Dealing with Difficult People

It is no secret that there are difficult people that we have to deal with everyday. They may be a know-it-all, a whiner, an instigator, or a busy-body. Whatever their type, it seems like every interaction you have with them makes your blood boil! You try to avoid them, but in a small work department, they are unavoidable. And the fact is, you have to work together.

So, how do you manage relationships with difficult people without loosing your mind? Following are a few important steps:

1. Understand that everyone is doing the best they can. Rare in this world is the truly evil person who started their day thinking about how to get you upset. We all have different levels of skill managing emotions and communicating. Recognize that the person who is annoying you may lack some of those skills, but they are truly doing the best they can.

2. Recognize the power you have, and don’t have. When interacting with someone, you only have control over how you behave and how you communicate. You can not control how the other person receives your message or the actions they may take. You can only do the best that you can.

3. Honor differences. Many of our issues with difficult people arise because they have very different beliefs or ways of seeing the world. Look first for what those differences are and strive to understand and respect them.

4. Ask how you can help. When someone blames or strikes out at you, simply ask them “what can I do to change the situation?” The response may be a reasonable request, or they may find that they don’t even have a request. Either way, you’ve put the burden on them to offer a solution.

5. Choose optimism. Most everyone tends to take things personally when, in fact, other peoples’ behaviors/words are often more neutral than we perceive. Therefore, unless you are told otherwise, choose to believe that another person’s issue has nothing to do with you.

6. Take a break. Because ‘it takes two to tango’, learning how to disengage from arguments is a great tool for many problematic encounters. The next time you’re in an unproductive conflict, inform the person and share that you’re going to remove yourself from the situation. If this is a person or a work relationship that matters to you, let them know that you hope to resume the discussion when you’re both clear-headed again.

7. Choose battles wisely. At times you may need to engage in heated disagreements with difficult people, but be judicious so that you only give that amount of energy when it’s really worth it to you.

8. Improve communication skills. The better we are at articulating what is going on for us, the easier it is to deal with difficult people in constructive ways. Effectively relaying messaging is a difficult skills and involves word choice, body language, timing and tone.

9. No matter how calm and controlled you try to be, dealing with difficult people can be upsetting. When you feel yourself getting upset, use the S.T.O.P strategy:
   - Stop whatever you’re doing
   - Take 3 deep breaths
   - Observe how your body feels
   - Proceed with kindness and compassion

If you are dealing with a difficult person at work, or anywhere in your life, call Family Services EAP for a phone consultation or appointment to talk about these and other strategies. Call 978-327-6666, email info@FamilyServicesEAP.org, or make an appointment online at FamilyServicesEAP.org.