

This fall, BRITE Training unveiled the next chapter in our customer service training curriculum, *Dealing with Difficult Patient Situations*. Having the skills and knowledge to deal with our patients when they become upset, uncooperative, or even abusive is critical to our success as healthcare service professionals. But what if the person displaying the above traits is not a patient, but a co-worker? Facing a negative incident with a co-worker can be even more stressful than dealing with a difficult patient situation, because the tension of an unresolved co-worker situation can linger for weeks, months, if not longer.

The Negative Effect of Stress in the Workplace

A study that measured stress in the workplace discovered that 80% of the people surveyed said that a single co-worker contributed *significant* stress to their workday. The survey concluded that this stress isn't just dangerous to employees, it also has a negative impact on the entire organization. Stress in the workplace can lead to poor work performance, absenteeism, and health problems. Additionally, sometimes outstanding employees who see no solution to a toxic co-worker look to escape by finding a new job. In today's competitive healthcare environment where finding and retaining talented people is increasingly difficult, this is a loss few organizations can afford. That's why having strategies for how to deal with difficult co-worker situations is imperative.

Steps for Dealing with Issues in the Workplace

Negative issues with co-workers will not get better if left unaddressed. In fact, ignoring negative or combative situations in the workplace can actually make the situation worse. When difficult workplace issues are allowed to continue on for an extended period of time, a person can

eventually become so resentful towards their co-worker that they may end up dealing with the situation in a way that is irrational and highly ineffective. That's why it is far better to face the issues and address them with your co-worker when you can maintain some objectivity and emotional control.

If you are preparing to approach an upset, uncooperative or abusive co-worker, there are some methods that are more productive than others. Most would agree that putting an anonymous note in a co-worker's mailbox or placing a can of deodorant on a hygienically-challenged co-worker's desk are not productive options. So, what are some productive options? Below are three steps that you should always use when addressing any type of difficult co-worker situation.

STEP 1: Start Out By Examining Yourself

In any situation that involves interpersonal conflict, it helps to begin by asking yourself a few tough questions. First, are you sure that the other person is really the problem and that you're not overreacting? Have you been told before by friends that you tend to take everything personally? Is it easy for people to "push your buttons"? Are you contributing to the problem in anyway by engaging in behaviors that most people would consider difficult (e.g., interrupting often or rarely listening)? These questions require a significant amount of self-analysis, but the results are well worth the effort. Always start here first to determine if the object of your attention should be your co-worker or yourself.

STEP 2: Privately Confront the Issue

If you are confident that you are not the problem, it is time to approach the person with whom you are having the problem for a *private* discussion. Be

pleasant and agreeable as you talk to the other person. They might not be aware of the impact of their words or actions on you. They may even be learning about their impact on you for the first time. Worst case scenario? They may know their impact on you and deny it or try to explain it away. During the discussion, at the very least attempt to reach agreement about positive and supportive actions going forward.

STEP 3: Stay Professional

In the situations where a co-worker is unwilling to have a productive conversation with you, it is imperative that you do not become part of the problem by acting unprofessionally as well. Think of each professional situation you are faced with as a testament to the kind of employee you are and will continue to be. If a co-worker decides to act unprofessionally by yelling at you, it may be tempting to yell back and join right in on the screaming festivities. However, if you can maintain a composed demeanor and calmly redirect the conversation back to a productive tone, you will have successfully increased your level of respect among those around you while displaying your ability to manage difficult people and situations.

Taking the initiative to deal with a difficult co-worker situation instead of ignoring it can help to keep your professional life rewarding and happy. But always remember that in the end, the only person that has complete power over your personal and professional happiness is you. ♦

STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

Similar to dealing with difficult patient situations, it helps to have a strategy when dealing with difficult co-worker situations. Below are some common difficult co-worker personality types and effective ways to deal with them.

Types of Difficult Co-Workers	Effective Strategy
<p>The Bully: Unlike playground bullies who often resort to using their fists, workplace bullies generally use words and actions to intimidate their victims. These people are the ones that are attacking, accusing, intimidating, and confrontational. They think they are always right and get irritated or angry when they are met with resistance.</p>	<p>To effectively deal with the Bully, it is important to stand up for yourself without fighting. Confront the Bully in a professional manner, but only if your physical safety isn't threatened. Don't sink to the Bully's level. Stay as calm as possible. Don't yell or threaten. Often the Bully is looking for this type of confrontation and it will encourage them to come back for more. Don't cry or show weakness either. That's usually what the Bully is after in the first place. Throughout any interaction with the Bully, maintain eye-contact and be ready to be friendly. It is also helpful to have the Bully sit down if you or others are sitting down; this helps to equalize the aspect of physical dominance.</p>
<p>The Slacker: They are the ones that would rather text message their friends or update their Facebook status instead of helping you perform the necessary duties around the practice. They are extremely talented at avoiding work and/or allowing others to do their work for them. Even worse, many Slackers have no problem taking credit for the work that they didn't do, or that others have done for them.</p>	<p>There are 3 ways to deal with the Slacker. 1) Ignore the situation, 2) Pick up the co-worker's slack, or 3) Confront the issue head on. Unfortunately, options 1 and 2 only succeed in building up resentment and hostility towards the Slacker, which leaves option 3 as the clear best solution. As in any situation that involves a co-worker's performance, speak with the Slacker privately and politely. This is not the time to point fingers and shout, but to have a calm conversation about the issue at hand. Be sure to talk to the Slacker about specific instances where they did not complete their job duties, and how it impacted the team. Listen to the Slacker's side of the story—it may be possible that they were unaware of how their behavior is affecting the team. If the Slacker pushes back or doesn't admit any wrong doing, it may be that the only alternative is to advise their supervisor or manager.</p>
<p>The Complainer: They are one of the most difficult personalities to deal with, and unfortunately one of the most common as well. If the Complainer is not complaining about their health, family, or significant other, they're complaining about their job, the patients in their practice, or their manager. The Complainer can find fault in anything, and feels that <i>someone</i> should do something to fix their issues—as long as that person is not them.</p>	<p>Generally, the Complainer isn't looking for advice or practical strategies, they're just looking for someone to listen to them complain and/or to share in their negative views. Misery loves company, right? The best way to deal with the Complainer is to stay positive and attempt to train the Complainer to begin thinking of solutions instead of the problem. An example of this could be to ask the Complainer, "What do you think <i>you</i> can do to improve the situation?" If done correctly, usually one of two things will happen: 1) the Complainer will either follow suit and begin to start thinking of solutions instead of the problem, or 2) the Complainer will stop complaining to you and find someone else who is more willing to join in on their pity party.</p>
<p>The Know-It-All: This is a person who has to be "right" about everything, loves having the last word, and will argue a point until the end of time, if necessary. Most Know-It-Alls feel a sense of fulfillment when another person backs down in favor of their position—even if they only managed to "win" the argument by frustrating the other person. Know-It-Alls have no problem sharing their opinion with you (even if you didn't ask to hear it) and they will gladly tell you how wrong you are if you happen to disagree with them.</p>	<p>The best medicine against the Know-It-All is to not get emotionally involved in arguments and debates. A Know-It-All's favorite words to hear are "you're right" so to stop them from engaging in know-it-all behavior with you, don't use those words with them. When the Know-It-All offers you unsolicited advice, a simple "I'll have to think about that" is an effective way to take the wind out a Know-It-All's sail because it's neither an affirmation or a rebuke of what they have to say. By refusing to take the Know-It-All's bait, you are denying the Know-It-All from the two things that they truly enjoy most: an argument and proving that they're right. Since Know-It-Alls are so "smart" they'll likely take their advice to someone else who is more willing to play their game if you're unwilling to do so.</p>

"Speak when you're angry, and you'll make the best speech you'll ever regret."

- Dr. Laurence J. Peter