How To Work With A Tyrant, Keep Your Cool, And Ultimately Win

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How to work with a tyrant. DEPOSITPHOTOS

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Do you work with or for a tyrant? A colleague? Your boss? Or a client? If so, then you know that tyrants behave aggressively. They're abrasive and often lie to get what they want. Their mission is to win concessions; their method, intimidation.

A particular client organization comes to mind here. Well, actually, this situation involves two Fortune 20 clients that merged and hired a tyrant as a purchasing agent to negotiate with my communication firm. We'd been working for one of the clients for more than two decades with excellent ratings, offering business/technical writing training and presentations programs. The second organization had been a client for about two years prior to the big merger.

The first call from that tyrant started with a wallop and quickly accelerated: "We'll be doubling our business with your firm, so here's what we need in the contract...."Then: "We insist that we have final approval on any employee you send to do the training." Then: "We don't intend to comply with any cancellation clause. We insist on the right to cancel any training up to the day before the scheduled event."

Then: "We are expecting a 50 percent discount across the board on every training program or keynote."

After several conversations, we decided to encourage them to take their business elsewhere and wished them well. Fortunately, we were able to fill our calendar to capacity without them. "Leaning on" our smaller firm was his job as a purchasing agent. But it's likely not the job of your coworker or supervisor to make such egregious demands on day-to-day projects and activities.

So how do you work with such a tyrant so that you stay stress-free and work productively? Several tips to tame the beast:

Never Assume the Tyrant Is Working Solo

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Often people think, "If the top executives knew what a jerk they had representing them, they'd get rid of this guy/gal." So they try to go over the head of this jerk to let the next level know what's happening—only to meet a very cool reception. That boss may be applauding the results that tyrant achieves by such aggressive, intimidating tactics.

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Moan and Groan, But Don't Bleed

Sometimes, the tyrant's job is to squeeze you to your limits—extract more money from you, or pay you less, or get concessions on a deadline, or bluster you into doing part of their job. If you moan and groan whatever they're demanding, you've made them feel good (and maybe look good to their boss or peers) just for

"roughing you up." Keep in mind that you don't necessarily have to bleed concessions for your tyrant to get credit for being aggressive. (And you yourself may get credit with your boss and team members for "holding the line.")

Play Powerless

Yes, yes, I know we all like to feel powerfully in control of how we handle our responsibilities and lives in general. But often it works well to put ego aside and claim no power: "Actually, the XYZ committee must make the decision on the situation." Or: "My boss has asked me to bring him/her in on the final decision." The absent decision maker is always a good negotiation tactic. You'll see this tactic perfected when you try to buy a car at your local dealership. Your rep has to get everything "okayed" by the guy or gal in the back office.

Call for a Repeat and Confirmation

Rather than a turn-the-other-cheek approach when insulted or pushed around, question that aggressive tyrant: "Do you really mean what you just said/wrote? That you think I've been slowing approvals to delay this project?" "Is this your personal opinion or are you representing your department/firm when you say that blah, blah, blah?"

Sometimes the tyrant will start backpedaling, claiming you misunderstood. But you will have sent your message just by questioning. The tyrant will hear that message loud and clear—— that you may want to escalate this discussion up the ladder.

Use a Matter-of-Fact Tone

When the tyrant demands something, simply state firmly what you can or cannot do. In a matter-of-fact manner, say what you do or don't intend to do. Instead of pausing and holding eye contact as if you expect an argument or reaction, break eye contact. Move on to the next topic or walk away.

Use Silence to Diffuse and Focus the Tyrant

This tactic works particularly well in a phone conversation or text. Give no response at all. When the tyrant winds down the tirade, he or she will ask "Are you there?" "Did you get my text?" Then you can respond with, "Yes. I heard you (or got your text). But we need you to focus on resolving the problem."

Put the Tyrant in Time-Out

You can always put that yelling, cursing tyrant in time-out until they cool down: "Hold on. I need to check the records." Or "I need to check on that with a few other people. I'll let you know in a day or two what I find out." A delay of even a few minutes gives the tyrant time to cool off, reconsider, tame the tongue, allowing you to guide a discussion in a more productive way.

State a Different Perspective

Listen to and acknowledge the tyrant's viewpoint. Then state your own perspective in a direct, yet matter-of-fact manner: "I understand what you're saying. I see things somewhat differently. Here's my take on the situation and what I can do under the circumstances at this point...."

Dealing with an abusive, aggressive, or manipulative peer, boss, or customer never warrants behaving in kind. That approach leads to more drama and rarely results. Instead, perfect the professional phrasing that makes you more productive and less stressed.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 50 books, including ***Communicate Like a Leader***. She helps organizations communicate clearly. Follow her at BooherResearch.com and @DiannaBooher.

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