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## **How to Hug a Cactus: Seeing Beyond the Spikes**

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On a recent trip to Arizona, I visited the Desert Botanical Gardens in Scottsdale. There I found an array of desert plants, including many varieties of cacti. There were cacti that looked liked octopi, and some that were called "teddy bear!" The very idea of calling a cactus a "teddy bear" seemed to me to be an oxymoron, and maybe the Arizona heat went to my head, but I felt that I needed to try one out; just for the heck of it. And so I hugged one of them. As I looked closer, I realized that if you stroked the cactus the right way, the needles didn't hurt you. Only when you stroked it the *wrong* way did it get feisty (so to speak.) It occurred to me that people are just like that: it is only when you rub them the wrong way that they are prickly.



Just like cacti, these people come in many varieties. Some talk constantly. Some never listen. Some interrupt. Some are lazy. Some are critical of everything you do. Some are overly competitive. Some undermine you. Some blame you for everything that goes wrong. Some make you feel like you need to watch your back. Some are just plain rude and obnoxious. And unfortunately, some of them are all of these...and more!

An internet search for books on dealing with "difficult" people (read: cacti) showed just how many people are struggling with this in the workplace. There is an amazing array of books on "managing" difficult people, "handling" difficult people, "dealing" with them, finding out what "they" don't want you to know, and "getting along" with them. One of the books I found even referred to people as "toxic" and the book was about how to "decontaminate" them. The question is, do these books really help? Don't they just make the situation worse by placing negative filters in our minds, making us think that these people are our enemies and that we need strategies and game plans to deal with them?

If we let the negative filters creep in, we subconsciously start to "label" people: "Oh, she is really rude," "he is just a whiner," or "she is sooooo bad-tempered." When this happens, we start *expecting* them to be that way! If people want to be prickly, they will be, but it seems that the more we expect people to be difficult, the more difficult they will be. People generally live up or down to our expectations, and when they do, we can be secretly smug, saying to ourselves (and others): "See, that is exactly what I am talking about." They justify what we think when they do what we expect. Yet, it is often our own attitude toward them that makes or breaks our interactions, or that makes them good or bad.

Granted, there are times when all of us have been completely frustrated with a member of our staff, or when we have wanted to ask a customer to go elsewhere and never come back, but the reward comes when we can turn these people around. I don't wish to undermine the difficulty of dealing with people who are belligerent, lazy or just plain rude, but I do want to make a case for seeing beyond the spikes.

It is no wonder that people are sometimes prickly: the stress of the 24-7 culture, attempting to balance work and life, driving on over-crowded roads at rush hour, not to mention dealing with normal but stressful life events such as house moving or sometimes just having a bad hair day (or week, month or year). Yet when we try to deal with the spikes rather than the person underneath, we are creating a recipe for disaster.

Naturally, it's easy to recognize when someone *e/se* is being prickly! Lest we think of ourselves as perfect, let's remember that each of us has our own variety of prickles hiding somewhere inside. For many of us, they might be so well hidden that only some rare situation brings it out. For others, it is right there on our sleeves for all to see.

When we see the proverbial cactus starting to emerge in others, sometimes it is useful to start by examining ourselves. Are you overreacting? Is this behavior typical of this person? Is it becoming a pattern? Are they just doing a great job of pressing your buttons? (We all have them!) Most prickly people are not aware of how they come over to others. They often work from the negative side of their personality.

There is a lot of value in trying to understand others' points of view. Often, when we change our own attitudes toward them, and challenge our own beliefs about what makes them "wrong," we can slowly find ways of working with them. My mother once told me that each of us can find a connection with every other person, but in some that "golden nugget" is buried much deeper than others, and we have to dig deep to find it. Finding that nugget might just be the key to calming the spikes.

Get me that spade and some good gardening gloves!

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