

# COMMUNICATING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

By Deborah Mackin

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**The first step is to keep calm, watch your body language and avoid arguing at all cost.** Don't ever argue, even if the objection is untrue. If you hear an objection about something, simply explain again. Keep your answers brief and to the point.

**Provide a "soft cushion" and acknowledge the other person's objection.** Don't counter the objection immediately. Use a verbal cushion such as "I appreciate your concern about the delays in the project."

**Follow that statement immediately with "Would you share with me the effect those delays have had on you."** Encourage the person to "vent" their objection. Don't interrupt. "Can you say more about how you see things?" or "What information might you have that I don't have?" or "Can you say a little bit more about why you think this won't work?" Make sure you have the root objection. Ask "Is there anything else about this that concerns you?"

**Now paraphrase and ask questions for better understanding.** Paraphrasing means you repeat what someone has said in your own words. "If I understand you correctly, you're thinking that..." You can also paraphrase emotions. "I sense that you're feeling anxious about this next change." Ask "how" and "what" questions to encourage the person to share more of their concern. Don't ask "why" questions or questions that can be answered with yes or no.

**Use "Glad-Sorry-Sure."** Here's a quick way to apologize and reassure the person. "I'm glad you've given us some feedback on your concerns. I'm sorry that you had that experience with us. I'm sure we can find a better solution for you."

**Or try the 3 F's (feel, felt, found).** Avoid using "I know how you feel" because most people will be thinking "no you don't." Instead, use the 3 F's: "I can see that you feel anxious about the new computer system. I felt (or others felt) that way when I started learning it as well. However, I've found that after a bit of practice, it really isn't that hard to grasp."

**Use "Separately, First."** Sometimes a person will try to send you off on a goose chase to avoid a topic. The smoothest way to bring it back on track is to use Separately, First. "I'd like to handle that concern separately. First, let's go over the process step-by-step." Using a flip chart "parking lot" is a great way to list the topic so it doesn't get forgotten.

**Now you are ready to provide your explanation if invited to do so.** Again, watch your tone and speed. Avoid sounding irritated or condescending (talking slowly in a sing-song delivery). Instead say "I think I have a good sense of your concerns. I'd like to explain our current plan for handling many of them. Would you be willing to hear me out?" Do not advance until you get permission.

**Focus on what you are able to do, not what you can't do.** "I can provide you with about 60 percent of the information by Friday. Will that help?"

**Avoid using the word "but"** and instead replace it with "and."

**After your response, double-check to assure the person understands.** "Does this make sense?"