

Let's Talk Strategy: Managing Difficult Clients and Coworkers

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Goal/Objectives: Practical, collaborative, and interactive strategizing to handle difficult clients and coworkers

“Shared challenges mean shared wisdom.”

Part 1: Let's talk!!!

Participants grouped together to describe challenging situations with difficult clients and/or coworkers, answering the following types of questions:

- What happened in your scenario?
- What made the client or coworker “difficult” in this instance?
- How did their behavior impact you or your work?
- What strategies did you try to address the situation?
- What outcome resulted?
- In hindsight, what might you have done differently?
- What feedback or ideas do you hope to receive from the group?

Common challenges discussed amongst attendees included various clients who haven't paid, as well as those who continuously delay timelines on projects. Possible solutions discussed amongst attendees to manage non-payment by clients include billing in segments, requesting 50% upon project launch and 50% upon completion, and in some cases, reaching out to an attorney. Repeated delays to project timelines can be countered by setting deadlines for key milestones in the assignment.

Note that other common types of difficult clients and/or coworkers may include micromanagers, ghosts, perpetual critics, interrupters, slackers, know-it-alls, and gossipers.

Part 2: Additional Tips, Tricks, and Tools

Effective communication

- Schedule a face-to-face conversation, if needed.
- Remain calm and professional, while practicing active listening and minding your body language.
- Recap decisions in writing and save email correspondence on the topic.

Boundary setting

- Use direct, respectful language
- Define project scope and acceptable communication channels
- Renegotiate if requests exceed agreed limits
- Schedule regular check-ins to track progress and clarify evolving needs

Conflict management

- Talk the situation out and debrief, clarifying what happened, why it happened, what you can do about it, etc.
- Choose private, neutral settings for difficult conversations
- Deflate and deescalate before working together to come to a solution.
- Document repeated incidents if patterns persist

Maintaining professionalism

- Don't match frustration or hostility
- Focus on solutions and facts, not emotions
- Address issues directly: "I see you're upset. Let's review the project objectives together."
- Know when to escalate, e.g. reference contracts or involve management

Sample language phrases

- "Let's revisit our timeline based on your feedback."
- "It sounds like you're frustrated. Help me understand where things went off track."
- "Can we align on priorities for the next deliverable?"

Part 3: Recap and key takeaways

- Set expectations early.
- Document everything.
- Communicate calmly.
- Listen actively.
- Maintain firm boundaries.
- Address issues directly.
- Pick your battles.