Skills 360 – Dealing with Problem People (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. Have you had to deal with a co-worker who caused you continual problems?
2. At what point do you think you should involve a supervisor when you have a problem with a colleague or co-worker?
3. Do you naturally discuss problems openly or do you tend to keep things in?

Vocabulary

To drive someone nuts: to annoy, bother, or anger someone; "Frank is really driving me nuts with his constant complaining."

To get along with someone: to have a good relationship with someone; "Many people don't like Ian, but I really get along with him well."

Thorn in your side: something that constantly bothers you; "The problems with the warehouse staff are a real thorn in my side, and I'd like to see the situation resolved."

To dread: to feel worried, stressed, or afraid of something that is going to happen; "Many older office workers dread having to learn a new computer program."

On a continual basis: continually, or repeatedly over a long time; "Unless we innovate on a continual basis, we will be left behind by younger and smarter tech companies."

To fester: if a problem or feeling festers, it becomes worse and worse because nobody deals with it; "I let my unhappiness at work fester, and one day I just couldn't take it anymore and quit."

Proactive: taking action to solve or prevent problems rather than waiting or just responding to what happens; "Cultural sensitivity training should be part of a proactive approach rather than a punishment for ignorant employees."

Tip: a piece of advice; "Our tech support group send out daily tips over Twitter."

To take something up with someone: to talk about an issue with someone; "The CEO took up some of the recent financial troubles with the CFO at the company retreat."

To whine: to complain, especially in an annoying or immature manner; "Everybody in our office hates hearing Bev whine about coming to work every Monday morning."

To confront someone: to talk with someone directly, especially about a problem; "When Susan confronted Geoff about the missing money, he quickly confessed to having borrowed from the till."

Easier said than done: we say that something is "easier said than done" when it seems like a good idea but is actually quite difficult to do; "Asking for a raise or promotion is easier said than done, even when you believe you really deserve it."

To open up: to speak freely and honestly; "When asked about his recent sales record, Tom opened up about his problems at home."

To value: to believe that something is important; "Tech companies that value fun and ingenuity attract many of the brightest computer science grads."

To go a long way toward: to help significantly to achieve a purpose; "Something as simple as sending a Christmas card can go a long way toward cementing a relationship with a new client."

Insecure: not confident in one's own abilities or a situation; "Mary is a pretty good worker, but she's so insecure that it's impossible to have a conversation without offending her."

To cross the line: to be inappropriate or beyond acceptable limits; "Sure, we can joke around at staff luncheons, but imitating people's speech and manner is crossing the line."

To bug someone: to bother someone; "Companies should be careful not to bug customers too much in popular social media outlets."

Defensive: if you are "defensive," you show that you are upset when you feel you are being criticized; "I only wanted to point out a spelling mistake on the website, but the designer got really defensive."

To keep your head: to remain calm; "A good leader should be able to keep his head even in very stressful situations."

To escalate: to raise in importance or seriousness; "When the angry customer kept calling back, I decided to escalate the situation and involve my supervisor."

Transcript

Thanks for tuning in to the Skills 360 Podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons. Before we jump into today's lesson on dealing with problem people, I just want to mention the coming release of our CourseBuilder web app. With CourseBuilder members can create courses by searching and saving lists of BEP lessons. Take a look at the demo video on BusinessEnglishPod.com to see just how quick and easy it is to make a personalized course.

So we've been looking at how to deal with problem people. These are the people in your office that drive you nuts because they're so difficult to get along with. Last week we talked about how to deal with specific incidents with difficult individuals. Today, we're talking about *ongoing* issues.

This is about the constant thorn in your side, whether it's your colleague, your boss, or the angry IT guy that gets annoyed every time you ask for some simple information. In extreme cases, these people can make you dread going to work each day. So how can we deal with them?

First of all, if there's someone causing problems on a continual basis, it's best to *act* instead of just *reacting*. Don't let the issue, and your resentment, fester. The problem won't go away all by itself, and if you wait to deal with it, there's a good chance that when you do, you'll lose emotional control. So be proactive. You know there's a problem, now go out and do something about it.

And doing something about it means talking to the person causing the problem. But before I get into that, there are a couple of other tips I want to share with you. The first is to document everything. Keep a log or journal of the problem. Save relevant emails. Record dates, interactions, and details. This will give you clear points to take up with the person directly and also if you have to discuss the problem with a supervisor. My second tip is to let someone know that you're experiencing a problem with someone – the person you tell could be a colleague or it could be your boss. Don't whine and complain, and don't ask for help. Just let the person know there's an issue and you're doing what you can to deal with it.

Okay, next comes the hard part. What you need to do is confront the person who's causing the problem. This is easier said than done, and you need to keep several things in mind when you do this to avoid making the problem worse or getting pulled into a pointless argument.

Make sure you ask the person to talk in private. You can start with some very open-ended questions to try to get the person to open up about any issues they're having. For example, you could say, "So, I've noticed that you seem stressed. Is everything okay?" What you may learn is that the person has a problem that is not related at all to work or to you. You can then kindly inform the person that the problem is affecting work and the people around him or her.

The problem may also be related to work. You may find, for example, that the person feels his or her opinion or work is not valued. You can then attempt to address those problems. A little compassion can go a long way toward making a difficult person feel less threatened or insecure.

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But sometimes you can't find a problem at the bottom of the behavior. Sometimes, that person simply has a bad attitude. In this case, you need to deal with the behaviors themselves.

What should you talk about? Talk about exactly what has crossed the line. Talk about specific behavior, not general character. That is, you can say things like "People feel rather frustrated when you interrupt them in mid-sentence," but avoid things like "You're so impatient and it bugs the hell out of everyone!" And focus on *professional* standards of behavior, not necessarily *personal* manners. We're all different.

One way to prevent confrontation in a situation like this is to avoid sentences that begin with the word "you." Think about a statement like this: "*You* never accept anyone's ideas." As soon as the person hears "you," they will start to feel defensive. Instead, focus on the behavior or the people affected. You could say "in brainstorming sessions, we really need to listen to all the ideas before criticizing anything."

Did you notice anything else in our bad example? Listen again. "You never accept anyone ideas." That word "never" is definitely one to avoid. In fact, avoid all kinds of extreme words and exaggeration, words like "always," or "completely," or "worst." These words will become points of argumentation themselves.

Remember, you can't control what other people do, but you *can* control what *you* do. And control is very important. Throughout your discussion, keep your head. You might feel quite emotional, but you shouldn't let the situation become emotional.

Once you've talked with the person about the problems and their behavior, then it's up to them to make a change. If the person can't, you may have to have another discussion. And if all else fails, you may have to escalate the situation and involve a supervisor or mediator. But that should only happen after you've done your best to deal with the situation, and the person, yourself.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **myBEonline.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. What does Tim say might happen if you *don't* deal actively with a problem co-worker?

    A You might risk losing your job.
    B A supervisor may have to deal with the issue.
    C You may become emotional about the problem.
    D The co-worker may be unfairly rewarded.

2. Before discussing how to talk with a problem co-worker, Tim gives two pieces of advice. What are they? [choose 2]

    A tell someone that you're facing a problem
    B investigate the person's personal life
    C create a list of things to avoid
    D record your interactions with the person

3. When you talk with a co-worker about their problem behavior, how should you begin?

    A by discussing specific behaviors
    B with open questions
    C by talking about how the person makes you feel
    D with casual discussion of non-work topics

4. Put the four words in the correct blanks:

    Personal   behavior   professional   character

    When confronting a difficult co-worker, you should talk about specific _____ rather than general _____, and focus on _____ standards rather than _____ manners.

5. Which of the following statements contain expressions that Tim suggests avoiding? [choose all that apply]

    A Dan, you always laugh when people talk about how they feel!
    B I'm not sure whether you realize how disruptive you are being.
    C You interrupt people all the time.
    D Many of us have noticed that you seem stressed out lately.
    E Nothing you have said in our discussions has been constructive.
    F Of all the people in this office, you have the worst attitude.
    G I'd like to find a way to improve our communication.

6. If you can't solve an ongoing problem with a difficult co-worker through discussion, what can you do?

    A find a position in a different department, office, or company
    B have a group discussion about the issue
    C involve a mediator or supervisor
    D seek legal help

Review Answers

1. What does Tim say might happen if you *don't* deal actively with a problem co-worker?

    C   You may become emotional about the problem.

2. Before discussing how to talk with a problem co-worker, Tim gives two pieces of advice. What are they? [choose 2]

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    D   record your interactions with the person

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    B   with open questions

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    When confronting a difficult co-worker, you should talk about specific **behavior** rather than general **character**, and focus on **professional** standards rather than **personal** manners.

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    A   Dan, you always laugh when people talk about how they feel!
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    C   involve a mediator or supervisor

Online Practice

Click the "Launch" button to open the **online practice:**