

handling difficult people

steps to take when it's not working

In brief

Handling difficult people is an art in itself. In business it is a constant. Ask any manager what the core of their job is and they will usually answer: managing people.

For self-starting, team players, this is not an issue. Unfortunately, not everyone falls into that camp. It is the more challenging individuals who take up a disproportionate amount of time, which often yields only modest results.

A key problem is that issues become personalised. It is hard to keep any discussions on an uncomplicated, dispassionate level. To counter this, focus on your management responsibilities, rather than the personality of the individual involved. Use a simple process for doing this.

First, sit quietly and gather the facts. Write down very clearly what the actions are that are causing difficulty. Don't write something like "because the person is difficult". Write down a dispassionate statement which purely describes their actions. Avoid colourful language.

Next, outline the impact of their actions on the business. What is the commercial effect? This is what you have to manage. That is your job. You are not a counsellor or a therapist. You are the manager of a commercial business. The issue can therefore be defined in terms of your management responsibilities.

In the third step, clarify exactly what your responsibility is in this area. Look at the examples shown on the next page. Apply this process to the situation your are faced with. This is what you will focus on as you work through it.

This approach will help you stick to the facts. Your responsibility is a fact. By focusing on it, you can avoid buying into personal issues surrounding the problem. The likelihood of finding a solution increases accordingly.



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Clarify your job

Relate difficult situations to your role

ACTION	IMPACT	ISSUE
When you:	The effect is:	My job is to manage:
Are chronically late...	Others feel resentful and no longer see the point in punctuality	Discipline
Are not friendly toward our customers...	We lose business	Customer loyalty
Don't complete tasks...	We fall behind plan	Business development
Are rude and aggressive with colleagues...	Morale suffers	Maintenance of a positive work environment for ALL employees



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Stick to the facts

Set up a clear platform for your discussions

action

Write down a clear statement which outlines the employee's **action** that has caused difficulty. This must be factual, not your subjective impression. Leave personal issues out of it. Stick to the facts.

impact

Be equally clear about the effect. The impact of their actions is what you have to manage. Be straightforward that this is a business issue, not a personal one. Their actions have a commercial impact which you are responsible for.

issue

Clearly state the management **issue** that arises. It is your responsibility to handle it. Be clear that you intend to manage the issue and find a solution.



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Encourage responsible buy-in

Seek a joint solution that assists both parties

State the problem in simple terms: "When you...The impact is...
It is my responsibility to...".
Then ask the employee what their solution would be

Examine what might be causing the problem. There may be reasons you have not foreseen. Look for remedies. Ask what actions you could take. If there are steps that you can implement, undertake to do so

Be clear that this a two-way street. If you are going to jointly take action to implement this solution, they will have to do their bit too. The action must cease, the impact eliminated and your responsibilities fulfilled.

Agree on a course of action and undertakings. Be straightforward that you expect immediate improvement. Be clear that should the behavior recur it will be brought back into immediate focus. Express thanks to the employee for their assistance, then immediately implement the actions you have agreed to take.



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Will this work?

Often, but not always. Generally I have gotten a positive result with this process, but nothing like 100%. However, it always has a positive impact on my ability to manage:

- It helps me navigate away from the shoals of personal issues and distracting emotions
- It focuses me on doing my job, which is to manage people so as to ensure the smooth functioning of the business
- It gives me a sense of progress – that I have addressed the situation, not shirked it. That in turn boosts not only my confidence in my management ability, but also my sense of personal dignity
- It airs the issue in a straightforward manner and lays a platform for any further dialogue on the matter

And there may well be further dialogue. Often this process brings about a change of behavior. But, equally, it is often difficult for some people to maintain such a shift.

Nonetheless, you have now have established the ground rules for the conversation. It may well turn out that the issue will re-emerge and you will have to consider other actions such as reassigning the employee's duties or perhaps issuing a warning letter. And it may turn out that you eventually part ways. But the process by which you have gotten to that point will be responsible, appropriate and dignified. You will be a better manager for it.



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For more information, visit my website www.alanhargreaves.com

Hi, I'm Alan Hargreaves. I specialise in simplifying complex business problems. In over 35 years as a business executive, I have never found an issue that cannot be addressed through identifying the essential but simple steps required to make any problem manageable. It might be your career, your firm, your team or your strategy. It doesn't matter. All hurdles can be lowered through dispassionate analysis, and all executives can embrace simple processes to take them forward. Using these techniques, I have helped hundreds of people through the various stages of their business or career development. It may be the challenge of taking on new responsibilities; it could be the task of managing a business you have created yourself; it may be handling a difficult team in the midst of major change. I use a straightforward combination of key principles to get results: collaboration, adaptation, simplification and action. You can contact me anytime at alan@alanhargreaves.com.



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