



## Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People

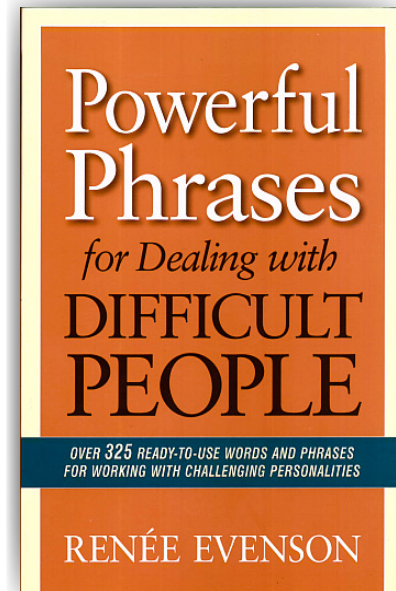
*Over 325 Ready-to-Use Words and Phrases for Working with Challenging Personalities*

Renée Evenson

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### KEY CONCEPTS

- “I” statements should be used when speaking to difficult individuals because these statements help reduce feelings of defensiveness when those people are asked to modify their behavior. For example, “I was hurt when you said I make too many mistakes.”
- A difficult boss can derail a promising career while a difficult coworker can really take the joy out of the journey. Learning how to deal with difficult personalities can quite possibly make or break a person’s career path.
- Communication is more than just what a person says. It includes the way a person words what they say, their tone of voice, facial expressions, and their body language.
- There are five steps in conflict resolution:
  1. *Think first:* It is important to calm down before addressing a situation.
  2. *Gain a better understanding:* The issues should be viewed from the other person’s viewpoint.
  3. *Define the problem:* Once a person has all sides of the story, pinpointing the actual problem is possible.
  4. *Offer the best solution:* A person should suggest a solution to which everyone can agree, allowing everyone involved to have input.
  5. *Agree on the resolution:* Agreements should be reached through consensus, by taking a vote, or by one person making the call.

## INTRODUCTION

As opportunities for doing business become more global and interconnected in nature, the work force is becoming more diverse. People from different cultures process information in different ways. These differences may lead to conflict in the workplace. Employees may feel that colleagues from different cultural backgrounds are more difficult to work with. In her book **Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People**, Renée Evenson provides more than 325 words and phrases that can be used when working with difficult or challenging people in the workplace. The book is divided into two parts: the first half dealing with cultivating successful work relationships, and the second focuses on effective conflict resolution.

### PART 1: COMMUNICATING POWERFUL PHRASES

Powerful phrases that are combined with action will lead to successful relationships at work. The foundation for workplace relationships is effective communication. When a person's communication includes powerful phrases that encourage unity rather than division, it promotes harmony in the workplace. In addition, an employee who communicates with a focus on problem solving is looked on much more favorably when managers are looking for someone to promote from within the company. Employees who gain communications skills in the area of dealing with difficult people have the best chance of having successful careers. Managers with this skill are also highly valued and sought out in the work force. Powerful phrases in communication begin with "I" and include phrases of understanding, apology, compromise, resolution, and reconciliation.

#### "I" Phrases

Phrases known as "I" phrases are the most effective tool for beginning a conflict-resolution conversation. When a conversation is opened with the word "you," it generally puts people on the defensive and aggravates the situation rather than correcting it. Such statements are typically looked upon as accusations or even verbal attacks by the people receiving them. Beginning a conversation with an "I" statement leads into a more constructive process. It is important to keep in mind that when a person wants to address the behavior of someone else, he or she should take the

time to calm down and try to view the situation from the offender's viewpoint.

Some examples of "I" statements include:

- "I was hurt when you said I make too many mistakes."
- "I became upset when you took credit for my work."
- "I felt betrayed when I heard that you talked behind my back."
- "I became confused and lost focus when you interrupted me during my sales presentation."
- "I was surprised when you jumped in before I had time to finish."
- "I get frustrated every time you talk so loudly that I can't hear my customers."

#### Phrases of Understanding

"I" phrases keep the focus on how a person feels about a particular situation. Once that person has listened to the response of the addressee, he or she needs to follow up with phrases of understanding. These phrases of understanding help people view sit-

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uations from others' view points. These phrases may even open the door for a person to become comfortable revealing some deeper issue that he or she may be facing, such as the illness of a loved one, a strained relationship, or financial struggles. These types of stresses can often directly impact a person's behavior and decisions.

Some phrases of understanding include:

- "I realize that you didn't do it on purpose..."
- "I understand that you didn't mean to sound that way..."
- "I'm sure you were just excited when you started talking..."
- "I'm certain you didn't mean to take credit for my idea..."
- "I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't knowingly do that to me..."

These phrases will open the door for the person being confronted to talk about the underlying cause of his or her behavior. The discussion can then be furthered by following up with phrases such as:

- "Now I see where you're coming from..."
- "I understand the situation from your viewpoint now..."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Renée Evenson** is a small business consultant and writer specializing in organizational psychology in the workplace. During her 15-year career at BellSouth Telecommunications, her responsibilities included managing staff training and development. She is the author of *Customer Service 101: Basic Lessons to Be your Best*, *Customer Service 201: Managing Your People to Be Their Best*, *Customer Service Training (2nd edition)*, *Award-Winning Customer Service*, *Customer Service Training 101*, and *Powerful Phrases for Effective Customer Service*.

- "I can see why you didn't think that would bother me..."
- "I'm glad you gave me the additional information. I realize why you did that."

*Conflict is one of the most difficult situations we face because it thrusts us out of our comfort zone. The truth is that most of us are uncomfortable handling conflict of any kind, so we overlook problems and hope they'll go away. But that never happens.*

### Phrases of Apology

An apology is not necessarily an admission of being at fault. However, it does empower a person to take the responsibility of resolving the conflict. A phrase of apology that is interpreted as being sincere often has a calming effect on the person who is being addressed. These phrases quench anger and soothe hurt feelings. Phrases of apology can also encourage dialogue and help bring about resolution, especially if the discussion seems to have stalled and the other person is not willing to consider the viewpoint of the addresser.

Some samples of phrases of apology include:

- "I'm sorry if I seem overly sensitive..."
- "I'm sorry if I misunderstood your intent..."
- "I'm sorry that we need to have this conversation..."
- "I apologize if I misunderstood what happened..."
- "I regret that I have to bring this up..."
- "Please forgive me for feeling this way..."

### Phrases of Compromise

Phrases of apology often lead into phrases of compromise, which are the ideal way to resolve a conflict. The "I" phrases, phrases of understanding, and phrases of apology often bring about a willingness in people to be flexible. Flexibility encourages the desire to negotiate a win-win situation for all parties involved because a willingness to cooperate, listen, and find a fair middle ground is reflected.

Some phrases of compromise include:

- "Can we talk about what happened?"

- “I feel that we need to talk this out so it doesn’t happen again.”
- “Let’s go somewhere in private and try to resolve this.”
- “Let’s talk this over and find a suitable compromise.”
- “Let’s talk about this. I need to know why it happened and how we can keep it from happening again.”

*When you show others you understand they may have a different viewpoint, you open the door to having a productive conversation. Conveying understanding is also a great way to build a rapport.*

These phrases can be following up with additional phrases of compromise that illustrate a willingness to be flexible, such as:

- “Here’s how you see the issue: \_\_\_\_\_. And here’s how I see it: \_\_\_\_\_. Let’s see where we can come together on this.”
- “Since we don’t agree why this happened, let’s lay out the facts and come up with a solution we both can live with.”
- “Why don’t we each state our viewpoints? Then we’ll see if we can find common ground.”
- “We need to resolve this somehow. The only way to do that is for each of us to be flexible and try to come together.”

### Phrases of Resolution

Phrases of compromise lead to phrases of resolution. It is important make sure that everyone feels that the resolution is fair for all. All parties involved need to be encouraged to participate in voicing their thoughts regarding a solution with which everyone is happy. Once everyone is happy with the solution presented, phrases of resolution need to be used to express gratitude that an agreement was reached.

Phrases of resolution include:

- “I’m happy we could resolve this.”
- “I’m glad we talked this out. We have a better understanding of what happened.”

- “I’m thrilled we were able to come to an agreement.”

If there is any doubt as to whether all involved are satisfied with the solution, the following phrases can be used:

- “Are you satisfied with the solution?”
- “Is there anything else we need to talk about?”
- “Do you feel we have a better understanding of what caused the problem?”
- “How do you feel about the solution?”
- “I’m happy with our compromise. How do you feel about it?”

### Phrases of Reconciliation

Once a solution is reached, it is important to take a moment to let all parties involved know that they are valued. This step will serve to keep the working relationship moving in a positive direction and strengthen it.

Some sample phrases of reconciliation include:

- “I value our working relationship. Going forward I feel we’ll be able to work through any problem.”
- “I’m glad we talked this out. Now I’m confident we can work through any problem.”
- “I respect you and know that we’ll work even more closely now.”
- “I’m glad we talked this out. In the future, we’re not going to let any disagreement get in the way of our friendship.”
- “I have a better understanding of you and I hope you do of me as well.”
- “We’ve always worked closely and going forward I know that we won’t let a little problem stand between us.”

### Actions that Enhance Powerful Phrases

While the words being communicated are important, a person’s actions will actually communicate more than his or her words. The reason for this is that nonverbal actions actually reveal the emotions and feelings behind the words that are being spoken. Nonverbal

actions consist of body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and assertiveness.

### Body Language

A person's posture, stance, movements, and gestures all provide communication. These things will reveal what a person is thinking and feeling—possibly more so than what is actually being said. They will also reveal a person's level of self-confidence.

Body language that suggests a person is confident, competent, and comfortable includes:

- Standing or sitting up straight.
- Holding the head high.
- Maintaining good posture.
- Relaxing shoulders.
- Keeping a relaxed stance by standing with equal weight on both feet.
- Allowing hands to fall naturally at sides or fold in front in a relaxed position.
- Keeping hands out of pockets.
- Lack of fidgeting.

### Facial Expressions

A person's facial expressions are another indicator of what that person is thinking and feeling. The expression on a person's face is typically a spontaneous response. For example, angry people may frown, furrow their brows, or their eyes may have a glare to them. When a person approaches someone with this type of expression, it is generally not going to foster a conversation that ends well. A sincere smile, however, makes a person more approachable and suggests that he or she is ready to listen and have a sensible discussion.

Eye contact is another important aspect to keep in mind when confronting someone. Looking people in the eyes projects confidence and sincerity. It also makes people feel that they are truly being listened to when they are speaking.

Facial expressions that project a positive image include:

- Holding the head up straight rather than lowering it to the floor or tilting it to the side.
- Smiling when appropriate.
- Turning the ends of the mouth upward slightly to convey friendliness.
- Maintaining eye contact, but not to the extent of staring.
- Raising the eyebrows to show interest or excitement.
- Nodding occasionally to show active listening.

*Anytime you're communicating, it's important to be aware of your body language because your posture, stance, movements, and gestures send very clear signals. How you stand or sit and what you do with your hands provide clues to what you're feeling and what you're thinking.*

### Tone of Voice

A person's tone of voice can have a very significant impact in connection to what he or she is saying. When confronting someone, a neutral, calm tone is generally going to bring about the best results. It will also come across as being more professional in nature. In addition, the sounds a person makes while listening can be a clue as to whether or not what the other person is saying is being understood. Sounds such as "umhum," "oh," and "hmm" can be key indicators that a person is listening.

Examples of how to use tone of voice effectively include:

- Using a professional, calm, nonthreatening tone when beginning a conversation.
- Using tone to enhance a message by showing concern or empathy.
- Using tone to express an interest in working toward a positive solution, especially if one notices that his or her tone is reflecting confusion.

### Assertiveness

Assertiveness generally shows itself as self-confidence. It is different from aggressiveness in that it is controlled and respectful. Assertive individuals care-

fully think through what it is they want to say, and they focus on the positive results they want to achieve.

Examples of assertiveness include:

- Speaking with confidence.
- Expressing views clearly.
- Speaking objectively.
- Staying calm.
- Controlling emotions when stating a position.
- Apologizing no more than necessary.
- Refusing to back down to allow someone to be verbally abusive.
- Showing respect and consideration toward the other person.

*By empowering yourself with effective conflict resolution skills, you'll learn how to deal with other people's quirks and idiosyncrasies. This will help you get along with everyone at work.*

## PART 2 – FIVE STEPS TO EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

### Step 1: Think First

When a person is upset and offended, emotions generally become intense. It is important to take the time to calm down and look more objectively at the situation. This is accomplished by keeping one's focus on the situation rather than the person. This will also make it easier to consider all angles of the situation and avoid jumping to the conclusion that something was done maliciously. Remaining objective will also be important if a person is drawn into a situation in which he or she is not directly involved but is asked to take sides. It is also important to think through the conversation, including potential responses and the ideal outcome.

### Step 2: Gain a Better Understanding

Once a person has calmed down and considered the situation from the other person's perspective, it is possible that there is not really an issue at all. Nevertheless, it is still appropriate to talk to the other person. This will give additional clarity concerning intent. If more than one person is involved, it is a

good idea to get everyone together for discussion. If anyone becomes emotional, it is a good idea to watch for nonverbal cues and be sure to listen for the message behind the actions.

### Step 3: Define the Problem

Once all parties involved have shared their perspectives on the conflict, it should be possible to pinpoint the actual problem. However, it is important for everyone to agree on the definition of the problem. This should be reiterated, ideally by the person who called everyone together, so that everyone has a chance to agree or disagree. Allowing all to state their perspectives and have the chance to acknowledge that the problem has been defined will also cause them to feel that they are contributing to an eventual solution.

### Step 4: Offer the Best Solution

With the problem being defined, solutions can then be explored. Everyone should be encouraged to contribute their thoughts on the solution, and everyone's opinion needs to be respected. It will be important to encourage flexibility as common ground and compromise are considered.

### Step 5: Agree on the Resolution

If a problem or conflict is particularly complex, it may take more than one meeting to resolve the issue and come to a consensus on the solution. A consensus whereby everyone involved remains flexible and agrees to a compromise is the ideal solution. However, if there is an unwillingness among one or more people to compromise or agree on a solution, then taking a vote whereby the majority rules may be the next best option.

If the option of majority rules is chosen, then it must be explained to those who do not agree with the outcome why the majority considers that particular solution to be for the best. People will often accept a majority rules decision when they understand the reasons for the decision.

When the people involved are not willing to meet and discuss any sort of agreement, it may be necessary for one person in leadership to make the decision. In this case, it is important for everyone to understand that

everyone's views were taken into consideration as the decision that led into the solution was made.

### **Dealing With Challenging Coworker and Boss Behaviors**

There are many different types of coworker behaviors that a person encounters in the work place. The five steps mentioned above can be applied to the majority of them with very little variation in their application. While confrontation may seem uncomfortable at first, the more a person does it, the more at ease he or she will become with conflict resolution.

Ideally, a person will make a point of staying focused on the situation rather than the person so that professionalism can be maintained. Sometimes it can be helpful to get the input of a neutral person's view about the situation, especially since it is not necessary to address every situation. If an issue is not particularly severe, waiting to see if others are being bothered by it may be a better option. However, if a person chooses to address a situation, he or she should make sure that specifics of the behavior are discussed, as well as its impact on others.

When a person works for a challenging boss, it can feel far more intimidating to address a situation. However, confronting a boss with a challenging personality can actually strengthen the relationship and mutually deepen trust and supportiveness. Bosses can be abusive, controlling, egotistical, incompetent, inconsistent, micromanaging, noncommunicative, passive, reactive, or unethical. Even where bosses are concerned, the five steps of conflict resolution can be applied.

When an individual is the cause of the challenging situation, taking the initiative to go to the other person is appropriate. Once these individuals have taken the time to gather their thoughts and consider how their words may have affected others, they need to begin with an apology and then state the issue as they view it.

In a situation where the other party is not skilled in conflict resolution, patience is going to be required, especially if the one who is unskilled is being accusatory, hurtful, or yelling. It will be necessary for the person skilled in conflict resolution to take a deep

breath, work to remain objective by focusing on the situation rather than the person, put pride aside, and consider if the claim being made is valid. Even in a situation such as this, the five steps can be used to bring about resolution in a productive and correct way.



## **FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

**Estimated Reading Time: 5–6 hours, 225 pages**

### **Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People**

by Renée Evenson would be beneficial to new college graduates as well as those who have been in the workforce and are looking to move into management or improve their management style. This book would also be ideal for those in the customer service or sales sectors. The sample dialogue and "something to think about" sections throughout the book add clarity to the concepts discussed. In addition, the "applying the approach" feature throughout section two details the use of the five steps to conflict resolution in some very specific situations. The book is best read in order and in its entirety, since the concepts build on one another.

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### *About the Author*



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