Ep #91: How to Deal with a Difficult Employee
Episode Transcript

Hey, I'm Kris Plachy, host of the Lead Your Team podcast. Running a million-dollar business is not easy. And whether you're just getting started with building your team, or you've been at this for a while, I'm going to bring you honest, specific, and clear practices you can use right now, today, to improve how well you lead your team. Let's go ahead and get started.

Hello, hello. How are you? Welcome to the podcast. I did want to remind you about this so much fun thing about posting a picture wherever you are when you listen to the podcast. If you didn't do that last time, do it this time. It's so fun. Just post a picture, go to Instagram, tag me at Kris Plachy Coach, seems to be the easiest way to do it. Other ways it's harder to tag people, all those things. So, but where are you when you listen to this? I would love to know.

So, okay. Today is the podcast after the election, and I am recording this before the election full disclosure. So I have no idea what's happening in the world as I record this other than what's happening in the world today, which is, of course, every day it's different, but I wanted to do this podcast. I can't believe I actually haven't done this podcast because, for those of you who've been listening to me for a long time, you know that I had a podcast before, which had 150 episodes. And then when I really started focusing on female entrepreneurs, I started brand new, which is why we're at episode, whatever we're at, because I don't keep track. So we were up to 150 with the other one.

And one of the areas of expertise that I have is dealing with and managing difficult employees and difficult people. And for those of you who are relatively new to my work, you may not know this, you may not know that I've written books about how to deal with difficult people and how to coach difficult employees. If that is something you would like help with, I would strongly encourage you to pick up my... I've written two books. They're on Amazon. They're really cheap, you guys. This is not a money making recommendation. This is simply really to get you some resources.

I wrote a book called the 5 Truths for Thinking About Difficult People, and then there's another one called How to Coach Difficult People in Six Steps. You can find them both underneath my name. They're both pretty short. They're more designed to be desktop look books or guides. So there's a brief lesson on one side and then some reflective questions or things to remember on the other side of the page. So I think you'll find them very useful, very short, very precise and simple.

But I was looking through my podcasts and I have never done a podcast on how to deal with a difficult employee. So we're going to do that because I'll bet one of you has one. Now this is part of the how to CEO curriculum. This is a whole course division or class that I teach and then we do a whole week of coaching on it. This is a real thing. Every client I have has at least one difficult employee, if not more. And like I say to everyone, dealing with difficult employees is a game of whack-a-mole.

I say that because you think you got rid of one and then there's another one. And so I do really want to give you, I have so much I could share, but I'm going to give you the real basics today that you can apply immediately. All right. So first of all, difficult. What does that even mean? Difficult is a word that we use to describe somebody's behavior. And the word that you use to describe somebody else's behavior is based out of your own experience. So somebody does something in the world and you might think that's very difficult of them, "How very difficult, they make this difficult for me."

And that's because you've had some frame of reference, some experience in your life that was similar in some way, shape or form, and it was hard for you. So therefore this employee's behavior now is difficult for you. That's perfectly understandable. That's normal. What isn't actually though true is they don't think they're necessarily being difficult. And so when we label them as difficult, they wouldn't necessarily call themselves difficult and therein lies where we start to get into trouble if we don't get this cleared up, right?

Okay. So the first thing I like to say is nobody's difficult until you decide that they are. And then how you define someone else in your mind will determine how you interact with them, how you relate to them, and honestly, how you act with them. So you know that I use the thought model, that's a huge part of the work that I teach. And if you think someone's difficult, you probably feel frustrated or angry or annoyed or hurt or irritated. And so that means that you have a certain behavior with them, which then results possibly, maybe in a slightly weird way of you being difficult too. Just never the part we love.

So when we have a difficult person, like I said, I am giving you the cliff notes and I want to give you honestly, something you could use when this podcast is over. You could go deal with this if you have somebody on the team that's really challenging for you. I want you to make a T-Chart on a piece of paper. And on the top of that T-Chart, you're just going to write the person's name. And if you're not comfortable actually writing their name, make up a name. And then on the left-hand side of that T-Chart, I want you to write down all the words that in your creative brain you have used to describe this person.

Now I used to teach a dealing with difficult people and employees workshop years ago. And I would do this with a whole class of people. And we would fill up at least two pages of flip charts with everybody's words. So difficult, rude, dismissive, arrogant, entitled, negative, victim, passive aggressive, justifying, blaming, hurtful, mean, unkind, irreverent, I mean, you name it. I've seen them all. What you've got to do though, is you've got to list them all. Just give your brain that free time to just say this person is disrespectful, they're insubordinate, they're challenging, they're annoying, they're clingy, very needy, they're all of it, okay? All of that.

And then now what I want you to do is go up to the top of that left-hand column and you're going to label it. And the label you're going to give the left-hand column is labels. These are

labels that you have assigned to somebody, you are unkind, you're rude, you're arrogant, you are mean, those are labels. That isn't a person, a person isn't unkind. A person isn't mean, a person isn't rude. A person might have those behaviors, which we then label that way. Actually, a person has behaviors that we observe that we then label as mean or rude, okay? That's your first exercise.

Then on the right hand side, we're going to now write behaviors on the top of that column. And for every label you've assigned, so let's say the first label that you wrote was rude. And then on the behavior side, you're going to write, what did they actually do in the world that you observed that made you think they were rude? "They walked away while I was talking. They cut off mid-sentence. They rolled their eyes when I was talking in the meeting. They told me my face was ugly." Whatever, whatever people do.

You might have on the column of the left-hand side, you might have untitled. What did they actually do? "They asked me for a raise. They told me they wanted a different work shift. They told me, they thought they should be promoted by now." What was the actual observable behavior? You being able to do this any time you find your brain's getting out over someone's actions is critical as their boss, as their leader. Because if you try and give people feedback based on a label, you will fail. If you try and say to someone, "Hey, in the meeting today, you were rude." You will be immediately met with defensiveness, who, me, gobsmacked, what are you talking about, type of response.

Even maybe mortified because people don't wake up in the morning and think, "I can't wait to be rude today. Can't wait to be entitled today. Can't wait to be negative today. Can't wait to be unkind today. Can't wait to be disrespectful today." People also have their own emotions. They can be irritated, impatient, frustrated, annoyed. And their emotions trigger their behavior, which could be to cut someone off in a meeting, to roll their eyes, to cross their arms, to ask for a raise, to tell their boss they think they should have been promoted by now.

I've had a lot of people say, they think I'm aggressive. But the person who's being accused of being aggressive feels instead passionate or even unheard. One of the things I did after I wrote the difficult people work and created the difficult people course, I actually coached difficult leaders. Companies would hire me to coach people who were really misunderstood and their careers, their jobs were on the line for it. So I've seen the other side of difficult, and while I don't ever disagree with you that there are things that people do at work that are totally inappropriate that should not be tolerated, ongoing, that they should be addressed.

In fact, I think a lot of people's careers get into a whole host of trouble because nobody ever does tell them, they just get talked about. Everybody talks about how rude they are, dismissive they are, arrogant they are, negative they are. But nobody tells the person what it is that they're actually doing. That's like I say all the time, don't talk about, talk to. So you make your T-

Chart and then you have that discussion. Then you can go to someone and say, "Hey, today in the meeting you cut me off when I was speaking. Why?" Versus, "Hey, in the meeting today, you were rude when you cut me off." Let's just say, "Hey, in the meeting, when I was talking about this, you cut me off. Why?"

And then let's let them label their own behavior. "Hey, last week when we met, you said that you thought you should be promoted by now. Why do you think that?" You know what I know they won't say, they won't say, "Oh, because I'm entitled." They'll say, "Because I've done this, this and this. And it seems like that's the right thing that could happen right now." And for you, if that's the case that you don't get promoted, yet, you have to explain that to them. If you notice that they're distracted in meetings, say something. "Hey, Lucy, today in the meeting, I noticed you were doodling on your pad. What's going on?"

Instead of assuming she's lazy or bored, talk to them, but do not use the labels that you assign for their behavior. Because the labels that you assign for their behavior come from your brain. What we need is to level set actual behavior that we observed, have them define it, and then help them understand why it didn't work. "So today when you cut me off in the meeting, why did you do that?" They'll have a reason. "Oh, super. I just didn't feel like you heard me the first time I said something. I had so many ideas, I couldn't wait to get them out. I didn't even realize I did that." They'll tell you something.

And then you could say, "All right, well, when that happened, I found it distracting. So in the future, I'd like to ask that you wait for people to finish what they're saying and then say what you need to say." We don't have to be blaming them ahead of time for intent when we don't even know it. And all those labels just trigger you. As soon as you believe someone's arrogant, as soon as you believe someone's dismissive. As soon as you believe that someone is rude, negative, passive aggressive, it changes how you interact with them. It changes you, it doesn't change them. And it makes it so that you don't even want to address it with them. And that's not the goal as their manager, as their boss.

And as an entrepreneur, if you've only got a handful of employees, you don't have time or bandwidth in your culture to allow labels to get a lot of traction, because it will destroy your culture. They have to be addressed head on. So difficult people are not difficult until somebody else believes that they are. And your job as the leader of your business is to quickly make sure your brain goes from labels to identify behaviors, that you address the behavior, you let them label it, and then you help them understand the impact of their behavior. And that's it, then we move along.

If they keep doing it and it keeps being a problem, it's a performance issue. These are the kinds of things I work with every week. This is what I help my clients with. These kinds of things because I know none of us are taught how to do this. But you get a bunch of human beings in a

room together, man, this is going to happen, misunderstandings and assumptions and all of it. Misconstrued intent, not to mention how we define labels, what words we use to describe people's behavior, okay? So that's your assignment, it's very simple. It's not very labor intensive, but it takes your ability and willingness to get out of believing that you're right about the way that you've defined someone and really just looking at objectively at their actual behaviors. Give it a shot, keep us posted. Thanks for tuning in. I'll talk to you again next time.

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