

## Managing Personal Relationships

Here are a few techniques that can be used if you feel that you are not getting on with, or not getting through to, someone with whom you are dealing.

First, pay attention to the need for clear communication. Use simple unambiguous language, and explain the reasons for your proposals or requirements. Never get angry and always be polite (but not unctuous). Remember that aggressive and demanding people often have fairly thick skins. And obsessive people often feel that something is being hidden from them. Tell both sorts of person that you intend, if they agree, not to beat about the bush. They will always agree and then you can deal with any problem in blunt terms.

Next, pay attention to your relative status. We all communicate with each other as superiors, equals or inferiors and we frequently adopt different approaches to the same person at different times. Problems invariably arise, in work as well as at home, when one party's approach does not meet the expectations of the other.

The usual starting point in any analysis of expectations is that we all expect to be treated with respect, and with due recognition of our different skills, experiences and perspectives. For instance, we should not talk down to Ministers (although some colleagues seem to forget this) or to the public (ditto) and Ministers should not talk down to us. Sometimes, however, this approach needs to be abandoned. For instance, you may need to defer to a Minister or manager, e.g. if time is short, or if he or she clearly has much more experience or knowledge than you, or if he or she has already heard enough and wants you to accept their decision. The need for you to do so is usually signalled pretty clearly. If you are slow to notice the signals then problems will certainly follow. Equally, excessive use of deference can also cause problems. Ministers, managers and the public expect to deal, most of the time, with experienced professional civil servants. Lengthy displays of deference will cause them to write you off as inferior in ability as well as status.

So if your relationship with someone seems to be fraught or distant, or if you suspect that they actively dislike you, consider carefully whether you are signalling superiority, equality or inferiority when they are expecting something else. It is then usually best if you change your approach to meet the expectations of the other, but it might be necessary to signal strongly to the other person that you expect them to adopt a different approach when dealing with you.

Finally, we need to work with people as they really are, not as we would wish them to be. We are each, to different extents, extrovert, introvert, practical, creative, analytical, driven by beliefs, flexible and structured. Some people will be quite different from you, and you will think them decidedly odd. You must put all this on one side when assessing whether the person concerned is talking sense and acting effectively. But you should learn to go further and to some extent adapt your own behaviour to the character of the person with whom you are dealing. If you proudly treat everyone in the same way, you are certainly not dealing effectively with many of them.