

# How to Deal with Difficult People

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Difficult people defy logic. Some are blissfully unaware of the negative impact that they have on those around them, and others seem to derive satisfaction from creating chaos and pushing other people's buttons. Either way, they create unnecessary complexity and strife.

## If You Can Deal With Lumberg, You Can Deal With Anyone



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To deal with difficult people effectively, you need an approach that enables you, across the board, to control what you can and eliminate what you can't. The important thing to remember when it comes to difficult people and the impact that they have on you is that you are in control of far more than you realize.

### **Step 1: Rise Above**

Difficult people drive you crazy because their behavior is so irrational. Make no mistake about it; their behavior truly goes against reason. Which begs the question, why

do you allow yourself to respond to them emotionally and get sucked into the mix?

The more irrational and off-base someone is, the easier it should be for you to remove yourself from their traps. Quit trying to beat them at their own game. Distance yourself from them emotionally and approach your interactions like they're a science project (or you're their shrink, if you prefer the analogy). You don't need to respond to the emotional chaos—only the facts.

Maintaining an emotional distance requires awareness. You can't stop someone from pushing your buttons if you don't recognize when it's happening. Sometimes you'll find yourself in situations where you'll need to regroup and choose the best way forward. This is fine and you shouldn't be afraid to buy yourself some time to do so. Think of it this way—if a mentally unstable person approaches you on the street and tells you he's John F. Kennedy, you're unlikely to set him straight. When you find yourself with a coworker who is engaged in similarly derailed thinking, sometimes it's best to just smile and nod. If you're going to have to straighten them out, it's better to give yourself some time to plan the best way to go about it.

### **Step 2: Set Boundaries**

This is the area where most people tend to sell themselves short. They feel like because they work or live with someone, they have no way to control the chaos. This couldn't be further from the truth. Once you've found your way to Rise Above (Step 1) a person, you'll begin to find their behavior more predictable and easier to understand. This will equip you to think rationally about when and where you have to put up with them and when you don't. For example, even if you work with someone

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closely on a project team, that doesn't mean that you need to have the same level of one-on-one interaction with them that you have with other team members.

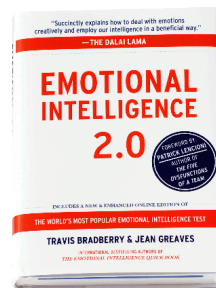
You can set limits, but you'll have to do so consciously and proactively. If you let things happen naturally, you are bound to find yourself constantly embroiled in difficult conversations. If you set boundaries and decide when and where you'll engage a difficult person, you can control much of the chaos. The only trick is to stick to your guns and keep boundaries in place when the person tries to encroach upon them, which they will.

## Step 3: Talk About It

There's nothing wrong with venting to family and friends about a difficult person, but the idea here is to use it as a means of moving forward. Venting is a great way to release tension and get some social support for your problems, but to mix things up and improve your situation, you need to tell the people that you vent to exactly what you're doing about the person. Share your specific plans for Rising Above (Step 1) and Setting Boundaries (Step 2). This way, the people in your support system can give you feedback and guidance as you pursue these steps. They will be able to more easily see when your emotions are getting the better of you, and can help you to maintain a rational perspective. When it comes to boundaries, you're going to find your support system asking a lot of great "what if" questions to help you consider new ways to set boundaries. The quality of this feedback will depend on getting a detailed account of what you're trying to accomplish in dealing with the difficult person. If your support people don't understand that you have a plan, they may just feed the problem by getting you riled up over how terrible it is that you're stuck with a difficult person.

## Bringing It All Together

Before you get this system to work brilliantly, you're going to have to pass some tests. Most of the time, you will find yourself tested by touchy interactions with your problem person. When you find yourself being tested, refer back to the specific strategies recommended for you by the Emotional Intelligence Appraisal test that came with your *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* book. These strategies will help you avoid getting blindsided by areas that are not your emotional intelligence strengths. Here are three additional strategies from *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* you'll want to consider, as they are very helpful in dealing with difficult people: Self-Management Strategy #9, Social Awareness Strategy #11, and Self-Management Strategy #4. 🌐 March 2012



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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.