

Disarm the Power

Dealing with Difficult People

“Promise yourself to be so strong that nothing can disturb your peace of mind.”

— Christian Larson

BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

Wouldn't it be helpful to be a fly on the wall to observe a confrontational situation? Or better yet, to crawl into the mind of a difficult person to figure out what makes them tick. Understanding difficult people puts us securely at the front lines in dealing with them effectively.

One of the most powerful tools used by difficult people is erratic behavior. It defies accurate prediction. The behavior is unexpected. It comes as a surprise. Flying into a rage or staring you down is a common strategy that difficult people use to keep you off-kilter. These unpredictable actions serve the purpose of confusing potential usurpers and avoiding responsibility. We often see property owners who freak out, yell or even stomp out of a meeting. Normal people, like you and me, might call them irrational. But it's the irrationality that gives them a leg up.

It's hard to resist getting riled up when confronted by a difficult person. Our immediate inclination is to freeze, fight or flight. We quickly jump to our own defense when we feel insulted. Our neural circuitry is what drives us into defensiveness, to rectify an injustice. This knee-jerk response pushes us to outrage, and we lose focus of our larger goals.

Resisting the trap set by difficult people is easier if we're aware of our own vulnerabilities to getting hurt and angry. It's always better to check your fight, flight or freeze reactions, and refuse to be a part of a duel. Sure you need to stand up for yourself, but do so without demanding that you be above criticism. Remind yourself of your long-range goals: saving time, energy and hassle.

Consider these seven tips as you prepare to disarm a difficult property owner:

1. Ask owners exactly what they are upset about, thus showing that you're interested in communicating rather than in arguing. The burden of responsibility is now transferred back onto the owner.
2. Difficult people rely heavily on generalizations when making anemic attempts to craft truthful statements. Go ahead and agree with the kernel of truth embedded in the complaint. However, agree only with that single point, and then correct the owner's over-generalization.
3. It's much easier to defend yourself once the emotional heat has cooled. You can defend without a defensive tone. For example, say something like, "I'm sorry for your past unfavorable experience with my agency..." Then stand up for yourself by reiterating the specific issue or make a commitment to a future change, "...but I'm assigned to this project now and you have my commitment to partner with you toward an acceptable agreement."
4. Offer your best guess as to what they might be feeling and ask for feedback. "It sounds like you're angry right now, and I'm sorry about that. But can we still work together to address your concerns?" This demonstrates a willingness to understand their frustration without blame or defensiveness. Remember that empathy breeds an amazing amount of tolerance. Showing empathy, kindness and understanding demonstrates the highest level of integrity.
5. Resist the urge to fight to win the argument. Staying calm, listening and asking questions will lead others to their own (often better) conclusions. Initially, it may be a struggle to maintain your sense of self-assurance. But as you gain experience and confidence, it will get easier.
6. Don't underestimate the power of waiting a situation out. There's a great deal of power in a pause. Sometimes we make problems worse by rushing to fix them.
7. If the owner is being rude, point out that respectfulness is the only form of communication that you can actually understand. If they attempt a change, make a positive comment. By doing so, you reinforce the behavior you want to continue.

The next time you're confronted with difficult property owners, remember to disarm them. If you give them the power to affect you, you're letting them win—and they don't deserve that.



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