



Leading from the ground up

For new or renewing leaders



Dealing with difficult dynamics

At different times, communicating and working with some people feels difficult. As leaders, we can't walk away from these situations and have to develop ways to make these events and relationships productive. Here we explore some of the interpersonal dynamics that can help.

Difficult person or difficult dynamic?

When dealing with someone is difficult or frustrating, it is tempting to conclude that they are a difficult person. This view of relationships believes problems are part of a person. But we can look at relationships as a dynamic created by two people. This way we realise the problem is that we don't have the right dynamic yet. We can fix dynamics but we can't 'fix' people.



When people are seen as the problem, there is nothing to fix



When the dynamic is seen as the problem, it can be fixed to better match the people

Different assumptions



People bring different expectations to a relationship. Likewise the reasons for a person's behaviour may not always be obvious. The result is we can conclude the other person is a difficult person.

Clarify expectations and understand each other's concerns. This way we have a chance of relating in ways that help everyone to benefit from the relationship.

When helping is hard



Helping others can be sensitive and solutions hard to get. The helper feels frustrated if they can't find a way to fix things. The recipient feels let down when they can't get the results they want. This can lead to abrasive or impatient behaviours that make people seem difficult.

Work together to set goals and explore solutions, rather than blame each other for the difficulties.

A menu of classic options



People have been dealing with difficult dynamics for a long time. Here are some of the options that get recommended. No option is suited for every situation. You will still need to choose the combination that fits the dynamic you are dealing with.

Options to try

- Listen and acknowledge what they say
- Stay calm
- Show respect to the other person
- Find out their key needs
- Seek help from others
- Keep space between you
- Apologise or offer to try and fix things
- Set boundaries around how you are treated
- Listen to your feelings if feeling unsafe and need to exit
- Be flexible and adaptable
- Debrief what happened with someone who can support you
- De-stress with exercise, relaxation, or finding your own space
- Praise and reward yourself for dealing with the situation

Options to avoid

- Don't judge them
- Don't dominate or force compliance
- Don't assume you understand
- Don't smile too much
- Don't get defensive
- Don't respond to anger with anger
- Don't try to convince them

You are not alone



When part of a difficult dynamic, we can forget that we are not alone. Look for corporate support for difficult situations. Colleagues can provide encouragement and tips.

Use your support network. You may even be able to draw on their support network who are happy to help you establish a positive dynamic.

Avoid traps and hasty conclusions



Avoid the escalation trap. Keep things calm when people are agitated. Try to understand what is normal behaviour for them. They may be blunt, not rude. They may be expressive, not shouting.

Personalities and stress can drive behaviour. If people are doing problematic things, it could be due the pressure they are under.

Be careful navigating the dark triad



The dark triad is a set of traits that can be harmful to others. These are psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism. These traits can show as ongoing selfishness, arrogance, lack of empathy, antisocial behaviour, volatility, duplicity, manipulation, and lack of ethics. Don't try and diagnose people but act if you find you are dealing repeatedly with these behaviours.

Keep yourself safe. Seek assistance from qualified others. Defuse angry situations. Use your best interpersonal skills. Do not try and go it alone. These behaviours are an organisational issue which need the support of other leaders and professionals.

People usually don't want to cause harm but pressures and lack of skills can lead to difficult dynamics

