INFLUENCE

Five Things I Know About Dealing With "Difficult People": *Declassify, Then Connect*

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

The label "difficult" limits what you can do. Five ways to build a working relationship instead.

1 Forget that he or she is "difficult."

Begin by declassifying the person as "difficult." That category disempowers you to find a way to work with the other. "Interesting" or "unusual" might serve you better if you need a category at all. Self-talk can either be limiting or empowering.

2 Benchmark others' success.

Identify someone who works well with the person – then observe what he or she does in as neutral a way as possible. Ask the person to share insights with you that might help you understand how to work better with the other. Experiment with his or her approach.

3 Have a frank, non-defensive conversation.

Let the other person know that you'd like to develop a more productive working relationship. Ask what you could do more of, less of, or differently in order to create an easier way of working together. Be curious and stay neutral. Listen and summarize, avoiding any defensiveness during the conversation. Promise to get back to him or her. Then go away and think about which of those things you'd be willing to do. Tell the person about it and ask for something in exchange, if appropriate – for example, "I can commit to listening to your ideas more often if you'll agree to signal me when you want to speak."

4 Find areas of common interest and use them.

Ask the person to do something with you in service of something you both value (when normally you might avoid voluntarily doing something together). Begin with something small and build on any success.

5 Surprise the other with positive feedback.

Identify some key accomplishments or talents that you have observed and make some sincere, positive statements about his or her abilities or achievements. You can do this in a public meeting or 1:1 to a person who's likely to mention it or to the person him or herself. Look for opportunities to agree with or reinforce the other's ideas in public meetings.

Self-talk can either be limiting or empowering.

Originally published on LinkedIn, July 31, 2014.

B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

© 2026 B. Kim Barnes. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced without permission.