

Dealing with Difficult People at Work



BARAK LOVED HIS JOB. CLIMBING INTO THE cockpit of the plane brought him joy even after five years of flying commercial airliners. He couldn't imagine giving up the work. But days like this sometimes made him wonder:

A snowstorm up the Eastern seaboard had flights backed up all over the country. This meant passengers were sure to be cranky as they watched the mounting number of delays and cancellations on the departures boards in the airport. While he could hide behind the cabin door of the cockpit once the flight took off, he knew the flight attendants would be catching flak all day. He also knew he'd likely have to step in once or twice to help them with particularly unruly passengers.

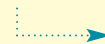
Worse than that, he was flying with Tom today. Never on the best of terms, Barak grated Tom's nerves in several ways. First, Barak got to "first seat" faster than Tom; too fast in Tom's opinion. Tom saw it as a "race thing," and the latent bias in Tom was always just beneath the surface. Tom was also an agnostic and loved to bait Barak's newfound Christian faith. Often entire flights would be consumed with badgering questions

about why God lets bad things happen, or how nutty some televangelist's latest remarks sounded to Tom. Try as he might, Barak always felt angry during these diatribes, and he sometimes resorted to his pre-Christian vocabulary in answering Tom.

Then there was the union thing. Barak was well-pleased with his job and salary and didn't feel particularly interested in union activities. Other pilots, notably Tom, saw this as betrayal and made it clear they expected Barak to back whatever move the union made in its labor negotiations. Barak, on the other hand, wasn't so sure taking a hard line in the negotiations made sense, but he'd long since learned to keep that to himself.

Sitting on the tarmac waiting for his plane to clear, Barak watched other pilots at other airlines backing their planes out of the gates. He wondered if he shouldn't put in with one of those companies. After all, he thought to himself, maybe it's better over there.

Should he switch?



Scripture Passages

II Corinthians 5:20
Luke 17:11-19
Matthew 26:33-75

Matthew 9:10-12
Matthew 12:8-13
Matthew 6:12

Study

Even in the category of feel-good careers, difficult people can make life miserable. For example, more missionaries leave the mission field because of personality conflicts with coworkers than for any other reason. Human resource managers spend huge blocks of their time managing conflicts between workers, workers and managers, and even between workers and customers.

What about Christians? How are we supposed to respond to difficult people in our lives?

Before we begin that discussion, though, let's first turn the question on its ear. Have you ever asked yourself if you are the difficult person in your workplace?

Describe some ways Christians can make themselves obnoxious or difficult to work with?

For a list of common errors Christians make in the workplace, we invite you to visit our website at www.marketplacenet.com.

Now that we've dealt with the possibility we're the difficult person, let's examine ways to handle situations where it's somebody else that's at fault.

List some of the problems you have with people in your job.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Now, to the left of each one you listed above (in the margin), use one or two words to categorize the nature of that problem. Here are some words you might use in categorizing them: ingratitude, insensitivity, back-stabbing, criticism (includes gossip), stealing credit, lack of support, unreasonable demands, unethical demands, bias/glass ceiling, poor social skills/habits, etc.

Key Point One

In II Corinthians 5:20 the Apostle Paul reminds us we are all ambassadors for Christ. This should add an extra layer of responsibility to our Christian response to difficult people. How we respond speaks volumes about our faith and affects how others view Christ. Each difficult situation presents us with an opportunity to reflect the redemption we've experienced.

But quoting Scripture passages about responsibility won't work by itself. Examining Scripture for evidence of how other Christians dealt with difficult people is useful. Since "misery loves company," let's look for examples of times when Jesus faced the same kinds of issues we've listed.

Describe Jesus' response to each of the events below:

Ingratitude — Healing the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19)

Insensitivity — Disciples falling asleep (Matthew 26:36-45)

Backstabbing — Judas's betrayal (Matthew 26:47-50)

Lack of support or loyalty — Peter's denial (Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75)

Criticism — Eating with sinners; healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 9:10-12; 12:8-13)

In the space provided below, write out any principles you see from these incidents that might teach you how to respond to similar difficult people issues at work? What do you think enabled Jesus to withstand the criticism, disloyalty, and even betrayal of those closest to Him?

Key Point Two

Over and over again in Scripture, Jesus demonstrated an ability to focus on the primary purpose of His incarnation: the redemption of the lost. Because of this he was able to look beyond the pettiness, frustration and hurt because His focus was on pleasing God and not humans. How might the idea of seeing difficult people as a chance to please God help you deal with difficult people?

What truths in Matthew 6:12 might guide you in dealing with the troublemakers in your life?

Do you see others as objects of service rather than sources of annoyance? How might that affect your relationship with them?

For further consideration

Christians can measure their spiritual maturity in dealing with difficult people by this scale:

- Stage One: Seeing difficult people as barriers, annoyances, persecutors, etc.
- Stage Two: Tolerating difficult people.
- Stage Three: Forgiving difficult people because we're forgiven ourselves.
- Stage Four: Serving difficult people out of gratitude for what God's done for us.

We must move the bar of service from tolerance and forgiveness to service and gratitude.

The verses below are placed here as continuing reflections on this study. While groups are certainly invited to use them in their sessions, we hope that you will go home and read these passages as an exercise in encountering your Bible in private.

Matthew 6:12 and Matthew 18:21-35

What new thought or insight has the Holy Spirit laid on your heart during this exercise? Or maybe even a new commitment He is calling you to as a result of the study? We encourage you to write down what you've learned, and revisit that insight or commitment in your private time with God.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Remembering that Jesus cautions us to deal with the log in our own eyes before the speck in others, the first and most important step in dealing with difficult people is to assess our own behaviors. We must perpetually ask ourselves if we are the difficult person in a situation or situations.
- Because we represent Christ in our respective workplaces, our behavior affects not only the difficult people we're dealing with, but also everyone who's watching the relationship as well. This means the issues that arise from encounters with difficult people are actually opportunities to serve them and others. It's an extra layer of responsibility for a follower of Christ.
- We'll never be able to satisfy everyone, so trying to find ways to please people will only frustrate us, and probably them as well. Instead, we need to have as our primary objective pleasing God. Each difficult situation, each difficult person, is an opportunity to please God with our response, even if it doesn't have a happy outcome or doesn't satisfy us or the person we've encountered.
- Pleasing God in these circumstances will often result in making us more patient with people.
- Remembering the debt God has released us from should help us to be patient, and even forgiving, to the difficult people we encounter.
- We were all once difficult people to God. Some of us are *still*.