

Difficult People

WORD COUNT 983

Duncan's arms were folded, he wouldn't look me in the eye and tapped his feet impatiently under the desk. His secretary breezed into his office with cups of coffee, smiling nervously, then quickly left, shutting the door. It was like sitting in a goldfish bowl. Duncan's sales team were in the outer office hanging on the phone or typing furiously on the computer.

"Is this going to take long?" he said sighing, looking at his watch. His expression was deadpan.

The office was stuffy with the smell of the early morning bacon sandwich still lingering. It reminded me I'd had no breakfast. Helping myself to a digestive biscuit, my bracelet jangled as I leant across the desk. Judging by his expression, the noise irritated him.

I shook my head, smiling sweetly "No, it won't take long."

Lying didn't become me but I wasn't going to let on. Meet Duncan Bradshaw, sales manager extraordinaire, winner of umpteen awards, who had doubled sales targets in the last two years. Only problem was no-one could work with him. He was known as a bully, aggressive and difficult. It was my job to find out why. Angus, the

big boss, told me they didn't want to sack him, "we just want him to be a team player," he said.

Duncan's desk gave little away. It was tidy and clear except for a pile of files, a computer, blackberry and landline. The framed colour picture of a woman and a young girl was on one of the shelves. They looked as though they were on holiday, seated at an outdoor café, smiling and squinting in the sun. It was the only personal detail I could detect. Here was an organised, highly efficient individual.

Duncan's piercing brown eyes challenged me. He gave short snappy answers, keen for the interview to be over so he could get back to work. He let slip he liked playing the guitar, so I suggested he should bring the instrument in for the next session. Playing the guitar was incongruous with being the office bully. I wanted to find out more.

I expected him to shout at me but he remained civil. This was in stark contrast to what his staff had told me. In their interviews, they had described him as aggressive and unpleasant.

I decided to cut it short. As I left his office, he insisted in walking me to the lift which I thought was strange. As soon as we were in the corridor, he pulled me into an empty meeting room and locked the door.

Startled, I ran behind the boardroom table but before I could reach the phone, he yanked it out of the wall.

He seemed bigger, almost puffed up like a fairytale monster from my daughter's storybook. I felt terrified. Even though I was wearing my high heels, I felt tiny and insignificant.

"This is silly," I said. "Let me out."

“What’s all this about?” he shouted. “Why has Angus hired you? As if I haven’t got enough to do. I have to meet impossible sales targets week in, week out.”

My heart was rattling in my chest. I could feel sweat under my armpits and my face was burning up. You’re a professional, I said to myself, you can handle this. I understood now what his colleagues meant. It was as though a switch has been turned on and he’d become another person.

I told him the truth, that his colleagues found him unbearable to work with because of his bad temper. “How do you think your colleagues perceive you when you behave like this?” I asked him. “They feel bullied and humiliated,” I added.

To my surprise, he started laughing, wanting to know what I was supposed to do about it.

I explained how I was going to help him, but his expression grew thunderous again. “My job is to bring money into this company. They don’t realise how crucial it is to give 110% all the time.”

He sat down and buried his face in his hands. I could sense he was under pressure and suddenly I didn’t feel threatened anymore. He was like a brick wall being demolished, crumbling into little pieces.

Sitting down next to him, he told me quietly how his father had died recently and his teenage daughter was having problems at school. He rubbed his temples. I could see his eyes filling up with tears and becoming misty, although the expression was taut.

I fetched water from the cooler. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and took the glass of water. “I’m sorry,” he said.

He went towards the door, but I encouraged him to sit down again.

We talked openly about his problems, how badly he missed his father. His wife had been on the verge of leaving him, but had decided to try again. I suggested he should organise a family holiday, at least two weeks. “The Lake District is good this time of year,” I said.

“I never get any time for myself. I’m on a treadmill. It’s all about work – I never stop. With the blackberry I’m on call 24/7,” he said.

“You need to talk to Angus,” I suggested, “and tell him how stressed you feel. You need to share the load and delegate tasks to your team, make them feel part of it. Let them share the responsibility – after all you’re not running the company single-handed.”

He looked at me with renewed interest as if I’d given him a pair of glasses and he could see properly for the first time.

We remained in the room for some time. I didn’t want to break my rapport with him so I just let him talk. We ended up hugging.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, unlocking the door.

“I’ll find my own way out,” I said. “Same time next week.”