Establishing boundaries with difficult people

While most of our social interactions go off without a hitch, finding yourself in a situation with someone who shows blatant disrespect for personal boundaries and common courtesy can be a truly off-putting or even frightening experience.

The ability to first recognize and then effectively deal with difficult people is a highly specialized skill. Developing this kind of understanding can really help you to better understand, and communicate more effectively with others.

Tips and tools you can use

Hostile, aggressive people can be very intimidating. They infringe on personal boundaries, with intent on bullying their way into control. Here are three common types of hostile or aggressive people, and strategies for dealing effectively with each:

The type	Typical behaviors	Strategies for effective communication
The Sherman Tank	This type comes out charging and abusive. They can come across as abrupt, intimidating, and overwhelming. "The Tank" often attacks individual behaviors and personal characteristics.	• Give them a little time to run down. • Don't worry about being polite; get in any way you can. • Get their attention, calling them by name, or deliberately sitting or standing. • Maintain eye contact. • Ask "the Tank" to sit down —this can help a "Tank" to focus and to give up some control. • State your own opinions forcefully. • Don't argue with what the other person is saying or try to cut them down. • Be ready to be friendly.
The Sniper	“The Sniper” uses a more covert approach, attacking with potshots, innuendos, and non-playful teasing under the guise of friendliness. The Sniper may use social constraints to create a protected place from which to strike.	• Smoke them out. Don't let social convention stop you. • Provide them with an alternative to a direct contest. • Don't focus on their point of view. • Do move on, and try to resolve the issue. • If you are witness to a sniping situation, stay out of it, but insist that it stop in front of you.

The Exploder	Characterized by tantrums and irate attacks, “The Exploder” is barely under control, and often feels physically or psychologically threatened. The Exploder is likely to show anger followed by blame or suspicion.	• Give them time to run them down on their own. • If they don't run down, cut into the tantrum with a neutral phrase, such as "Stop!" • Show them that you take them seriously. • If possible, take a breather. Take them aside for a private dialogue. Seek out the true reasons for the aggressive behavior.

Remember that the first step in dealing with difficult people is to develop control of the one person that you can control—yourself. Be sure to:

- Identify, understand, and counteract boundary violations.
- Recognize that people can encourage difficult behavior in others.
- Control your own emotions and respond with a level head to avoid reciprocating problematic behavior.
- Calmly communicate how someone’s inappropriate behavior affects you.
- Move discussions from discord to mutual agreement.
- Where needed, enlist another person to help enforce your boundaries.

By recognizing the methods they use, you can better understand how to deal with them in a productive manner, and maintain your personal boundaries with integrity.