

Staying Steady with Critical Controllers

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Teresa told me, “I would love to read some of your work on dealing with work environments that are stressful and perhaps even emotionally abusive. What are some strategies to deal with a co-worker that is all about power and control and getting even when you dare to identify areas that may need improving?”

Teresa is not alone. In a presentation by lawyer and mediator, Janis Magnuson, called *Handling High Conflict People* she cited research from a book called ***High Conflict People in Legal Disputes*** by Bill Eddy. Here are some interesting facts: twenty-five million North Americans have a mental disorder of which most of them are unaware they have. Another thirty million people have traits or tendencies. What can we conclude? That between seventy to eighty percent of people can generally handle themselves in a reasonable manner. For the rest some strategies would be helpful.

Even those of us in the seventy to eighty percentiles when under extreme distress behave unreasonably. Usually our co-workers understand those temporary circumstances and eventually we bounce back. However, we need some strategies for the remaining who typically act emotionally abusive and controlling. Their thinking is probably extreme, rigid with all or nothing (black or white) positions and an excessive dose of finger pointing. What can you do? Based on Magnuson’s recommendations you could:

- Remember their behaviour is unconscious.
- Talk to yourself internally saying, “This is about him/her.”
- Detach yourself emotionally, if you can.
- Use empathy. Listen without getting hooked.
- Acknowledge strengths and constructive behaviour when possible.
- Calmly educate about the consequences of his/her thinking and actions.
- Speak and act as respectfully as possible.

Some of the articles on my website may help you take action with some of the above suggestions. Consider reading “Thanks for Listening”, “Talk and Listen Quiz”, “Calming Criticism”, “Secrets of Recognition” and “People Boosting”.

Shouldn’t these troubled people be sent to courses on how to change themselves and behaviours? It wouldn’t work. Their co-workers are the one’s

who are aware of the challenge and therefore are the ones capable of change. Here are some books that may be helpful:

- ***How to Deal with Difficult People*** by Ursula Markham
- ***Dealing with People You Can't Stand: How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst*** by Dr. Rick Brinkman & Dr. Rick Kirschner
- ***Tongue Fu! How to Deflect, Disarm, and Defuse Any Verbal Conflict*** by Sam Horn

One final thought. Meredith Brooks once said, *I have a lot of survivor instincts, and I know when to quit.* If the situation continues and you are experiencing stress to the point of emotional, mental or physical deterioration, look after yourself. You can go to upper management with the idea that you deserve better and request the situation be addressed. If that fails you could request a transfer. If nothing improves, be prepared to find alternative work in a supportive work environment. You owe it to yourself and those who love you.

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