Does your heart sink when a particular colleague comes through the door? Do you ever think work would be great if it was not for a difficult member of your team? No workplace is perfect and while escaping may not be an option, successfully dealing with difficult people is.

Ask yourself what makes a particular person so trying. Perhaps he or she is aggressive and speaks over you, does not speak enough, or goes off on tangents. Dig a little deeper and we often find that difficult people do not communicate as we do. This realisation can leave us wanting to blame a difficult person for not being like us, or to change them into being more like us.

**Blame game**

Have you noticed how we often refer to difficult people as ‘they’ – ‘they do not listen’ or ‘they never contribute’? If communication is a two-way process, ‘they’ language allows us to blame the difficult person and ignore our part in the process. Blame convinces us that the situation is beyond our control and nothing can be done. But would everything be fine if we could simply change their behaviour?

Changing a person’s behaviour sounds easy, but experience teaches us that it is the opposite. So, if blame or change is not the answer, that leaves us with the only thing we can control and change, and that is ourselves and our response.

Replace the label ‘difficult’ with ‘different’. If someone’s style is different, this does not necessarily make it wrong. Separate the trait from the person. In another situation, a ‘difficult’ trait may be exactly what is called for.

Focus on common ground. What do you both want? Understand communication styles – your own and that of the other person. Modify your style to meet theirs.

Above I touched on three common communication traits: aggressive, tongue tied and disorganised. There are ways we can manage these types of communication (see box). When we label someone as difficult, we become less open to them and their ideas. Our behaviour can make us blind to their valuable contributions and skills.

Instead, by focusing on our ability to connect, rather than our desire to blame or change, we may find our colleague is not so difficult after all.

Jennifer MacKay is communications trainer at Jump Training and Development.

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**How to communicate with difficult colleagues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Action you can take</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive: interrupts, does not listen, criticises</td>
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- Be prepared – aggressors love holes in your argument so do your homework.  
- Get to the point – use short sentences and avoid waffle.  
- Be in control – use statements that begin with I.  
- Sound serious – use a calm, firm, clear voice.  
- Look confident and keep steady eye contact. |
| Tongue tied: silent, keeps you wondering what they are thinking |  
- Show interest – find out their strengths and expertise.  
- Draw them out – ask for their opinion using open questions.  
- Resist the urge to dismiss their silence as disinterest, speak over them or finish their sentences. |
| Disorganised: thinks aloud, eats up time, likes tangents |  
- Give them some time to talk to help them process information.  
- Manage time – be clear about time limitations and set deadlines.  
- Focus creativity – have them identify key points, steps for action and expectations. |

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