

# Leadership

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## Who Do You Think You Are? Creative Ways of Dealing with Challenging Employees

**Y**ou may be the most competent leader in your organization, but people will always be challenging your authority.

It's normal for individuals to see the world in different ways. As a leader, you want to respect and validate the perspectives of those who are affected by your decisions. The way you handle those challenges makes all the difference.

Sometimes the employee that seems the most difficult can offer you and your organization a hidden benefit, as long as you are willing to see it.

Before confronting such an employee, prepare yourself properly. Here are some questions you can ask yourself.

### Note

In this article, I use the male gender when describing people. When the English language comes out with a unisexual pronoun, I will use that.

1. What might be his context or background?
2. What may be his subtext or hidden agenda?
3. What does he *not* want to have happen? What does he fear might happen as a result of submitting to your authority?
4. What verbal things can you do to win him over during the discussion?

5. What non-verbal things can you do to win him over?
6. What kind of logistical setup will help create a win-win atmosphere for your talk?
7. What aspects does he represent in you? This question is psychological. For example, leaders who are rebellious in nature can get particularly annoyed by rebellious employees. Similarly, people who are very judgmental often fear judgmental employees. When you soften that aspect in yourself, others will not bother you quite so much. An old African proverb says, "If there is no enemy within, the enemy without can do us no harm."

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### Reasons People May Resist You

What can make an employee resist your leadership? These points have nothing to do with you or your message, so it is best not to take these reasons personally.

#### 1. Inertia

People have a natural inertia when it comes to doing something active or new. You may be challenging people to

change. We all resist change to some degree. Show your compassion and understanding for that resistance by disclosing your own relationship with change.

#### 2. Powerlessness

You are the one in control. Many people naturally resist when they cannot have full control of the situation. Find ways of allowing your employees to have some control over their work.

#### 3. Competitiveness

With powerlessness comes competitiveness. Some people start comparing themselves with you. They may consciously or unconsciously want to undermine you to build themselves up. By finding ways to recognize the unique contributions each person makes to the organization, you can curb this behaviour.

#### 4. Anonymity

You are the one getting more of the attention as leader; he is just one of the workers. Some people will undermine you to get attention. Again, find ways to invite recognition for employee accomplishments.

#### 5. Fear of Being Manipulated

Some leaders give others a bad name. They use manipulative devices such as pandering to people's insecurities. When an employee discovers that a leader or manager has manipulated him, he may become resistant to all people in authority.

By acting with honesty and integrity, you will gain his trust, over time.

### Re-Channelling Challenging Behaviours

To follow are some specific types of behaviours that arise in work groups. As a leader, you can help balance these behaviours so they contribute rather than detract from the group project.

#### The Rambler

This person becomes loquacious on every subject except the one being discussed. He loves to tangent. Because precious time is lost, the rest of the group can become irritated.

- **How to Handle**  
Refocus attention on the subject at hand. He'll have to stop for breath. When he does, get him back on track by restating the relevant points; then move on. Say, "I'm losing the point you are trying to make. Can you state it in 20 words or less?" As a last resort, glance meaningfully at your watch.

#### The Clown

He loves to make people laugh by telling jokes, being playful, and making wisecracks. This can be a welcome relief from serious topics, but it can get out of hand.

- **How to Handle**  
Enjoy it for a while, then say, "Now let's get down to business."

#### The Mule

He couldn't be budged with a bulldozer. He hasn't seen your point or he won't see any other point of view but his own.

- **How to Handle**  
Ask the group to comment on his view. Tell him you'll be glad to discuss his views later; ask him to accept the group viewpoint for the moment.

#### Highly Argumentative

These combative types may simply take pleasure in heckling, or they may be temporarily beset with personal problems. A clash between two such members can divide your whole group.

- **How to Handle**  
Draw attention back to the objective

of the group discussion. Emphasize the points on which the two agree. Cut across the argument with a direct question on the topic or bring a dependable member of the group into the discussion. If necessary, frankly ask that personalities be omitted.

#### Poor Loser

He doesn't like it when his ideas are not supported. He will not admit when he is wrong.

- **How to Handle**  
Indicate that you understand his objections. Emphasize the strong points in his arguments first, then tell him in a friendly manner why his ideas won't fly. If he continues to sulk, try to get him interested in something else by asking his opinion.

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#### The Dampener

This person points out the worst in every idea put forward.

- **How to Handle**  
Ask him to suggest an alternative. Indicate you understand his objections, then restate the good points of the suggestion that has been offered. Ask other members of the group to comment on his remarks.

#### Inarticulate

This person needs help. He's getting the idea but finds difficulty in expressing his thoughts.

- **How to Handle**  
Repeat his ideas in more specific language, then check in to see if you got it right. Keep going until he feels satisfied that you understand.

#### Silent Sam

Silent Sam may feel timid, insecure, superior, indifferent, or bored. Whatever

his reasons, he won't be an asset to the group unless you draw him out.

- **How to Handle**  
Your action should depend on what is motivating him. Try to arouse his interest by asking him a question. If he is seated near you, ask his opinion so he will feel he is talking to you, not the group. Ask a provocative question in his area of expertise. Be sure to compliment him sincerely when he does make a comment.

#### Indiscriminating

He's an amiable type who will heartily agree with *any* ideas.

- **How to Handle**  
Don't put too much faith in the premise that his opinions are really his own. Acknowledge his enthusiastic remarks politely, then ask for the opinions of other, more discerning members of the audience.

#### Passive Aggressive

He seems to be agreeable overtly, but later on, covertly undercuts you or the work project. He refuses to be honest about his opinions.

- **How to Handle**  
Try not to directly confront this type of person. Find a non-threatening or anonymous way for him to express his opinion. Listen and include his ideas where possible. ▲

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