



# print edition

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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

## Dealing with difficult people is an art

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Dear Susan,

I'm having a problem being heard in team meetings because another manager talks over me or belittles my contributions. If I present an idea, he forcefully presents the opposite one, sometimes ridiculing me or my idea while doing so. I have been ignoring this for months now. But I need the board's support for a project soon and need to do something to get my point across.

-- Casper

Dear Casper,

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You are wise not to react in anger. But why and how long you desist is crucial.

If you're waiting for the right moment to intervene, and the right message to convey, then you're on the right track. Simply doing nothing because you hope the problem will vanish on its own is conflict avoidance.

According to William Ury, director of the Harvard Negotiation Project, this tack will escalate the hostility because it looks like acquiescence when it's nothing of the sort.

Despite your forbearance, you're probably bristling with anger, and, next time, it may take just a small nudge for you to crack and attack - no holds barred.

In his book *The Power of the Positive No*, Prof. Ury quotes Martin Luther King Jr.: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

I agree. Even if you're the epitome of self-control, you're not alone in this picture. Allowing mockery to hold sway is pernicious to the business culture and corrosive to the spirit, no matter who is the target.

Still, dealing with difficult people is an art, and what will help is to identify your goals. By separating your emotions from your larger purpose, you can face down this bully with greater panache.

To do that, you need to prepare yourself well before the next meeting in two ways: by rehearsing your response and by recruiting some allies.

Then, when your colleague disses you or derides your ideas, you can breathe deeply several times to gain your composure, speak up and say: "Whoa, hold on. That's not my point at all. My project is about ... which will benefit us all in the following ways ..."

"Building a coalition," as Prof. Ury calls it, gives you the confidence to express this point of view knowing that there are others at the table who want you to be heard.

If the bully continues to put you down, Prof. Ury suggests making eye contact with him or her and saying firmly: "Don't do that" or "That is not allowed."

Then, quietly and deliberately, say something like: "Please stop. I can take criticism, but this kind of talk doesn't work for me. Let's discuss this in a professional way."

You can face down the objectionable behaviour while holding to your goals - whether it's advancing your project, or promoting more civil meetings.

And, if you resist attacking the bully, your relationship with that person won't deteriorate.

Learning how to navigate tricky negotiations while preserving her business relationships is the reason why Alida Gualtieri, general counsel at Montreal pharmaceutical company Draxis Health Inc., took the Harvard Negotiation Project's three-day seminar in Boston in June.

Along with 200 people from across the world, she learned and practised a mantra that went something like this: What does he want? What does he need? What do I want? What do I need? What are my fallback positions? What are our possible trades?

As a lawyer, Ms. Gualtieri admitted that she used to "go for the jugular. I wanted to win," she said, then added: "But at what cost?"

It's not the big contracts or signed agreements but the conversations you have with your colleagues everyday that really mark you, she says.

"In a company, you can't have the bodies fall where they fall. They're going to be your clients and your colleagues for a very long time," she says.

At least that's what you hope. Negotiating well means you get what you want with no, or at least a lot less, blood on the floor.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*, to be published in February.*

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