

## Work lessons straight from a country song

**Sometimes at work, losing is OK. You just have to know when to fold 'em.**

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Growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was routinely exposed to second-hand Kenny Rogers music. It was common then — parents enamored with crossover country music didn't know better.

Though I've suffered harmful side effects — an irrational fear of beards and an uncontrollable attraction to women named "Lucille" — the Rogers-ization of my youth wasn't all bad. In fact, the best-known lyrics from his hit song "The Gambler" have proved invaluable workplace advice:



"You got to know when to hold 'em/know when to fold 'em/know when to walk away/and know when to run."

If you boil this down — and remove it from the context of illicit gambling — it's a call to pick your battles, an affirmation that sometimes it's OK to lose. And it turns out Kenny and I aren't the only ones who think so.

Geoffrey Tumlin is a communication consultant and head of a Texas-based leadership development company. He's also a West Point graduate, a pragmatist and author of the new book "Stop Talking, Start Communicating," which encourages people to not fear losing.

"The general rule I stand by is that we're rushing into way too many confrontations and we over-respond," Tumlin said. "Whether that's reading just enough of an email to realize that I should be upset or thinking that every minor slight is something I need to respond to. We get defensive and that puts us on a path to mutually assured conversational destruction."

(For the record, "mutually assured conversational destruction" is my new favorite term.)

There are difficult people in every facet of our work lives, and as I've noted in past columns, there's

little hope of making them less difficult. Yet our basic human response is to meet resistance with force.

In his book, Tumlin writes: "Difficult people don't change. At the end of a conversation, the difficult person remains the same, but often we are in a weaker position. Difficult communication is frustrating — and occasionally exhausting — communication. Frustration acts like a multiplier, amplifying our responses, increasing the escalation and magnifying relational damage. Whatever happens, we lose."

This is the part of the column where "The Gambler" starts playing in the background and you hear Kenny's raspy voice "... know when to walk away ..." (I really wish newspapers came with sound.)

The problem is, it's easy to say "don't engage," but hard to stand down when Phil from accounting makes some snide remark about your cost-saving idea.

Tumlin said one of the keys to dealing with a difficult person is to maintain a laser focus on the goal of the conversation. At the end of the day, you're not this person's friend, and it doesn't matter whether you prevail in some sniping battle. What matters is: Did you accomplish your goal?

In his book, Tumlin suggests:

- Let go. Focus on your strategy and "let difficult people be difficult."
- Aim low. You know you're dealing with a person who's a pain, so keep your expectations modest.
- Get out. Try to accomplish what you need to accomplish — or at least something close to it — and then split. No need to linger and let a difficult conversation escalate.

It's also good to strategically defuse volatile situations. When someone comes at you, don't rise to that person's level of irritation. Throw cold water on it.

Tumlin writes that if someone says, "This is the worst report I've ever read!" you can neutralize things by responding with, "I'm sorry you didn't like it. I didn't mean to upset you."

I'm sure some of you fear that kind of response will make you appear weak. But consider the circumstances and your goals. Who cares what that person thinks? All that matters is you get what you need out of the conversation, that you manage relationships in a way that makes life as easy and productive as possible.

"We assume that we have to match strength with strength, but in so doing we're letting the other person set the tone of the conversation," Tumlin said. "If somebody comes at you at (level) 8 you want to come back with a (level) 8, 9 or 10. But by doing that, I'm giving away the keys to the conversation. Nobody can take my power to influence a conversation away from me except me. You're better off bringing it down to 2, 3 or 4 to regain control of the conversation."

This doesn't mean you put up with bullies. There are situations where you absolutely have to stand up to

people — that's the "know when to hold 'em" part. The key is knowing when to hold and when to fold, and the question you must ask yourself is: What will most help me accomplish my goal?

Kenny Rogers always seemed like an easygoing guy. So in that spirit, people in the workplace should learn to slow down their actions.

"It's all about thoughtfulness, keeping your thoughts ahead of your words," Tumlin said. "You do that and you're going to have the ability to avoid a lot of the dumb mistakes that are hurting us."

It's like The Gambler sang: "The secret to survivin'/is knowin' what to throw away and knowin' what to keep."

Strive to find your inner Kenny. And if you have a beard, please shave it off. Those things freak me out.

*TALK TO REX: Ask workplace questions — anonymously or by name — and share stories with Rex Huppke at [ijustworkhere@tribune.com](mailto:ijustworkhere@tribune.com), like Rex on Facebook at [facebook.com/rexworkshere](https://www.facebook.com/rexworkshere), and find more at [chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere](http://chicagotribune.com/ijustworkhere).*

Author Geoffrey Tumlin will be speaking in Chicago on Tuesday from 8:30 to 10 a.m. at University Center, 525 S. State St. For more information go to, <http://bigfrontier.org/index.php>