

“The Dynamics of Difficult People,” FCAP Managers Report

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We all encounter difficult people in our lives. This is particularly true for property managers. In dealing with difficult people, and in order to maintain your sanity, finding an effective way of dealing with difficult people is critical.

Effectiveness in dealing with difficult people begins with understanding the dynamics of the person and situation. It is helpful to understand the difficult person by examining what type of difficult behavior are they exhibiting and what are their motives. In understanding the dynamics of the situation, you are deciding what tools and techniques you can use to assist in resolving the situation.

The first consideration is identifying the type of behavior being exhibited. This consideration focuses on two aspects of behavior: whether the person is at their core a difficult person or is being difficult due to the situation itself and how they are exhibiting their difficult behavior. The next step that is important is to identify as best you can, the person's motives which can be trickier than it seems.

Once you have an understanding of the dynamics of the person, you then turn to the dynamics of the situation. This is where you employ your tools and techniques that can help resolve the issue you are experiencing with the difficult person.

The typical behaviors of difficult people generally fall into one of several categories based on common characteristics. Some of the more common categories are:

- Bullies – people that tend toward angry outbursts, that must be right at all time, that backstab and spread rumors.
- Malcontents – people who complain about everything, are never satisfied

and are negative about everything.

- Know it Alls - people who are pompous, condescending and generally believe (whether true or not) that they know more than you.

After identifying the behaviors associated with certain categories of difficult behavior, it is important to try and understand the motive of the person which involves asking the person questions and communicating with them. It is important for you to control the communication by making sure the communication is on your terms. Setting an appointment with the person is one of the best ways to make sure you are fully prepared to address the issue.

Motives can be obvious and easy to understand but they can also be complex. The key is to identify, through discussion, the motive of the person. Asking the following questions can help expose motive and help unpeel any complex motivational issues:

- What is going on that led to X?
- What would getting X do for you and why is that important?
- If you are not able to get X, what else might satisfy you?

Identifying behavior categories and motives allows you to more effectively disarm the difficult person and to negotiate with them. The following are a few strategies that can be helpful in disarming a difficult person based on the type of behavior the person is exhibiting:

- Bullies - stand up to the bully and confront the person on your terms in a professional but direct manner.
- Malcontents - refuse to feed into their complaints or allow yourself to be a sounding board. Instead, steer the conversation toward the person's desired outcome and encourage the person to find solutions.
- Know it Alls - counter the person's understanding with information but try to present the information in a way that allows the person to save face.

Once you have a plan for disarming the difficult person, the task becomes resolving the issue. Active listening is essential to understanding the issues, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement and preparing yourself for your response. Asking questions and making statements that make the person defensive should be avoided as should statements that minimize the person's feelings.

After allowing the difficult person an opportunity to express themselves and their objective, you can begin the process of negotiating with the person in order to resolve the conflict. The following techniques can help in the negotiation process:

- Focus on the future. Remind the difficult person that the past cannot be changed but they can be part of coming up with a solution for how things should be in the future

- Use silence. Use silence during points of unreasonableness and after making offers in order to encourage the other person to reflect on what was said.
- Use doubt. Use a question like “is it possible?”
- Use the facts if the difficult person was not aware of all relevant facts.
- Role reversal. Help the difficult person see the situation from your point of view.
- Point out possible inconsistencies by gently saying something like “I am confused, I thought I understood you to say X.”
- Point out constraints.

Once you feel that a resolution has been reached, it is important to make sure that you restate the resolution so that you both are clear on what will happen next.