

# dealing with DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Are people difficult – or simply different? *That* is the question. In today's stressful workplace environments, everyone is struggling to manage their daily responsibilities. Often the greatest pressures come from the expectations our employers have in terms of harmonious relationships with our colleagues.

**W**hat if you love your job, but cannot stand your co-workers? Should you leave or 'soldier on' regardless? Many people grapple with this question.

For those of us who choose to stay, how do we make the best of the situation? The ability to work and get along with the most challenging types of people is a skill. We know that we cannot change people – but we often spend a lot of emotional energy trying to do just that. When we can accept that people are the way they are, our lives become more peaceful and balanced. If you have an assortment of people living 'rent free' in your head, then please read on. It is possible to learn how to manage yourself with difficult people.

Can you win with every person? Well, we certainly can give it our best shot. Once you acquire and then, more importantly, *apply* the expertise to, you will be able to communicate effectively with all types of personalities. Not only will you add to your repertoire of marketable skills, you will also be able to teach others how to treat you in the manner you deserve in every area of your life.

## LEARNED BEHAVIOURS

It is important to make the distinction between people who 'have' problems and people who 'are' problems – all of us have the occasional bad hair day.

Accepting one another's

humanness is something most people manage well. After all, we recognise other people's imperfections, moodiness, and life challenges as part of the human experience. We identify with our fellow man's daily 'sagas' as well as happy times. We give unconditional love to our children and we learn how to 'tolerate' our relatives. But what do we do with our peers, managers, customers, suppliers? People that we come across regularly in our professional lives who have mastered the art of pushing every conceivable button? Why is it that some people are triggered by another person's actions and words while others are not?

These are questions that I am frequently asked in many parts of the world. Perhaps you can now take some comfort in knowing that you are not alone! The significant point to make here is this: It is behaviour that sparks a particular reaction, not people.

Behaviour is learned therefore it can be re-learned. This fact alone should help you feel a lot better! There is a difference between 'responding' and 'reacting' to another person's behaviour. All of us have learned ways to adapt to our surroundings.

Our behaviours are shaped by a variety of influences. The primary influence is our family of origin. We are exposed to ideas and attitudes from our parents, siblings and family members. Our education systems,

cultures and socialisation affect and shape our 'world view'. Through these experiences we also acquire a lens through which we view ourselves. It is important to understand the powerful impact of such influences.

We are often egocentric when it comes to understanding others. Let me assure you that if someone else's behaviour upsets you, it rarely is 'all about you'. Difficult behaviour works to the degree that we allow it to work.

## THE REALITIES OF CHOICE

We all have a choice when it comes to people and situations. These choices are true in our professional and personal lives. The first choice we have is to accept circumstances as they are. This means that we are OK with things; we can 'live' with the status quo. If we cannot accept, then the second choice is to leave.

Some of us have made that choice in order to seek a happier state of being. We have left friendships, partners, jobs and we move on. If we choose to stay and we are looking for a different outcome, then the other significant choice available is to *change*. This means changing our attitude and response. As Kenny Rogers says in his song, *The Gambler*: "You have to know when to fold 'em, know when to hold 'em, know when to walk away and know when to run!"

If we choose to change our response rather than hope for others

to change theirs, we are on the right track. Anything else is merely wishful thinking.

Let's look at seven challenging behaviours used by people who have learned that they can act in a certain way in the world get results. For each type of challenge, there are powerful response options to 'disarm' and 'deflect' the unwelcome behaviour.

## THE DOMINATOR

This is a person who uses a bullying approach to get their way. They have learned that intimidation 'works'. They can be stubborn, loud, belligerent and overbearing.

Why do they behave this way? There are many explanations. Some people try to build their self-esteem at another person's expense – they dominate the situation in order to make themselves feel better and impose their agenda on others. Perhaps they were exposed to this kind of behaviour growing up and learned to use it, not realising the consequences of their actions.

It is important that we do not take this tyrannical, self-serving type of behaviour personally. By doing so, we allow ourselves to be the 'victim'. Instead, learn how to respect yourself so that others who threaten or attempt to 'coerce' you cannot succeed. Before encountering this kind of person it is essential that we really are prepared to assert ourselves and have planned and practiced our responses in advance. Remain

## retail support

objective by focusing on facts rather than emotions.

**THE WHINGER**

Nothing is more exhausting than buying into another person's negativity. People who complain about everything are often so conditioned in their pessimistic beliefs they have no awareness that positive responses are an option. They are emotionally invested in the problem rather than in the solution.

Some negativists learn to survive this way. If they manage to drag you down in the process then they have all the more reason to stay down.

There are alternatives available when encountering negativists. First, do not buy into the whinging. Remember that misery loves company. Give limited responses when they tell you everything that is wrong in the world. Eliminate the tendency to agree and ask them for solutions. It is possible that the person who displays a negative attitude has never been exposed to a positive role model. Perhaps their parents belittled them or minimised their successes. Validate their accomplishments in order to demonstrate belief in them.

**THE SPANNER IN THE WORKS**

This is a person who operates covertly. They are behind the scenes attempting to sabotage morale. If you do encounter them, they may mutter something under their breath with the deliberate intention to provoke you. The 'Spanner' loves to gossip and can never be trusted. It is important that you learn to confront this person and extract deeper meaning to clarify their intent. Expect that they will deny any wrongdoing. Your next step is to tell them you are the kind of person who appreciates open communication, and that they should feel comfortable expressing any concerns they may have about you, or the workplace in general. By setting a boundary with them, you are letting them know what kind of behaviour is acceptable to you. The objective is to remain calm and respond. Rather than

expect others to suddenly change their actions, concentrate on changing your own perceptions and actions.

**THE 'SILENT' SPANNER IN THE WORKS**

Sometimes, the most frustrating kind of conduct is the noiseless type. How do you deal with a person who doesn't communicate? There is often more behind the stony silence, yet the 'silent type' keeps people guessing.

Pay attention to what they are not saying.

Look at the body language for clues and ask open-ended questions to engage the person in conversation. Be aware of your own body language. Dealing with difficult situations requires emotional energy. Count to ten rather than verbalising too much. Too much talking on your part may encourage them to clam up even more. Maintaining an open posture will increase the likelihood of a dialogue and more openness on the part of the other person.

**THE PROCRASTINATOR**

There's no time like 'whenever'. The person who makes excuses and creates delays could be doing so for a number of reasons. Perhaps they are so overwhelmed they simply cannot decide what to do first. By doing nothing, they are releasing themselves from the responsibility of making decisions and mistakes. Sometimes people procrastinate because they are perfectionists. The pressure of not doing a task perfectly may propel them into a state of fear and indecisiveness.

On other occasions, the stalling tactics are deliberate – the procrastinator wants to avoid taking ownership. A law of physics states that 'a body at rest tends to stay at rest'. How does one get them moving?

One solution is to validate their accomplishments – however small. Demonstrating belief in their abilities gives them the opportunity to feel more confident. Another option is to involve them in the decision-making process to teach them the value of

accountability. This strategy helps them to get moving. If you assign a non-threatening task and ask for their input when setting a deadline, the person will slowly feel more comfortable about taking on more.

**THE DOOM AND GLOOM-ER**

Dealing with a person who possesses a defeatist mentality is hard work. They cannot see a way out and have no desire to move out of their chronic state of negativity. This individual is myopic – totally blind to positive outcomes. They often have low self-esteem and are convinced that indeed there is no Santa Claus! Their fatalistic view of the world has 'worked' for them for a long time. When confronted by such a pessimist the best option is to maintain your happy disposition and not allow yourself to become a naysayer. State your positive plan of action and future intentions and refer to optimistic outcomes. Be a positive role model and demonstrate your belief in them.

**THE EXPERT ADVICE-GIVER**

Lawrence J. Peter once said that, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still". This is the motto of the 'expert'. Trying to convince them that your argument holds more weight is simply a waste of energy.

Their ideas are unbeatable and they know it! They are able to whittle down your arguments with their insatiable need to be right. The best approach to take is to be prepared with concrete facts and data. Rather than investing time trying to sway them around to your way of thinking, acknowledge their strategies and ideas.

Refrain from the urge to show them up. Instead, when the 'expert' makes their point, validate them. If they are wrong, and it is evident that implementing their suggestions would be risky and costly to your organization, ask extensional questions. These questions begin with: "What would happen if...?" This line of questioning focuses on the issues and not the person. In other words, make the questions

situational rather than personal by asking them: "What would the outcome look like if we took option X instead of option Y?" You are the diplomat in this instance, maintaining objectivity rather than correcting them.

**WITHDRAW THE PAY-OFF**

With all types of difficult behaviour, one of the most powerful strategies is to 'withdraw the pay-off'. Recognise that difficult people know how to 'win'.

When we demonstrate that we have another response, they begin to 'lose'. I am not advocating a manipulative approach – that would put our own motives into question. What I am recommending is that you stop playing their game. For example, antagonists know they can wind you up. So a proactive approach is to ask a question. Let's say you attend a business meeting for a few hours and, when you come back to work, one of your team members expresses their annoyance and frustration about the fact they couldn't get hold of you. Imagine that they expressed themselves in an angry tone. Instead of reacting, a proactive response would be to offer your help now that you have returned.

**FOCUS ON RESPECTING YOURSELF**

Ultimately, we need to pick our battles. We decide whether we are going to deal with another person's difficult behaviour or simply let it go and put it all in perspective. If you experience stress around other people's behaviour, recognise that you always have options available. The most powerful choice is to communicate your point of view rather than avoid the situation. By asserting your position you are managing and respecting yourself, and therefore teaching others how you wish to be treated. You are your most valuable asset.

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