



Positive Solutions for Difficult People at Work



By Ken Warren
Expert on People Skills
Keynote Speaker and Workshop Presenter

Introduction

It seems that wherever there are people, there are challenging relationships.

- ❖ Managers who are controlling or unsupportive
- ❖ Staff who are negative and resistant to change
- ❖ People who push our buttons or we just don't get along with

Although we are all allowed to be human, the quality of our workplace relationships should be a concern for everyone. A poor relationship with your manager or a co-worker is also number one in contributing to poor morale, decreased productivity, and staff turnover.

I am firmly of the belief that that there are actions we can all take to turn strained relationships around. We are all someone else's difficult person at times.

Even for those people who are unwilling or incapable of change, there are still actions we can take to limit their impact on us and our colleagues.

I hope you enjoy this e-book and find useful the ideas you gain from it.

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Ken Warren BA, M Soc Sc, CSP is an expert on People Management Skills and Human Behaviour. With his engaging, interactive and positive presentations, Ken has shown thousands how to improve team performance, provide great customer service, and enhance staff resiliency. Check out all his FREE resources at www.positivepeoplesolutions.com.au

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Find a Kinder Way to See That Problem Person

When you are caught in a difficult relationship with someone at work, it can be very tempting to see them in a very unkind light – seeing them as the enemy, deliberately undermining your position, being overly negative and resistant to change. This is also true for people who we find difficult in our personal life. I remember one man I knew who used to refer to his ex-wives as B1 and B2!

In the workplace, we use another B-word. No, it is not the ones you are thinking of - I am referring to behaviour that is labelled as Bullying.

Although staying with the unkind perspective is sometimes accurate and somewhat satisfying, ultimately putting a negative label on the other person is not only often inaccurate and unhelpful, it is disempowering – giving us nothing we can do to improve the situation.

Seeing someone at work as the enemy will also affect your demeanour when dealing with them, further affecting your interactions with them. Labelling someone's behaviour as bullying, typically only provokes a defensive response.

Although there is no doubt that some people are inherently difficult, my experience in mediating both personal and workplace conflicts over 28 years has been that, for the vast majority, there are much kinder ways to view the situation.

If you can find a kinder perspective, if one is there, you will be not only feel less offended and frustrated, you will also be in a much better position to respond. Consider if any of the following perspectives are a good fit for you.

1. **Have you misread the situation?** You can double-check your perspective by asking yourself or a trusted confidante if there is a kinder way to view the situation. Give some thought to what the intention of the 'difficult' person was. If you can find a more honourable intention behind their behaviour, this will help you to be less affected. Remember, that when unsure about their intention, assume the best. For example, someone who appears to be undermining you to others, may simply be trying to access emotional support. Someone who appears to be bossing you around may simply be trying to get something done and is not aware of how they are coming across.

Some people find themselves getting quite defensive when given constructive feedback by their boss. To these people I compassionately say, 'Get over it!' Feedback, even that given poorly, is still an opportunity to become better at what we do. It is more helpful to look for the gem that is there in the feedback.

Another kinder perspective could be that it is simply our boss doing their job, addressing problems as they arise. Here I am not excusing ongoing disrespectful communication.

- 2. Are they simply a different person to you?** Simply accepting that some people are wired differently to you, have different ways of operating, and different ways of communicating can be very liberating. This can help you to put your energy less into being offended and more into adjustments that you can make to fit in better with them. Of course, it is great when they can appreciate that you are a different person to them as well and are also willing to make adjustments. For example, some people who are very direct appreciate when others are direct with them. Others who are more sensitive, however, can find such directness quite intimidating, and appreciate a more sensitive approach.

Although some people might say, 'This is just the way I am. I shouldn't have to change for anyone', this is not how things work when you want to have good relationships. We all have to make the effort to fit in better with those around us, especially with those who are very different to us.

- 3. Are they under a lot of pressure at home or work?** Although this is no excuse for poor behaviour, it certainly can be an explanation which can soften communications or behaviour with a sharp edge. Yes, I know we are all under pressure at different times and most of us don't let our personal challenges affect the way we relate to others, but some of us do. When we are unhappy at home, we become unhappy at work.

While many of us just become miserable or sick, sometimes the stress can come out through our behaviour. We take short-cuts with the way we speak to people. We become more sensitive, reacting more strongly to stressors than we would normally. Here it can be more helpful to ask if they are OK, to activate their support network, and to address those stressors that can be changed.

- 4. Are you contributing?** Can you find something (anything) where you may have contributed to the difficulties? Have you misread the situation, reacted defensively, not let the other person know the best way to work in with you? Remember that it is OK to be human - we are all someone else's difficult person at times. In fact, it is a good thing when you can acknowledge your own personal flaws, as the biggest personal flaw you can have is to pretend you are perfect and the problem is always with others. I think we all know someone like that!

By taking personal responsibility for your contribution, this helps you to be less offended and gives you something to work on. Even if you judge your contribution as only 10%, this at least gives you something you can change. If you change your part, there is a high likelihood that others will as well. Ask yourself, 'What behaviours from me would this other person see as helpful right now?'

Often the first step to changing the dynamics in a difficult relationship has to begin with the part of the relationship in your control – your own behaviour. If you can find a kinder perspective, you will be in a much better position to do your part to help.

Yes, it would be nice if the other person found a kinder way to view you, made adjustments to fit in better, cut you some slack, and looked at their own behaviour.

But someone has to be the adult here. It may as well be you.

Judge People More By Their Intentions

When my son, Robbie, was 16 months old, I remember making a Mother's Day card for my wife, Christy. It involved the use of paint to make hand and foot prints on the card. I struggled in juggling my baby son, coating his hand in green paint and placing it on the card. My wife walked in at a critical moment to discover her precious boy, the new outfit he was in, and half the bathroom, covered in green paint!



Understandably, she was a bit upset. I apologised and helped clean up. Christy later came to appreciate my motivation behind this escapade and said her card was one of the loveliest things I had ever given her.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were totally misunderstood or your actions seen in a way that was not intended? It can be very frustrating, especially if the other person cast your actions in a negative light. Our usual response is to try to explain our true intentions or to retaliate to the unnecessary criticism we believe we are receiving. However, this tends to only produce a stronger emotional response from the other as their feelings are not being appropriately responded to.

It's strange isn't it? We tend to judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their actions. When we retaliate, we are slow to judge our own actions. Instead we justify them by saying we had good reason, such as, we were provoked or needed to defend ourselves.

We are often better to judge people more by their intentions than by their actions. This can be difficult, but it is fairer, since we prefer it when people look beyond our

mistakes to discern our true intent. As we do this, we are likely to respond in a less defensive way and have more compassion. The important part here is that we have to understand their intentions and motivation as they see them and not as we see them.

Furthermore, if we judged ourselves by how our actions are perceived by others, we may become more sensitive and understanding of any hurtful responses by them. We may become more alert to how we are coming across and less focused on defending ourselves.

Ultimately, when someone has been hurt inadvertently by our actions, we are better to respond to their hurt, than we are to explain ourselves. In brief, their hurt is more important than our explanation. There is a time for explanations of course, but such explanations are unlikely to be heard when the other person is hurt or upset.

We are better to acknowledge their perspective and how they are feeling, apologise for how our behaviour came across as hurtful, even though this was not intended, and perhaps ask what we can do to make it up to them. As the other person feels more understood, they are often in a better position to let go of their hurt and hear our explanation. We have to be careful in not using any explanation to excuse any actions which were obviously hurtful.

It also helps if we resist the urge to attack the other person or withdraw from them due to how they are speaking to us. As you offer things for the future that takes into account their feelings and perspective, their hurt is further diminished. Actions of course speak louder than words. As we show understanding and, do what it is that we offered, we will be speaking volumes.

Dealing With People Who Are Different To You



One of the interesting things about human beings is that we are all different. These differences certainly make life more interesting. And yet it is often these differences that can make relationships challenging.

Perhaps you are a caring person, but a colleague is more concerned about getting things done. Perhaps you are creative and don't mind trying new things where the other person is very cautious and reluctant to embrace change.

There is no right and wrong here, just difference. And it is the way we deal with difference that makes the difference.

Here are some ideas on what helps.

1. **Understand how other people (and yourself) work.** If the other person likes their opinions acted upon and values challenge, then we will simply be frustrating that person if we never act on any of their ideas or fail to give them challenge. Some are motivated by challenge, whereas others are motivated by relationships. Some need to be persuaded by logical analysis of the options before them. Others are motivated more by being given a lot of freedom and choice.

You can use personality profiles if you like, but simply noticing others' personality traits, what they value, how they make decisions, and take in information, will give you some clues as to how they work and what they might need from you. If you can take some time in understanding how you can best work with others, they will be more open to understanding how they can best work with you.

2. **Respect and value difference.** If we label people's viewpoint or way of working as wrong, our effort is put instead into trying to change them, which often produces tension and resistance. I love to see Team Meetings where people respectfully raise contrary viewpoints and the Team Leader says something like, "Isn't this good that we have different viewpoints here." Energy is put more into understanding different viewpoints and finding an agreed way forward rather than denigrating someone's perspective.

Once you have the right mindset that 'we are different and that is ok; then everything else tends to fall into place. We need all kinds of people in teams. This enables teams to be comprised of people with complementary strengths who also bring new perspectives and solutions.

3. **Adjust yourself for individuals.** Some people might think, 'why should I have to change?' But failing to do so limits the development of your people management skills and increases the likelihood of tensions in your relationships. Although my wife, Christy, and I have much in common, there are a few things in which we are different. One of these is the way we make decisions. I am very good at making speedy decisions. Whilst these are not always good decisions, I can at least make them. Whereas Christy often needs days and weeks (sometimes months) before she can gain certainty. I learned the hard way that I am better to give Christy my opinion and also time to think and talk it over, rather than pressure her into a decision.

We need to adjust ourselves to fit in with others, to speak their language, and see things through their eyes. When we do so, we not only enhance the

relationship, but often they want to return the favour and make the effort for you.

4. **Accept difference or search for a compromise.** Christy once said to me that she thought that past Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, is a very attractive man. Whilst this caused me to question my belief in my wife's good taste, ultimately, I could accept that we had a different opinion on this. There are some things you can agree to disagree with others about. But other times, effort needs to be put into finding a compromise if one is possible.

Whilst Christy and I might agree to disagree on Mr Rudd, we do need to be on the same page with how we handle our sons' misbehaviour. This is where compromise comes in. Literal Types, like me, might need some help from the Creative Types in realizing that there is more than just a yes and no option. Although compromise is not always possible, relationships are preserved when one is sought.

Think Before You Speak

I once asked my wife if she could think of an example where I have said something dumb. "Just one?" she replied innocently. She reminded me that I have this curious habit of using people's names in conversations with them even if I am not certain of their names.



Someone's name might be Frank, but I call him Fred. Or someone's name might be Mary, but she looks like someone I know called Susan and another mix-up occurs. I try to explain that it is because when one has a 'super brain', working on so many complex problems simultaneously, mistakes are bound to occur. But this does not hold much sway with my wife.

There seem to be a lot of people out there like me who do not always think before they speak. Some think just because they have something to say, then they should say it, even if it is hurtful, inconsiderate, or in my case, inaccurate. A good rule of thumb is that we should not always say what we think, but we should always think what we say. It does not matter how right we are, if it is going to come out in a hurtful way, we need to rethink how we say it and, perhaps, whether we even say it at all. So often, it is not just what we say, but how we say it that counts.

A good way to think before we speak is to ask ourselves if what we are going to say is going to hurt or if it is really that necessary or important. Sometimes when we allow ourselves to cool down, we discover that it wasn't that important after all. If it remains important, we tend to be in a better position to choose our words well. I don't think I

have ever regretted allowing myself time to cool down before I have had a difficult conversation with someone, though I have often regretted times when I did not.

If we do not think before we speak, we are leaving ourselves at the mercy of our learned relationship patterns. Some of these patterns are functional, but often when faced with frustrations or the challenging behaviour of another, some of our old unwanted patterns can emerge. By thinking before we speak, we are interrupting the patterns that do not get us the relationships we want. Such self-evaluation can also reinforce our healthier patterns.

If you don't think, you will be tempted to do the automatic response, which for many people tends to make things worse. The challenge, though, is finding a way of thinking that helps you to better respond. It could be asking yourself, 'What's the best way I can respond right now?', 'Will what I am about to do or say make things better or worse?' or 'Is there a better time or way I can say what I need to say?' Some people find it helps to think, 'Someone needs to be the grown up here', or 'If I say this thing I feel like saying, I know things will become a lot worse, or "Maybe this person has had a bad day and I can cut them some slack'.

When you have found a way of thinking that is a good fit for you, it becomes easier to change your responses. Here, the general rule is to interrupt the usual pattern by changing the who, what, when, where or how. By the 'who', I mean who is speaking to them or who is present at the time. Some behave better for others or when other people are present.

What is being said or discussed, can also stop people 'spinning their wheels' over unproductive conversations. Some people who are stuck on a particular issue find they can make progress if they start talking about a completely different matter. Others find it helps to move the focus from arguments over the past to what they can both do in the future.

Of course, how things are said, and how people are looking when they say it, are extremely important. Often the message is lost in the delivery. You can always ask the person who is upset with you the best way to respond, but I think you are best to ask beforehand. You could experiment with the 'Triple A' approach in responding to those who are upset – acknowledging their perspective and how strongly they are feeling about this first, and apologising and agreeing genuinely where you can.

Where such conversations take place can also help. Some people are better behaved in public while those who are performing for others, behave better in private. The timing can also make a big difference. People are often defensive to feedback immediately after they have done what you find frustrating, but are less likely to be so, before or sometime after the event. But avoid the temptation to simply keep your mouth shut, perhaps withdrawing, but never finding a better time to talk. There is a

time to disengage, but it is still important to find a time to talk and develop a better understanding for the future.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how intelligent you are if you do a lot of dumb and hurtful things in relationships. Even though we are all human and say dumb things at times, we can at least be quick to apologise when that occurs. Even someone with a 'super brain' can sometimes speak before they think.



Speak Up and Sort It Out

Being reluctant to have difficult conversations at work seems to be a very human condition. Many of us get frustrated or hurt by others at work, but we refuse to speak to that person directly. Of course, there are some direct types who do so easily, but it does not always come out well.

The main reason people don't speak up is that they fear the worst – that the other person will become defensive or make their life at work difficult in some way. They may well have good reason for believing this. But the problem in the past may have been due to how the issue was raised.

Other times, people don't speak up because they think, 'What's the point? This person is incapable of change.' While this is true of some individuals, my experience has been that the great majority of people we find challenging either know they are imperfect and are open to change or they are not aware of how they are coming across and are open to change.

There are, of course, those who think they are perfect, don't care about how they are coming across, and are not open to change. But that's an article for another time!

Assuming you have not given up hope of achieving an easier relationship with this person, here are some tips for speaking up and sorting it out:

1. **Gain the right mindset.** By this I mean finding a way of thinking that helps you to approach the conversation well. It could be simply a 'Let's work it out' mindset. It will also help you to project a more helpful demeanour if you expect the best - that you will work something out that is fair for both of you. Other times, a helpful mindset is simply appreciating what the consequences are for yourself and others at your work if nothing is said. Even when you find a helpful mindset for you, you will still need a bit of courage!

2. **Choose a good time and place.** Even a very problematic person at work has better days. Alternatively, agree on a good time and place to speak. My recommendation is to get outside of the workplace, if this is possible. When you change the environment, perhaps meeting over coffee, this can often help to change the dynamics.
3. **Define the problem in a face-saving way.** Typically, problems in workplace relationships are always defined as being due to the other person. Here is where the problem labels come out – bullying, difficult, unreasonable, etc. Such finger-pointing tends to elicit only a defensive response and escalation of the problem.

It tends to be more helpful defining the problem as you both being different people, but needing to find a way to work in better with each other. Sometimes, the problem can be defined as both of you being under a lot of stress or simply having had a communication breakdown of some sort. When you can find a definition of the problem that is acceptable to each, this then avoids arguments over whose perspective is correct.

4. **Communicate clear expectations.** Great supervisors and team members actively check with others what their expectations are of them. When expectations are unrealistic, this allows for some discussion about what can be done, so both individuals are on the same page.

Here are some examples of how you might start a discussion about expectations:

“Can I let you know that what really helps me is ...”

“I really appreciate it when you ...”

“Can we talk about how we do this project, so we are all on the same page?”

“What can I do to be a bit more on track for you?”

“Is there something I can do differently to make things easier in our work together?”

“What can I do differently to be a bit more on track for you?”

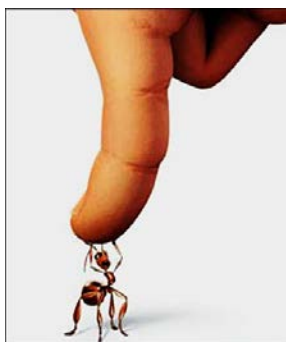
5. **Speak about behaviour rather than labels.** Speak about the behaviour that concerns you or that you would prefer in the future, rather than putting labels on the other person or their behaviour, which is more likely to elicit a defensive response. Eg. *“What I really need from you is coming and speaking to me sooner.”* Rather than saying, *“I am sick of you undermining my position.”*
6. **Watch your body language.** You do need to look and sound confident and respectful without antagonising them. When speaking about inappropriate

behaviour by them or by you, focus on a third point. Eg. The description of the problem written on your notes rather than looking at them. Direct any negative energy towards this third point, not towards each other. Have a downward inflection in your voice and gesture with your palms facing down. However, when speaking about solutions, speak with an upward inflection, palms facing upwards, and look them in the eyes.

7. **Keep the focus on the future.** There is a time to focus on the past and that is when one person needs a lot of empathy about how they are feeling. But it is all too easy to get caught in a debate over what did or did not occur. If you are going to speak about the past, at least keep the focus on behaviours rather than labelling the other person. As soon as you are able, move the focus of the conversation to the future – what you will both do in the future to help. If what is being offered seems very one-sided, then you might say ‘Can we both?’ or suggest a trade. ‘If I do ..., will you ...?’
8. **Keep a record.** With very problematic relationships and people who are reluctant to do what they say, you might want to agree that what is agreed is written down and you each have a copy. You can say it is to help you both stay on track. Another option is simply to send that person an email of what was agreed. Also keep some private records of the problem behaviours, how you responded, anything that has helped, and for how long there was improvement. Your records may come in handy if you need to gain the advice or support of your management.
9. **Follow up and reinforce any progress.** Rarely is a difficult relationship at work resolved in one conversation. Often the agreement needs to be fine-tuned or recommitted to. If there has been progress, this can at least be reinforced. If there has not been any progress, this is disappointing, but not uncommon. While it might be tempting to return to the status quo of not speaking up or escalating the situation, consider also simply arranging another meeting and going through the same process.
10. **Have a backup plan.** I often say, ‘Expect the best, but prepare for the worst.’ Hopefully, your backup plan will not be needed. But it is there, just in case. Examples of backup plans include:
 - If they get defensive, giving them a lot of empathy or finding a better time to talk
 - If they have a history of volatility, meeting with them in a public place that is still appropriate to a private conversation
 - If they are likely to accuse you of bullying, having an agreed person join you at that meeting – perhaps a friendly face from HR

- If there is no change over time, putting up with them, speaking to their manager, taking formal actions, or perhaps finding yourself another workplace!

Consider if any of the above are relevant for your situation. While it is tempting to simply do nothing apart from get increasingly hurt and frustrated, my experience has been that the great majority of strained relationships at work can be worked through. But it takes two things in particular – a willingness to do things differently as well as some courage!



Dealing With the Power-hungry At Work

Whenever I visit workplaces, it seems that the type of manager or team member who gives their co-workers the most grief are those with a very strong need for power. There is nothing wrong with having a very strong need for control, respect and achievement. In fact our high achievers tend to have a very strong psychological need for power.

But it is the choices such individuals make to meet this need that can be frustrating and hurtful to others. Perhaps they speak disrespectfully to others, insist on having things their way, or put other people and their opinions down. In effect they use their power - whether this comes from their authority, personality, verbal skills, or influence over others - to walk over the needs of others.

Assuming you are not working with a psychopath, just how can you work a little easier with such individuals? Firstly, such people tend to be highly sensitive to criticism, but they soak up positive feedback. Provided you can do so genuinely, catch them behaving in ways you like and reinforce this in some way. But it is important that what you say is not interpreted as a criticism. Thanking them for treating you like a human being that day is probably not a good idea. But you could at least respond more positively to them when they are respectful.

People with a strong need for power also tend to like their ideas and opinions being sought out. Some clever team members can even help their manager to think that a change that they want to see was actually their manager's idea.

I remember one woman I worked with who I asked to do a particular task at work. Over time, when she continued to not do what I had asked, I hopped on my high horse, reminding her who her manager was. The trouble with this approach was that she hopped on a much higher horse of high emotion and superior verbal skills. For the next several months, we had a very difficult working relationship. I would have been much better to say, "We have this problem at work, what are your ideas on what needs to be done about it."

People with a strong need for power also like control - being in charge. Perhaps I would have been better putting that team member in charge of solving that particular problem. I recently heard a story of a manager who had a resistant, uncooperative and undermining team member. This manager correctly identified this person's need for power and actually promoted him, giving him authority over a department at work. Within weeks, this person's difficult behaviour largely disappeared and, through this new experience, he gained greater compassion for his manager.

Of course, if you are going to give such people control, this is a calculated risk. You are hoping by considering their needs they will also reciprocate and not use this new power in a negative way. Where it is not an option to give greater control to those individuals, at least give them choice over how they do their work, even if it is from a limited range of options.

So what if you do have a psychopath at work and they continue using their power for evil? This is when other options need to be explored. Typically, management will lay down clear expectations about how they are to speak to people. But if change does not occur, they need to be supported in moving to a role that plays to their strengths, but minimizes their weaknesses. Sometimes this role is outside of their current workplace 😊.

Get Your Manager's Support

There is no doubt that if you are in a role where you need to address the performance of a team member with a long history of being difficult, that you need the support of your manager. In a government department, you may well need the support of your manager's manager and their manager as well, right up to the Director level. Otherwise, it is all too easy for the problem performer to go over your head or for you to feel not confident enough to take direct action.



Decisive action might be moving the problem performer to another role consistent with their strengths or one where they are out of harm's way. Or it could be negotiating their departure out of your workplace, lodging a formal grievance, commencing performance management, or outright dismissal if the circumstances warrant this.

So, how do you get the support of senior management so you can do what needs to be done? Here are three things you can do to get them on-side.

1. **Let them know that you need their support.** Yes, you shouldn't have to say this. But sometimes you have to spell out that you need their support in taking

decisive action. If you have their backup, you will feel much more confident in knowing that you are taking reasonable actions and doing what needs to be done. If they have been supportive at some time in the past, let them know how much you appreciated this and that you need their backup now.

2. **Let them know what you have done to address the problem performance.**

Of course, it will be that much easier for senior management to support you in taking decisive steps if they know everything that you (and others) have done to turn things around. Speak to previous managers of your team about what they have tried with the problem performer. Show your manager a private summary of what has been tried and whether this resulted in only short-term improvement. They may well be able to suggest you try something that has not been attempted before. But if you really have done double back-flips through hoops to turn things around, this summary will show your manager it is time for more decisive action.

3. **Put the argument for action in terms that are motivating for your manager.** Here I am asking you to consider what is motivating to the manager with whom you are speaking. Do they care about the bottom line? That's great. Create a list of what this particular employee has cost the organisation since they have been problematic.

Say there has been an estimated reduction in performance of 10%, over the past year, of your team of 10, each on \$60 000 p.a. That's a \$60 000 cost! Say two team members have left due to the stress – another \$40 000 (minimum) of lost performance in time spent recruiting and training their replacements. It can be quite impressive when you include the figures of increased sick days, time spent counselling staff, stress leave, and Workers Compensation claims. One outstanding problem performer I know has cost her government department \$850 000 over the past five years!

Perhaps your manager is motivated more by a genuine care for the well-being of your team. Here you might relate stories of how you and your staff have been affected. If they are concerned about keeping the peace, you might share your concern about how things are likely to escalate to a formal grievance if the status quo continues.

If you do not have the support of your management, this is the bigger problem and needs to be addressed first. Ultimately, if you are not able to gain the support of your immediate manager, you are faced with three options – go to their manager, put up with the status quo, or find yourself a more supportive workplace.

Sadly, too many people choose the last option first. Although this may be valid, if you are invested in your current work, I encourage you to speak up and engage the support of your management, if this is possible. Once you have their backup, it becomes so much easier to address problem behaviour in your team.

Workplace Bullying: What Individuals Can Do



If you are on the receiving end of hurtful, controlling, or offensive behaviour at work over a long period of time, it can certainly take its toll. You often don't feel very powerful or able to take action to stop the bullying. Of course, management can do their part to help, but there are also things you can do as well.

Assuming you have not already made a decision to leave the workplace, consider which of the following are a good fit for your situation.

1. **Double-check your perspective:** Yes, it may well be a case of clear-cut bullying, but there are many occasions where you may be misreading the situation. Search for a kinder perspective if one is there. For someone who is speaking disrespectfully to you, is it possible they are highly stressed or having problems at home? Perhaps they are not aware of how they are coming across?

This doesn't excuse their behaviour, of course, but it does help you to be slightly less offended. If you are feeling deliberately excluded by others at work, is this really the case? You can't be friends with everyone. I encourage you to double-check your perspective with someone who can give you an unbiased opinion as to whether you are over-reacting or misreading the situation.

2. **Find the right mindset to help you take action:** So often, we fear the worst or think the other person is incapable of change. We may be right, but you can see how such thoughts will stop you from taking constructive action. When you have the right mindset, this can help you to project the right demeanour as so often it is not what we are saying that people are reacting to, but our manner.

Which of the following would work for you? Would it be a compassionate mindset, appreciating that the other person is stressed or that you may be contributing in some way? Would it be expecting the best from a discussion you are to have, rather than fearing the worst. (With some, you might have to expect the best, but prepare for the worst, just in case). Would it be a 'let's

work it out' mindset that will help you to take action and project the right 'vibes'. Or would it be seeing the other person as a teacher, where you ask them to help you understand what is going on for them?

If you make an appointment to speak to that person, that commitment will tend to get you over the start line. Even when you have the right mindset, you will still need some courage.

3. **Start on a positive note:** You could ask if they are OK. You could say that they seem to be acting out-of-character perhaps. Often people who are coming across badly are very unhappy at work or home. They might confide in you what they are dealing with. At the very least, this approach will get them thinking about how they are coming across. You could start on a positive note by saying 'Something is not working for me' or 'I want to work things out'. You might say that you want a fresh start or speak of the common purpose you both share. You could also ask why they think things are not working. Remember it is not just what you say that counts, but how you say it - you need to not look or sound like a victim.
4. **Define the problem in a face-saving way:** You could say, for example, that you know that they are under a lot of pressure, are not behaving in a particular way intentionally, that you may be misreading the situation, or that you are both different people but need to find a way of working together. This is better than starting with a complaint, an accusation, or using the 'B' word - Bullying.

There is a time and place to use that word, but when you are trying to work things out, I would speak more about specific behaviour rather than labels they will want to dispute. Speak more about their specific behaviour and how it is coming across rather than putting a label on them. If you suggest that you both put the effort in for the future, this is face-saving as well, instead of simply insisting that it is only the other person who needs to change.

5. **Communicate specifically what you find helpful:** This is preferable to a list of what you find offensive or hurtful. Be as specific as possible. Don't just say you want to be treated respectfully. Say it helps when they keep their volume down and ask for your ideas (rather than simply telling you what to do). Of course, this is no guarantee that people will change. All I can guarantee is that if you don't communicate your expectations, you are relying on their maturity and sensitivity to work it out for themselves. Some people won't know unless you tell them.
6. **Talk about the natural consequences:** You could say, for example, 'Sometimes it comes across as you getting others to side with you and then

no-one in that group speaks with me. When this happens, it hurts and it makes it hard for me to come to work.' You will want to choose language that is appropriate for you and the situation. You could also speak about the flow-on consequences to the morale and cohesiveness of the team.

Of course, you could bring out the heavy artillery and start speaking about lodging a grievance or, if you are their manager, speak about performance management. But assure them that this is definitely not your preference. You would prefer to get things working better. You could also discuss the positive consequences if change occurs and how this would make it easier for both of you to work together.

- 7. Interrupt the usual pattern:** Here we are resorting to doing something, anything, to disrupt the usual pattern and to notice what helps. It could be changing your behaviour in some way with the hope that a change by you will also lead to a change by them. You might also consider whether it would be helpful for someone else who they respect to speak with them.

I have known some people who have made the decision to leave and figure they have nothing to lose, to strongly challenge the person who is behaving disrespectfully. Sometimes this is not done in the most civil way. Half the time, it has helped with the other person apologising and changing as up until then, they were not aware how their behaviour was coming across. The other half of the time, such a challenge only made things worse.

You might feel more comfortable experimenting with safer changes to the usual pattern - what you say to them, when it is said, where you speak to them, how you say it, or who speaks to them or is present in support.

- 8. Document your interactions:** It is a bit sad when it gets to this point, but sometimes you need to privately write down what occurred and when, what you did in response, and what you have done to get the relationship working better. If there is an agreement reached about actions they or you will both take, consider putting it in writing with both of you keeping a copy.

If you need to take formal actions such as speaking to your or their manager, lodging a grievance, or commencing performance management, this documentation will help you to be taken more seriously and also provide some record for the future. I think it is tragic when I hear stories of a new team leader dealing with a problem team member who has a very long history of being challenging. When their personnel file is looked at, there are no records the new manager can look at to help decide a course of action.

9. **Seek help:** Check out your workplace's policy on bullying, if one exists, which may well be able to give you some guidance. Seek also the help of your or their manager, your workplace harassment officer, or perhaps someone from Human Resources or your Employee Assistance Program. None of us are made to suffer alone. Even if they cannot change the situation, they can at least support you while you are dealing with it.

Keep in mind that there are many managers who fear difficult conversations just as much as anyone else. And not everyone who works in HR or your Employee Assistance Program is confident in giving good advice in this area. So search out someone who inspires confidence. If you have a manager who is reluctant to take action, your documentation may help here. Otherwise, you may need to speak to their manager.

10. **Take formal actions:** Nobody likes to lodge a grievance or commence performance management as these are very stressful for everyone going through the process. But there is a time and place for such actions. But I find that workplaces are reluctant to go down this path, even with very problematic employees or managers, and as a result these individuals cause tremendous costs and disruption. At the other extreme are individuals who choose this option too quickly, often having taken no other action apart from stewing on the perceived slights and letting things build until they become major issues.

On the brighter side, about 60% of people who are performance managed will leave within six months of their own accord. And when management demonstrate a willingness to investigate and take action in relation to complaints of bullying, other staff know that such behaviour will not be tolerated and that problems at work will be addressed.

Of course we know that taking action can be very hard. Consider the above, discuss them with a support person, and decide which of the above may be of help. We all deserve to feel good going to work and respected when we are there.

Being Less Affected by Difficult People

The stress of dealing with difficult people at work can certainly take its toll and come out in different ways – health problems, reduced morale, dreading to go to work, to name a few.

It doesn't have to be this way. There are ways to be less affected by the challenging behaviour of others.



Here are five ways you can do so.

1. **Don't take it personally.** This sounds easier said than done. But people who are less affected tend to explain the difficult behaviour of others as being due more to external factors rather than reading it as a personal attack. Resilient individuals tend to think the 'difficult' person is under a lot of stress at work or perhaps going through personal problems.

When we explain difficult behaviour with colleagues as due to the situation or external factors, it becomes far easier to take it less personally. If you know that your manager is going through a marriage breakdown or suffering health problems, for example, you will find it easier to not interpret their behaviour as a personal attack.

2. **Assume good intentions.** So often, we assume the worst – that someone is deliberately being disrespectful, undermining our position, or resisting change. Yes, sometimes this is the case. But my experience is that, on the great majority of occasions people have good intentions and we are misreading their behaviour.

I remember one occasion when I felt that one of my staff was bossing me around, telling me how to do my job. When I spoke with someone who knew us both, they suggested this person was simply trying to get the job done. This was certainly a far more accurate and helpful way of seeing things, helping me to feel much better about working with this person.

3. **Cut them some slack.** It is not written down anywhere that everyone should treat us respectfully 100% of the time. Although that would be nice, we are all human, we all tread on each other's toes at times, and we are all allowed to have a bad day, though when it comes to having a bad year, that is harder to tolerate. Our ability to show compassion, to empathise, to see the situation from their perspective, is one of the key factors that help us to moderate our own behaviour.

What would the other person be saying? How would they be seeing things? Would they be saying that you are contributing in some way? If you can acknowledge your own contribution, even if this is only 10%, it becomes easier to view the other person with more compassion.

4. **Decide to get over it.** Some people have a wonderful ability to simply decide to get over upsets and focus their attention elsewhere. This is a wonderful strength. Others of us need to find a balance between venting how we are feeling with our support people, but also doing and thinking things over time

which help us to let go of unwanted emotions. Remember, it is not time that heals. It is what we do and think over time that helps us to get over upsets.

Certainly, assuming good intentions or viewing the other person with compassion will help. As will reminding yourself that you want to let go of those feelings and focusing your attention elsewhere. Ultimately, if we hold onto hurt, this only continues our suffering.

You do not necessarily need to forget or excuse someone's behaviour, but you do need to find a way of moving forward if you are going to do your part in having an easier relationship in the future.

5. **Take action.** Resilient individuals know there is a time to cut someone some slack, but there is also a time for action. Such actions might include returning meanness with kindness, perhaps asking if they are OK. Or speaking up, letting them know what you would prefer in the future. Even very difficult people have times when they are less difficult, so you may be able to use these times to reinforce the behaviours you would like to see more of.

Of course, there is no guarantee if you are kind to these people or let them know what you need, that they will respond positively. We have to be realistic. Difficult behaviours at work are not always resolved with a single step or conversation. Sometimes further actions are needed. The only guarantee is that no change by either of you guarantees more of the same.

Review the list above and ask yourself, which do you need to practise more?

The Next Step

If you would like further assistance, there are a number of options open to you:

1. Subscribe to my [free fortnightly newsletter](#)
2. Check out my range of [products and resources](#)
3. Look into my [coaching programs](#)
4. Book me to run a [customised program for your workplace](#) (details following).
5. Stay connected through [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [LinkedIn](#)

You can also contact me through 0406 402 800,
ken@positivepeoplesolutions.com.au or www.positivepeoplesolutions.com.au

About the Author

Ken Warren BA, M Soc Sc, CSP is an expert on People Skills and Human Behaviour.

With his presentations and coaching programs, Ken has shown thousands how to ...

- Improve Team Performance
- Work Well with Difficult Customers
- Enhance Staff Resiliency and Well-being

Ken is no ivory-tower theorist. He draws on 28 years hands-on experience ...

- Managing his own teams in the government, community and business sectors
- Mentoring team leaders and professionals in helping roles
- Counselling couples and co-workers in conflict, team members over their performance, and individuals with aggressive behaviour



Ken has achieved recognition as a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) - a certification achieved by less than 10% of professional speakers.

It is your guarantee of professionalism, eloquence, and expertise.

Ken speaks to audiences, large and small, throughout Australia. You will enjoy his stories, his interactive style, and find his ideas easy to put into practice.

Ken's most popular speaking topics

Team Performance Programs



1. Grow Your Team – Working with Strengths
2. Difficult Co-workers Made Easy
3. Attract and Retain Quality Staff
4. Customer Service Excellence: What Every Workplace Needs to Know
5. Advanced Negotiating Skills: Getting to Agreement
6. Workplace Bullying: What You Can Do

Staff Resiliency and Well-being Programs



1. Enhance Your Resiliency and Improve Your Well-being
2. Work-life Balance: What You Need to Know Before You Tip Over the Edge
3. Get on Top of Your Workload and Free Up Your Time
4. 'You Want Me to Do What?' Coping Well with Workplace Change

Difficult Customers and Clients Programs



1. De-fusing Explosive Situations: Managing Aggressive Behaviour
2. Engaging and Motivating Difficult Clients
3. Becoming Solution-focused in Brief Therapy
4. Bullying in Schools - Best Practice Prevention and Intervention
5. Adjusting and Moving Forward: Working with Normal and Complicated Grief

Further details can be gained by contacting Ken through 0406 402 800, ken@positivepeoplesolutions.com.au or www.positivepeoplesolutions.com.au

