

**Tips for Managing ‘Tricky’ Team Members**

**1. Keep an open mind and get to the heart of the issue**:

When working with a member of the team who we perceive to be challenging, it is very easy to jump to conclusions and make assumptions about the underlying causes of their behaviour e.g. “they’re just being lazy” or “they just don’t respect me.” Before rushing to judgement, take the time to try to really get to the heart of what is causing the issue. This will usually mean a lot of listening. Very often the issue relates to a lack of confidence i.e. it’s not that the person doesn’t want to do something rather they are not sure how to but fear losing face by being honest about this. Invest the time in asking them about their views on what is happening and using open questions try to get at the underlying causes. Don’t expect these to come out immediately – it may take several conversations for the trust to be built. However, once you do understand the underlying cause, it is much easier to begin to improve the situation.

1. **Conduct or capability?**

This is closely linked to the first point. When you are trying to get to the underlying cause of the issue, one of the key questions that you should keep in mind is whether this is a situation where the person ‘can, but is choosing not to’ (a conduct issue) or if they are genuinely struggling with what is being asked of them (more likely to be a capability issue). Again, you should be careful in rushing to judgement, but the answer to this question will help you work with them to decide the best way forward. It is important to keep in mind that most of us don’t like to admit when we are struggling with something and many will prefer to mask it as a conduct issue rather than lose face by admitting they lack confidence in a certain area.

1. **Remain highly professional at all times**:

It’s vital that you remain the picture of professionalism in all your dealings with such a colleague so that there can be no criticism of your conduct now, or in the future. If we’re completely honest, this is not always as easy as it sounds. However, it is vital that you maintain the highest levels of professionalism at all times – remember you’re the leader here. Even if you don’t believe your colleague is maintaining the same standards, it is vital that you do. As tempting as it might be to let those standards slip occasionally, this could well come back to bite you in the long run.

1. **1:1 is usually best:**

Most people won’t appreciate you tackling sensitive issues in front of their colleagues. Such an approach rarely ends well. Equally, from your own perspective you shouldn’t have to tackle tricky situations in front of an audience. This can be challenging if the person is deliberately raising issues when others are present, but the phrase “I’m very happy for us to discuss this afterwards” is one that can be very useful at such times.

1. **Be specific, and clear about your expectations:**

You can’t expect someone to respond positively to your concerns if they don’t know exactly what the issue is. This means communicating very clearly what your concerns are and stating what you expect to see instead e.g. “it is really important that you arrive to our meetings on time”. If your school has a set of agreed values or a code of conduct, it may be useful to refer to these.

1. **Be prepared to follow-up and to hold people to account**:

One of the biggest mistakes leaders sometimes make is forgetting to ‘follow-up’. Once you have made your expectations clear, or put a programme of support in place, your colleague needs to know that the issue will be revisited regularly to make sure change is occurring. This will likely mean further meetings and conversations where you both review how things are going. Without this level of accountability, it is unlikely that things will change significantly. Remember, the follow-up is also an opportunity to celebrate and appreciate improvements.

1. **Be prepared to be flexible in your approach:**

This is perhaps a slightly controversial one, after all you’re the leader and why should you have to change your approach? You should just treat everyone the same, right? The reality is that by being adaptable and flexible in how you deal with people, you increase your chances of success. For example, if you know you have a colleague who has a tendency to be difficult in staff meetings, consider speaking with them in advance so they have the opportunity to share any concerns they might have beforehand, rather than when everyone else is present.

1. **Constantly reflect on your own approach and ask what can I do differently?**

Brilliant leaders are reflective leaders. They know that however good they are, there is always room for improvement. They constantly ask how they can do things differently to be a better leader. This applies for how we interact with our colleagues. Take the time to reflect on how you have been approaching a certain situation or colleague – is this definitely the best way? Is there another approach you could try that might be more effective? Considering your own approach to professional relationships is a sign of a leader with a high level of emotional literacy. After all, it’s much quicker and easier for you to change than to wait for someone else to!

1. **Kindness is not the enemy of assertiveness:**

It is entirely possible to be both kind and assertive at the same time. The goal here is not to become some sort of Alan Sugar or Simon Cowell figure! Throughout your interactions with a tricky colleague you can, and should, demonstrate a real sense of care and compassion for the person you are working with, but at the same time not be afraid to be very clear about your concerns and where / why you feel change is needed.

**10. Seek support and escalate if necessary**:

Working with colleagues you find tricky to manage can be very demanding. It requires ultra-high levels of professionalism and an equally high level of emotional intelligence. If at any point you feel you need to, seek help and support from a senior colleague. Equally, there may come a time when, despite your best efforts, nothing you have done seems to have worked and the only option left is to escalate to a senior member of staff.