

## Transcription - Working With Difficult Personalities

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Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we're talking about an interesting and challenging topic, how to work with difficult personalities.

First of all I guess you've got to have gone through the process of knowing your team well enough or knowing the people that you work with well enough and then assessing whether they're difficult in terms of your relationship with them, or just difficult generally with everybody, and this will not just be people within your team, it's people who are at the peer level with you, at the executive level or even those to whom you report. I'll say again, the most important thing that you need to do is assess whether it's just the relationship that they have with you, the interaction that they have with you, or whether it's more widespread.

It is important to know what the relationship is with that person because your approach could be different if it is one of your team, if you're a team member, if it's a peer, or it is the manager. As Kim said, it's really important to know is it you, the interaction and that doesn't mean good or bad. What that means is, you've seen it yourself, a person that you don't sort of like interacting with very much, somebody else will get on like a house on fire and so on. So the first thing is to ask what am I doing that might be causing this person to be irritating or prickly or whatever word you want to use? Then look at that and say to yourself, what can I do about it? But at the same time, don't over beat yourself up and think it's all about you or start negative talking to yourself.

There's a number of steps for you to take to explore what makes you find this person difficult and that's the hardest bit. Are they difficult because they always come up with another point of view? Are they difficult because they want to be the center of attention? Are they difficult because they like to undermine everyone in general? Are they difficult because they accept very high standards? With all of these the matter is for you to know how does that affect you? Are they pushing your buttons based on personality or based on actual expectation? Is it long-running? Has it been an interaction that hasn't worked for many years? Has something changed more recently? How much does this relationship and the fact that it's not smooth and easy going, affect the work that you have to do together or the outcomes that you have to achieve together? If it doesn't really affect the outcomes, then I don't think it's worth spending too much time working on. We can't be friends with everyone. We can't get along with everybody.

What we need to understand is that we have relationships with people and a good friend of mine told me that you interact with people for a reason, a season or a lifetime. Now if you are interacting with someone for a reason and that reason won't exist after say six months or 12 months when this particular project finishes, then you can ride out any difficulties that you're having so long as it is not affecting your performance, their performance or the outcome that you're looking at achieving. If it is affecting your performance or the outcome, then you do need to address it in a way that is going to make the opportunity arise where you can have the outcome, or the best outcome possible, given the circumstances.

Remember the good things about having a diverse team. The diverse team would have different operating styles. So it might be just that. It might be that when you present to this person or you take a matter to that person or they come to you, some of us are better at attention to detail. Some are very factual, some are very visual and some are very high level. So it might be just that. It might be that I come in with all the details and the facts because I know they're really important and the person says, look just give me the big picture. So again, catering for your audience. It might be as simple as that.

It might be that they are difficult and it might be addressed with a conversation. Think very carefully about that because sometimes those conversations can backfire and end up escalating on a very minor issue. You've really got to know what it is. What I normally do is say to myself, all right then, this is not working as nice as I would like it and I tend to work okay with most people, so what can I do differently? Why are they pushing my buttons? Is it because they ask for more information? Is it because they're always late in submitting their stuff to me so I can't do my bit? What is it? If it is, for example, they're consistently late and you try to, sort of very nicely and very professionally, get them to address meeting targets and you're a member of a project and they're not going to change, don't spend too much time stressing about that. What you do is you allow extra time factor in that time line, when they're doing their bit, if you can. If you go to address them and look at their history, has somebody else had the same problem? Did they try to address it? Did it work? Obviously not because you're still having that problem. I guess you've got to outsmart the situation. You've got to find out a way so your buttons don't get pushed or you, at least, be ready and that's a huge advantage if you know this person is always going to do this and that is going to annoy you. At least you know it's going to happen and you can plan and prepare how to control your emotions and reactions to that situation.

It's very interesting when we're put under stress and that situation, when you're dealing with someone who has a difficult personality, does put you under stress and what happens chemically in your body is that serotonin is released into your brain. It makes you not able to make decisions as clearly as you would otherwise. So your assessment of a situation when you're dealing with a difficult person is not going to be the same as when you look at it in hindsight or with forethought. So I think that the suggestion of planning around knowing that the situation is not going to be as pleasant as you would like, is going to help you make better decisions than you would if you're trying to make them at the time of your interaction. Now obviously that's not always going to be the case, you can't always second guess what's going to happen and make your plans and make your decisions beforehand, but you do need to think about those situations, you do need to plan for them and I think that the more difficult situation is where these are peers or they are people to whom you report, because you don't have the same sort of control over those situations as you would if it was someone within your team.

In that instance I think that it's a case of, quite clearly for me, I'd be putting down the things that irritate me and the things over which I have control, the things that I can't control, the things that I can avoid, so that I'm not presented with that situation. In the end, if you've still got a situation where you have to deal with a difficult personality, and let's say that it's the person to whom you report and that they never appear to give you credit for the work that you do, they don't ever allow you extra time and you look at the way they interact with other people that are your peers that are also reporting to this person, that they seem to have

a different relationship to the one that you do. I think, in that instance, because you're a senior executive, because you're a manager of people, because it is affecting the way that you can produce the outcome that is that you feel is required, I think you address it. I think you have to say to this person, we don't seem to see eye to eye on these things. I've written down these things that appear to aggravate you, upset you, affect our relationship. Am I reading it right? Can you tell me if these are things that I need to address or is there something else? I'm looking for the underlying issue that you're not happy with. Simple as that. You take control.

I think that's good advice because then if you're concentrating on the things that aren't annoying the other person and you're forgetting the ones that are, the person would particularly appreciate the fact that you have been thinking about it and wanting a positive outcome, you are self aware enough to think these might be the things that my boss is unhappy with. At the same time take the time to listen to what your boss is saying because when they do say, well no, none of those is what I really find annoying but I talk to you about this and you don't seem to get it. Don't get defensive. Take it on board. Continue with the same spirit that you went in with and that is, I'm trying to identify the root cause and address it. This is a business interaction. It's not a personal one. Again I will emphasise you don't have to be friends, it's for reason, a season, a lifetime. Just don't forget that saying.

Now I have had recent experience with this situation. Someone that, I suppose, I'm an accountability partner rather than mentoring, dealing with some some clients of his and the clients are a couple. The bloke he gets on with really well, no problem at all, and he's the one that does the actual physical work that is being addressed but the other partner is the one who pays the bills and there was always an issue of control between that particular couple which we weren't aware of until more recently but he found, my accountability partner, found that he couldn't get on it all with the person paying the bills and he didn't understand because normally he gets on with everyone not a problem. I said, I gave him that advice and said just address it, just say I feel this is not working, is there something I'm doing that is aggravating you. When he addressed it, she said yes. She said you write emails like they're a letter, all I need is a line, you just send too much information, I don't want to read it all. It was as simple as that, that she felt that he was wasting time writing long and chatty emails about the issues that they were addressing whereas she just wanted the facts and that was it. It was simply a matter of miscommunication or communication that was overdone in that case. So a really good outcome simply by addressing what he saw as an issue between them and communicating. When it comes down to it, we've said it almost every podcast, it comes down to communication. Being clear about what you want being clear about what you're hearing, and then having the discussion afterwards.

To continue on the communication aspect of it, a few things that would make a situation of potential conflict more peaceful is to spend time choosing your words and tone and body language. Use words that are not provocative, use words that are factual, and use your tone, don't have your voice raised, don't whisper like here I'm a defeatist and there's another horrible communication coming out, just normal tone. Your body language, you might be feeling terrible on the inside and you're screaming on the inside and on the outside you need to continue to control

yourself, in that sense. Now I know that's easier said than done. For me, I use couple of tools and the tools are, if this conversation was recorded and played back to me later, how would I feel about my contribution, never mind the other person. Will I feel so embarrassed by my tone, language and behavior, whether I'm overreacting or underreacting or I don't want to be a doormat but I don't want to be a bully either. I always keep that the back of my mind, if this played back to me, what would I think of me, is that the image I want to continue to display to the world, is this my reputation. I'm in control of it, how do I want to look? That's one tool. The other tool is really saying, you know what, he's a colleague, he's a staff member, or she's a colleague, she's a staff member etc, I'm just going to call it as it is. The answer is think of them as your best customer. If they're your best customer, you won't lose it, you can't lose it, because you'll lose that account. So at the end of the day you say to yourself, what is the biggest behavior I should always display with my customers and that is professionalism. You don't have to say yes all the time, you don't say oh I want you to cut your price by you know 80%. You say yes to be nice, that's not what I mean and you know that what I mean is, it keeps you professional in your communication, in your approach and the desire to continue with the best working relationship that you can have. Those two tools, imagine you're being recorded, imagine this one is your best customer and that helps me, anyway.

I guess if I can be quite Australian vulgar, this is not a pissing competition. What I wanted to emphasize is that it's not a competition, it's not a win-lose situation, you want the best outcome possible and sometimes that might be that the situation doesn't change even though you've addressed it and you've tried to come to some common ground. It might just be that you don't get on with one another and that's simply a point that you both have to agree on and just interact at a minimal level, find some other way of interacting so that you don't press one another's buttons because it may well be that you're just as aggravating to this person as they are to you.

I think at this point we've talked about people you manage, people to whom you report, we haven't talked about the situation where these are peers as much. We've touched on a little bit but I think that's probably, of the three, that's the hardest to address because you don't really have a whole lot of influence at that level unless these are people who are part of the process of work that you're doing and so you rely on them or they rely on your outcomes from your group to do their work. This group, the peer group, are probably most affected by internal politics or politics at work, so it's an even harder situation, I think, to address than the other two. I think that you will get to know their style and what their drivers are a lot of time. It's a sort of unspoken competition that cause tension, it is very much like, oh he knows more than me or she knows more than me but I'm a bit of presenter so I'm going to take all the credit at the meeting or whatever it may be. In that case, again you're not a psychologist, don't try to change the person's personality. What you do is win them over as best as you can by finding things that matter to them and show that you are willing to help them achieve their objective. This way you have a united front in achieving the outcome that's best for the two teams and the company. If somebody's deliberately trying to sabotage you, again, you use the same techniques as we said before and figure out, is it good to talk to them, yes or no, and if you decided yes I really need to have a talk to this person, plan it carefully, think ahead and if you've got someone that you can trust, a confidante that you could sit there and practice that, because we want the right outcome. It's not winning and it's not losing, it's the right outcome. Demonstrate to the other person that you're trying to help them meet what's in it for them and vice versa. Show them it's not just about you, it's about them as well. The

other thing is, as we talked about with leadership before, it's important that you don't have these things fester because it will impact both teams and the people that work for you.

I think, in summary, what we're saying is that you do need to address it, that it's not a situation that will go away, it's not a situation that will fix itself, it's not a situation that someone else will fix for your benefit. You really do need to address it. I think that in the discussion we've had today, we've covered a whole lot of different ways that you could start to address the issue of dealing with difficult personalities, whether they are within your team, your peer group, or the people to whom you report. I'm sure it's a topic that we will revisit on another occasion and perhaps we'll look at it in some of our scenarios that we're going to do. For some of the podcasts in upcoming weeks, we're going to just pick one or two situations and talk through what we would do individually, together, to resolve those particular situations.

For today that's it. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.