashed. She is focused on everything but the task at hand and is easily distracted by the crisis of the hour.

**To work effectively with her,** sit down and explain why the project, task, etc. is so important to the organization. Dramatize a bit to add urgency to your own needs or crisis. Outline the necessary step for completion of the project. Obtain her buy-in to the project and then monitor her progress with lots of praise and recognition.

**The Steamroller:** The steamroller is an aggressive bully. She is quick to anger, loves to intimidate others and throws tantrums when she does not get her own way. She believes she is right all of the time and will go to great lengths to prove her superiority.

**To work effectively with a steamroller,** stay calm during her outbursts and above all, stand up for yourself. Maintain good eye contact since her tirade will eventually run down. Prepare ahead of time with effective comebacks, which you have rehearsed and clearly state you will not be her scapegoat or bear the brunt of her tantrum. Be friendly (every bully wants someone to accept them) and do not argue with her since that is part of her game.

Volunteers are encouraged to resolve conflict amongst themselves whenever possible. However, Membership Services and Adult Education staff are available to provide advice and are trained to act as objective third parties