

# Simple Strategies to Resolve Conflicts with Difficult Supervisors and Coworkers

By Dora Farkas, Ph.D.  
Founder, [www.FinishYourThesis.com](http://www.FinishYourThesis.com)

## PART I: Developing Open and Assertive Communication

### Summary of Three-part Method for Assertive Communication

1. State the facts
2. Clarify your thoughts about the situation and why it bothers you
3. Explain your goals and how you would like the problem to be resolved

### Tips for a more effective meeting:

- Have a clear agenda with desired outcomes before each meeting
- Focus on solving the problem and not your emotions surrounding the problem
- Listen to the other person to understand their viewpoint
- Propose solutions that are beneficial to both parties
- Put important agreements in writing (e.g. meeting minutes and action plan summarized in an email after meeting)
- Follow up with others after meeting

Think of a conflict in your work place either with your boss or your coworkers that you had to resolve.

How did the conflict affect your concentration or ability to do work?

How did you resolve the conflict? Were you, passive, aggressive, or assertive?

Were you satisfied with the way the conflict was resolved?

Knowing what you know now about assertiveness, how could you have resolved the conflict better and how could it have improved your performance?

## Part II: How to resolve conflicts with difficult people

Types of difficult people:

**1) Hostile-Aggressives: They are disruptive, disrespectful, impatient, and frequently make others feel inferior.**

Strategy: Stand up for yourself and do not let them intimidate you. Let them calm down if they become emotional. Be respectful, and assertively communicate your goals. If you suspect covert hostile aggressiveness, bring this behavior to light by asking the person specific questions.

**2) Complainers: They have a tendency to complain about everything.**

Strategy: Listen to their opinion, acknowledge their problems, and switch into problem-solving mode as politely and quickly as possible.

**3) Silent-Unresponsives: They close down (or clam up), and seem to ignore your presence.**

Strategy: Get them to talk by asking open-ended questions followed by a friendly silent stare. If they remain silent, ask them more specific yes or no questions. If they talk, listen and acknowledge their opinions. If they refuse to talk, let them know how you will resolve this issue on your own, and give them another chance to give you input.

**4) Super-Agreeables:** They always say what you want to hear, they make promises, but do not follow-through.

Strategy: Be specific about your goals, and make it easy for them to give you what you want, or to be honest with you if they cannot keep their promises. Before you ask for their help do some of the work on your own, so it will be easy for them to help you.

**5) Negativists:** They think that your project will not work out, and there is nothing that you can do about it.

Strategy: Avoid getting drawn into negativism. Do not argue or try to prove them wrong. Acknowledge their concerns and politely suggest your ideas as alternatives.

**6) Know-It-Alls:** They believe that their way is the only right way, and everybody else is wrong.

Strategies for Bulldozers: Do your homework, so you can discuss your research with authority.

Do not argue with them, but do communicate your ideas with confidence.

Strategies for Balloons: Listen and suggest your own ideas as alternatives. Do not embarrass them and give them an opportunity to save face.

**7) Indecisives:** They stall major decisions as long as possible or until they are no longer relevant.

Strategy: Help them solve problems by finding out the blocks to decision-making. Is the problem with the project or with the person doing the work? Suggest ideas that address their concerns.

Once a decision is made, make sure that they follow through.

**8) Extremely Hands-Off (or Super-Busy types):** They give you little guidance on your project, either because they do not have time or do not care about it.

Strategy: You have to take charge of your own project or dissertation. Choose a project that you can complete on your own. Be proactive about setting deadlines, and seek support from other professors in

the department. Be very prepared for the few meetings you have.

**9) Excessively Hands-On (Micromanagers):** They want to control every aspect of your research including your hours at work. Set boundaries and let them know which aspects of their managerial style are disruptive to your work. It might be necessary to put your requests in writing. For example, you might need to clarify your hours at work, and how frequently you think there should be meetings.

Who is the most difficult person you ever had to work with?

What type of difficult person were they?

What conflict(s) did you have to resolve?

How did working with this difficult person affect your performance?

If you put yourself in their shoes, do you think they would perceive you as difficult? If so, what type?

What was the most valuable lesson you learned from working with this difficult person?

Do you have any new insights on how to resolve a current conflict in your life?