

Handling Dominance

“In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it”. Lao Tzu

One of the biggest challenges for people in organisations is learning how to be effective in the face of dominance. At its’ worst handling dominance means dealing with someone who exerts their power or influence in a way which undermines or belittles those they encounter – and whether they do this intentionally or not it can be very difficult to deal with.

Most of us would rather avoid a dominant person, hoping they will go away or that we’ll find another route to achieve our objectives. Most of us don’t like conflict or confrontation. However, sometimes avoiding is neither possible nor healthy.

Here are some ideas that will equip you to handle dominant people with more confidence and effectiveness.

Top Tips

Choose Your Mindset

When faced with more difficult situations, we often unconsciously adopt an unhelpful mindset. This can have a significant impact on how we behave. For example, when faced with a dominant person you might adopt the mindset of ‘they are strong’, ‘they won’t listen to me’, ‘I can’t add value here’, etc. These mindsets will result in you feeling powerless or inferior to the other person. You can choose to adopt a personally powerful mindset by thinking ‘they are task focussed’, ‘they are keen to get the job done fast’, ‘if I put my case skilfully then I can increase my chances’ etc. These mindsets are more likely to put you in a position where you use your own power rather than suppressing it. It’s worth remembering that to some extent negative assumptions about how people will behave can be self fulfilling especially if they lead you into submissive behaviour.

As the proverb says “The Lion’s power lies in your fear of him”.

Be “Weak and Strong”

When challenged by a dominant person, many people back down or give up. Instead think of the analogy of water in the opening quote. This will require you to absorb their intensity, not become reactive and instead of Pushing become highly Responsive (Pull). Use your skills as a listener to acknowledge the challenge e.g. “I hear that you don’t like my proposal” maybe you’ll also need to add a disclosure e.g. “I’m unclear as to what precisely you don’t like or what you would like instead?” You can then wait to hear how they respond and notice in particular whether their energy changes. If your first attempt doesn’t work it may help to add in some good quality exploratory questions e.g. what is your thinking behind that position? Try to stay calm and open to what you hear.

If having listened, you still hold your view, then express it again possibly with modified reasoning which responds to what you've heard.

If you change your mind in view of what you've heard be explicit about that. Dominant people often value and respect, honesty and directness.

Don't Give In, Give Up or Avoid

Dominant people often get what they want by over-riding others. When you become a 'yes, how high?' person you help reinforce their dominant behaviour. If you do nothing it can signal that their behaviour is acceptable and encourages the patterns between you to become embedded. If you do nothing, nothing changes.

Instead, think about what you want and stand up for it. If you are being overrun by a dominant person, it can be empowering to ask yourself "What are my needs?" and "How can I express them clearly and early?"

Adopt an Assertive Posture

Your body posture has a big impact on your mental and emotional state and therefore how you behave. When confronted with a dominant person, ensure that you adopt a posture that gives you strengths and credibility. Maybe stand up, balanced on both legs, making steady eye contact with your spine straight and shoulders back, etc. Try a posture whether sitting or standing, which makes you feel strong.

Prepare and Anticipate

Prepare well and know your facts - do your research, anticipate questions and have your answers at the ready. You might never mention most of it (especially if they like brevity), however, if needed you can draw on it. This will also help you to feel confident and you can focus on paying attention to how you listen and respond.

You might also want to rehearse the situation with a trusted colleague and get some feedback before you deliver it for real.

Know Their Style

Think about their influence style – are they more push or pull? Which behaviours do they tend to respond well to? Use your Critical Influence planning steps to become clear about behaviours that are likely to be effective.

For really important situations additional insights can be useful – maybe you can find out their DISC, MBTI or Insights profiles. These provide you with an insight into their preferences and may give hints towards their communication style. Be flexible and adjust your style accordingly.

If you can't do any of the above try to speak to people who are closer to them. Ask their advice.

Take Solutions Not Problems

Don't bring problems to dominant people. Think about the solutions you can offer and bring those. Dominant people will often respect you for this, even if they don't like your solution.

Give Feedback and Aim to Build Your Relationship

Many dominant people are task orientated. They want to get stuff done fast. Often they don't think about or are unaware of the impact they have on people. Let them know about the impact they are having on you. Judge your timing and the environment so that they are more likely to hear it and be open to a conversation. Dominant people are unlikely to change "in the here and now" in response to being publicly challenged or when they are under pressure or stress. Ensure you provide feedback in a rational, non-emotional way. Be prepared to listen carefully to how they respond, "Demonstrate You've Heard" their underlying concerns, needs or views while also looking for the right moment to help them to understand what is acceptable or not in their behaviour. Make it clear that your aim is to arrive at a new understanding which enhances your relationship.

For further ideas on how to prepare read our handout on "Initiating a Difficult Conversation" based on the work of Susan Scott.

References and further resources

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