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11 Tips for Dealing With Difficult People (or *Challenging* People!)

By [Jim Estill](#)

I started my company (EMJ) from the trunk of my car (and it was a small trunk so that's a small business). I grew EMJ to \$375,000,000 in sales prior to selling it to SYNEX. I am now CEO of a \$1 billion business.

One certainty in life is you will not always see eye to eye with everyone. The purpose of this article is to share practical ideas on dealing with difficult people.

Tip 1 – I hate the title.

The first step is to reframe the situation. If you think you are dealing with a difficult person, it will be difficult. If you think you are dealing with a challenge, it can be invigorating.

Tip 2 - Use the Stephen Covey rule "seek first to understand"

Often the simple act of understanding the person will be cathartic enough to have the person deal with you civilly. People have a need to be understood and if they feel understood, they tend to be easier to work with. If you truly understand the other person, often you will see a solution to the challenge or will have empathy for them and not feel as threatened.

Tip3 – Leave stubbornness (and ego) at the door.

Most cases I have seen where someone is very challenging, it is because both of the parties are set on their point of view.

Tip 4 – Be Zen.

If you cannot change the situation, live with it. Not only tolerate it but do not stress about what cannot be changed.

Tip 5 – Take a break.

Often challenging situations can bog down. Stepping away from the situation can allow more creativity. It can also allow for a cooling off by both parties. Some of the best breaks include deep breathing, [exercise](#) (take a walk) and of course the longer the time, the better. Try a [power nap](#).

Tip 6 – Ask yourself why you think this person is a challenge.

Often the reasons tie to interpreting cues wrong. For example, I do business with an individual who uses a lot of foul language. I find this somewhat offensive and

it tends to raise my stress level. When I look at the situation, his first language is not English. He likely does not have the same associations with swear words as I do. Furthermore, they are only words so perhaps I need to look at myself. Does it really matter?

Tip 7 – Be creative.

This ties into the stubbornness. Often creative solutions can solve an impasse. Take a win-win negotiations course. Much conflict is actually about problem solving and negotiation. Much of win win negotiating is about [creativity](#).

Tip 8 – Ask “what about this person or situation is good”.

There will always be something about everyone and every situation that is positive. Relax a little and you will see it.

Tip 9 – Ask the "How?" question.

How could you solve this challenge? How could dealing with this person be a good thing?

Tip 10 – Get help.

Often someone might be tough for you to communicate with or be challenging to deal with but someone else might deal with them easily. I often end up in this role in my company. Because the card says CEO, people are often more polite and nicer to me than they are one of my staff. It is not that I am better, it is the position. Or sometimes just someone different might have different chemistry.

I used to do an account swap among the sales reps and trade underperforming accounts. Invariably sales would increase for both reps. There was something about adding new energy and a new person that moved all underperforming accounts to higher sales by just switching reps.

Tip 11 – If all else fails, avoid the situation.

In some cases, this can be a viable option. I often ask myself “will this go away if I do not deal with it”. If the answer is yes, why should I spend time and energy on it.

Thanks Jim for your insights! Lyndsay Swinton
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