

How to Deal With an Obnoxious Know-It-All

By DIANNA BOOHER SEPTEMBER 29, 2020



How do you manage an obnoxious employee or vendor? Glad you asked — and I know you’re “asking for a friend” because no one wants to admit they’ve hired such a jerk.

You may ask, “Aren’t all Know-It-Alls obnoxious?” Although some Know-It-Alls seem to be oblivious to their behavior and attitude, many are proud of that deficiency and put it on full display. More specifically, they keep deep-sixing any recommendations or solutions you provide.

When you run into that smart-aleck manager, coworker, or supplier, work your way through the following approaches until you find the one that tames the offending ego.

5 Way to Manage a Know-It-All

1. Use their knowledge and disregard their behavior.

If you can disregard their Know-It-All attitude and habits, the more expedient way to manage an interaction might be to stay focused on the information or expertise they can provide to you. If they can help with a new software installation, let them. Then get out of their path. Keep in mind that you’re not hoping to gain a new BFF.

2. Collect and verify the facts.

Not surprising, the Know-It-All is always confident — but never in doubt. If you suspect the person has their facts wrong, make a noncommittal statement: “I’ll talk with the manager involved and review the policy for any exceptions. Then I’ll let you know exactly how we plan to resolve the issue.”

You’ve sidestepped an argument that would ensue if you doubted the Know-It-All’s assertions or recollection of facts. Instead, you’ve simply stated your next steps.

3. Lead them to reexamine opinions by asking reflective questions.

Avoid what they will perceive as an insult by taking care not to challenge their opinion or recommendation. Instead, acknowledge their expertise, but lead them to rethink what they’ve said.

For example: “What if we changed the deadline? Do you think that would make a difference in employee reaction?” Or “I was thinking that we might be able to simplify this system. Obviously, I don’t have your expertise. But that seems logical to me. Is it possible to modify this generic program?”

Statements elicit arguments. Questions lead to reflection.

4. Express disagreement tentatively, giving them think-it-over time.

Many times, ego stands between you and the right approach or answer — their ego, not yours. Many people can say “I don’t know” or “I was wrong” quite easily. But not Know-It-Alls.

To allow them to change their position on an issue, they need time to find a face-saving “reason” to come back to you with a different answer. When you think ego is the barrier to change, emailing may be the best approach. State your different answer or position in an email so they can “think it over” before replying.

They'll often come back with a good "reason" they were wrong: "Yes, you may be right in light of the new regulations on X. I wasn't aware of that yesterday when I said blah, blah, blah."

Such a "reason" leaves their ego intact — while you get agreement!

5. Lead them to argue with the other side.

These questions can do the trick: "I hear what you're saying. Would all attorneys (or accountants or engineers) agree with you on that approach?" (If they're honest, they'd have to admit all attorneys don't agree on anything!)

Or probe with, "Can you think of who might disagree with you on that position?" Likely, they'll typically come up with a name or two — Tom, Dick, or Harriett. Then your next line should be: "Hmm. What would Tom probably advocate? And how about Harriett — what's her take on a project like this?"

Here's what you're doing with such an approach: You're encouraging this Know-It-All with genuine expertise (which you personally may not have) to give you insight to the counter argument.

The goal with a Know-It-All: As much as possible, avoid tangling with their ego. Instead, use tactful phrasing and questions as you dig for the best opinion, information, or approach.



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