

Dealing with Difficult People

Difficult people are everywhere! If you've been a steward or activist for any length of time, you've certainly dealt with them. These can be people who constantly attack the steward or the union over one issue or another, or demand the impossible - and then get angry when the impossible can't be made to happen. And then there are the whiners - always complaining and nagging for help, but never doing anything themselves.

What can you do about it? A good start would be to try to understand why members sometimes act in these difficult ways. You've seen them all at one time or another:

1. Members with legitimate complaints about the union or the steward.
2. Members who demand 'service' in exchange for their dues, because they view the union like an insurance company or other service.
3. Members who seem to cause difficulty in everything they do, perhaps for psychological reasons.

They're not all #3s! Listen to them so you can really understand where they're coming from. Keep in mind your duty of fair representation. If they have legitimate complaints, look for constructive ways to help. If they are 'service minded,' scolding and lectures won't work. Show them that they are the union by the way you do your job. Keep them informed, talk to them one-on-one.

And that #3 person? Don't get sucked into his problems! Don't argue or get into long discussions with her! It almost always gets you nowhere. Instead, make a clear statement that doesn't engage the complainer. Eventually, they will see that they can't get you to "wrestle" with them and they will move on.

Here is some food for thought for those #3s.

Four Types of Difficult People

These are just a few of the types you might come into contact with...

Sherman Tanks - people who bully and push you around

Snipers - people who strike with negative remarks

Complainers - people who whine and gripe about everything

Know-it-Alls - people who love to tell you facts and figures and show you they are always right

See the next page for characteristics and coping skills you can use.

Sherman Tanks - people who bully and push you around

Characteristics

Attack you
Intimidate you
Base decisions on fact of the moment
Get impatient with people of different opinions

Coping Skills

Stand up to the person
“I disagree with you”
“Sounds like our facts don’t fit”
Don’t get into an argument
Call the person by name
Don’t allow the person to interrupt
Be ready to be friendly after standing up to them

Snipers - people who strike with negative remarks

Characteristics

Very strong sense of how others should act and think
Have to prove they are right
Maintain cover behind victim
Take potshots at others

Coping Skills

Deal with them alone
Explain situation and end with question
“Did you mean it that way?”
Deal with every snipe
Be prepared for ploys
“Can’t you take a joke?”
Don’t let the person get away with it

Complainers - people who whine and gripe about everything

Characteristics

Sentences filled with ‘ands’ and ‘buts’
Uses a whiny voice
Feel like they have little control
Appear to be blameless, innocent and morally perfect

Coping Skills

Listen actively
Don’t agree with them
Acknowledge that you understand
Don’t apologize
Paraphrase what they say
Get them to problem-solving mode by asking specific questions
“When did you first notice the problem?”
Give simple task like putting complaints in writing
Involve them in solving problem

Know-it-All - people who love to tell you facts and figures and show you they are always right

Characteristics

Know that they have THE right answer
Are insulted if you try to talk to them
Powerful - feel they don’t need others

Coping Skills

Get them to consider alternative views
Avoid direct challenges
Listen carefully
Paraphrase
If you have objections, ask them
Ask questions
They often discover their own errors