



Handling Conflict with Difficult Colleagues

No college, university, or department is free of difficult people, and, as a result, conflict is inevitable. The choice for us is not *will* we deal with difficult people but *how* we will deal with them. As individuals, we have each developed our own preferred method of handling difficult people. As administrators, we will need some new options and new models in order to deal successfully with difficult people.

Unproductive Conflict Styles

It is important to examine some styles that difficult people use to get their ways. Here are the six most common styles.

The Bully

The most popular style for those with the most power is to simply be a bully. If they cannot solve the conflict through shouting ("Give him what he wants if it will shut him up!"), then there are always threats and intimidation upon which to draw. From the bully's perspective, "might makes right." The sad truth is that they often get their way even when that way resulted in poor productivity and low morale.

The Complainer

Complainers present themselves as weak victims, unable to solve problems because of others. They make it clear that they are inundated with problems and doing better than anyone has a right to expect. They hope that someone will rescue them by taking on the conflict.

The Procrastinator

The procrastinator simply puts any problem on a back burner. Their motto is "Let sleeping dogs lie." Unfortunately, they can see only sleeping dogs.

The Guerrilla Fighter

Guerrilla fighters use insidious sarcasm and criticism to browbeat their "enemies" into feeling that they were stupid to even have raised the issue. They "shoot" from trees and bushes, attacking with no warning and catching the unarmed colleague unaware. Guerrilla fighters insult others in public, demeaning them in an attempt to disarm them. They might use remarks such as "Mr. Negative will now speak."; "How's that black cloud over your head?"; "Not having a good day, are you?"; "Watch out! You're about to agree with someone!" The guerrilla fighter believes that he can feel smart if he makes you feel dumb.

The Expert

A most frustrating style is the expert. Often bright and often right, these people refuse to ever be wrong. They will wear you down with data, credentials, and at times long, involved arguments. They will believe whoever knows the most is the winner. Getting your ideas heard by them is almost impossible.

The Icicle

The most difficult style to manage that I have found is the icicle. The icicles freeze up at the first sign of conflict. When asked what they thought, they would say nothing. When confronted about where they stood, they replied, "Not sure yet." When asked if anything was wrong, they said, "Not now. Everything is fine . . . just fine." The icicle believes that whoever is the quietest wins: If you say nothing, you cannot be attacked.

This short list of six difficult people is only the beginning and reveals one common theme: Difficult people are poor problem solvers and hope to steer any responsibility away from themselves. We need a new model to deal with difficult people, in which problems get solved and individuals accept responsibility for their part in conflict management. After examining and teaching these observations in dozens of study groups in colleges, universities, businesses and hospitals, I realized that a major barrier to developing a healthy model for managing conflict is that most of us have never seen or experienced a healthy model.

A Profile of the Difficult Person

Difficult people share certain characteristics.

- They have a predictable abrasive style of behavior. You can count on them! If they complain on Monday and you miss it, don't worry because they'll do it again on Tuesday.
- Nearly everyone finds them difficult—not just you.
- They are certain to keep all blame outside themselves. It is never their fault.
- They rob you of time and energy. A minute with a difficult person is like an hour with anyone else. Furthermore, they do not even have to be present to affect you. Someone can just mention their names and you immediately become tense.
- Their behavior is almost always out of proportion to the problem. Like 'Chicken Little', they get hit in the head with an acorn and assume the sky is falling.
- They are terrible problem solvers. This has nothing to do with their intelligence, skills, or abilities. Many difficult people are very skilled and bright and yet do not know how to work through differences with others. Difficult people are only difficult when they are not getting their way. From their perspective, they know best and are blind to the positive possibilities in other options or the negative consequences of their own plans.

Tools You Can Use

The following guidelines for working with difficult people to resolve conflict are derived from seminars and study groups.

Stand Up

Once an acceptable emotional climate has been established and the anger is down to an acceptable level, be certain to stand up. By that term I do not mean physically stand, though sometimes that can be important. By standing up, I mean presenting yourself in such a fashion that you avoid body language that says either "I am here to fight" or "I am here to be trampled." The healthy message is "I am not here either to fight or run away. Rather, I am here to be taken seriously and to solve a problem." Too often our very stance makes conflict resolution impossible.

Talk Straight

Once the body language is correct, it is necessary to confront in an appropriate place—if possible, in private. Never embarrass anyone anywhere. Add to this an appropriate time so that the issue can be considered and discussed thoroughly.

Once you have identified the appropriate place and time, then talk straight. Be clear about what you want and what the issue is. Keep your concerns short and to the point. When you are angry, you are not getting what you want. Therefore, state clearly your wants and needs. Have you noticed, however, that it is not so much what people say but the way they say it that affects others? Talking straight means that your words, tone of voice, and body language all send the same message; they are congruent. When they are not, they send a mixed or double message, a common phenomenon of conflict.

Listen

After you have presented your concerns, stop and listen to the other person's response. Our usual impulse is to talk or get away, but listening is one of the most powerful ways of changing behavior. The flip side is also true: One of the least effective ways to change someone's behavior is to talk. But what do we usually do in conflict? We talk. We do what is least effective. We do need a two-way conversation, but the challenge is to set the example by listening first and then clarifying the conflict. Send it out and then check it out.

Avoid Triangles

Up to this point, I have emphasized three points: stand up, talk straight, and listen. Before proceeding to the next step, it is important to mention *triangling*: Avoid asking someone to express your problem to another person for you.

A few rules for staying out of triangles: Never do for anyone what that person can do for him or herself. Always separate your problems from the victim's problem. Sue's problem was with Harold. Your problem is with Sue. You must deal with Sue, not with Harold.

What it boils down to is this: Any time you rescue someone, that someone perceives you as a persecutor and will attempt to make you a victim.

Solve the Problem!

There are nine basic steps to solving a problem:

Identify the Emotional Climate

First, assess how angry the individual is. If he or she is very angry, then he or she is not very likely to be rational or even able to hear what I say. Neither is the person likely to hear or think straight until some of the anger has been drained. Therefore, allow a few minutes for a cooling off time. Then spend a minute or two just listening, trying to understand the problem. The worst thing you can say is, "Calm down. Just calm down!" This only makes the person angrier. As anger goes up, listening goes down. As anger rises, thinking falls.

Identify the Problem

After you have stopped the flooding, then identify the problem from the other's perspective. This includes the person's frame of reference as well as his feelings about the issue. Here is the question to ask, "I wonder what the problem is as you see it? Tell me in a sentence or two." Why do I add in a sentence or two? Time is important, and without that limitation, people will talk forever. By asking the question and defining the length of their answer, you can bounce the ball into their court. This forces them to think. Have you ever tried to stay angry and think at the same time? It cannot be done.

Stay Focused on the Problem

Once the problem has been identified, stay on it. Watch for the person's looping to other issues. It is called "looping" because the person presents you with a problem and then hops about like a jumping bean. When this happens, the person will leave your office half an hour later and you still will not know why s/he came to see you.

Some people are masterful loopers. When they start to loop, we have to say, "That's another problem. Let's stay with this one." Everyone has many problems and can go in many directions. Your goal is to be keenly aware of the present problem and not wander from it.

Resist Placing Blame

Resist blaming once the process has begun. It is easy during conflict to turn to blaming. The conversation becomes, "Not my fault. I know who did it. I can tell you exactly who did it!" It is

possible to know who did it and still not solve the problem. It is even possible to fire someone and not solve the problem.

The goal is to move to problem solving. Remember, even if you discover who created the problem, the problem still must be fixed. It may well be essential to identifying the creator of problems. But to solve a problem, the major focus must be on fixing it.

Avoid Name-Calling

Avoid put downs, discounts, and name-calling. A part of you will want to say, "You are at fault . . . irresponsible . . . unconcerned . . . stupid . . . or incompetent." That approach is pointless. Instead, tell the person what those words mean. Instead of telling an employee he or she is slow, say, "I want all six reports by 3:00 p.m." In place of saying, "You're irresponsible." Say, "I want the material filed alphabetically rather than chronologically and I want it completed by 4:00 p.m. today."

Always focus on the behavior. General terms only get in the way. Telling someone that he or she is a slow worker is not helpful. Be specific about what the person is doing or what you want accomplished. General complaints cause further conflict. If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it.

Develop Alternatives

Ask the person to list possible alternative solutions to the problem. Avoid suggesting alternatives yourself. If you propose a solution and it does not work, the person will blame you. If your proposal does work, then that person will continue to expect solutions from you. When it is his or her problem, it is critical that the person supply the alternatives to the problem.

You may be asking, "But how do we keep this person from doing something counter-productive?" The answer becomes step seven.

Evaluate the Alternatives and Select One

Evaluate the alternatives with the person in light of their costs. Now what kind of costs might there be? Money, time, personnel, and public relations are only a few, but all are important. When you ask the person "What would it cost?", you are not saying the idea is bad; rather you are asking for an evaluation as to its cost and chance of success.

If the proposal causes more problems than it solves, you have a right to say that it is not acceptable. In discovering a solution to the problem, the person must present an alternative that will be effective and at a price that both of you are willing to pay.

Be Clear about Procedure

Before concluding the conversation, discuss the procedure in detail. Make sure that the person fully understands what specific steps will solve or alleviate the problem. State how you understand the suggested alternative will be handled. Who will be responsible, what is the time

frame, how are you going to measure the results? Unless the person understands and accepts all these points, the plan will never happen.

Evaluate the Success

The last step is to have some way to evaluate the proposed solution. The proposal will be difficult to manage if it cannot be measured. Remember, if you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it. You can ask directly, "How can we measure if we achieved what we wanted?" Always check out how the other person understood both how things will be done (the procedure) and what it will look like if successful (measurement).

The Back-Up Plan

In some conflicts, we are not going to get what we want. In fact, there will be times when we will get nothing at all. The back-up plan is what you are going to do if you do not get what you want. Never go into a conflict situation without being clear just how you will react to a "no" or rejection; otherwise, you will leave angrier than when you started. Such frustration usually leads to irrational behavior. Therefore, have clear in your mind what your options are if you cannot get what you feel you need or what needs to be done. Be ready with a second or even third option.

Furthermore, never let a person leave your presence without a back-up plan if you have rejected his plans and needs. Sometimes you must say no. In such cases, ask the person whose request you are turning down, "Now that you did not get what you wanted, how are you going to handle the situation?" Talk about the back-up plan right then and there, not later. The rule is never let anyone leave your presence feeling helpless. Discuss alternatives, consequences, cost, and multiple options even if they are just temporary. The individual may not get what is wanted, but at least he can leave with constructive directions and a sense that something can be done.

Also, s/he will feel that s/he has been heard and understood. People must always feel that they have a way out even if it is not a perfect or satisfactory one. Conflict, while inevitable, is not the problem. The problem and solution is the manner in which conflict is managed. Whichever style you may use, keep in mind: Everyone is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity. That includes you!

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