

## **WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE SUPPLEMENTARY HANDOUT**

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### **DEFINITION**

#### **What is a difficult person?**

**Definition:** Difficult Person (DP): Anyone who causes anyone else irritation, upset, stress, anxiety

**If you see someone as difficult, they probably see you as difficult**

**So all of us are difficult to someone else, at least sometimes**

#### **Levels of difficulty:**

**1<sup>st</sup> level – everybody, some of the time**

**2<sup>nd</sup> level – affect more than just a few people in a negative way on a regular basis**

**3<sup>rd</sup> level – purposely hurt/harm others; rare; best thing to do is avoid**

#### **Is This is a Battle Worth Fighting?**

**The first decision to make is, is this a battle worth fighting? Is the DP just annoying, or actually disruptive to team functioning?**

**CAUTION:** If you decide to “just ignore it,” make sure you can really let go of the problem; otherwise, resentment will build up and be expressed in a dysfunctional way: a) we drop hints to the DP instead of clear communication b) we gossip about people to others instead of confronting them directly c) we end up avoiding the person entirely

### **KNOW YOURSELF**

**Change Yourself:** You can only change self, not others... at least not directly

#### **Reacting vs. Responding:**

**When you react, it's automatic, reflexive – you've have lost control;**

**When you respond, you're in control, you retain personal integrity; you're not buying into DP's framework**

**Transactional analysis:** DPs usually coming from critical, punishing parent, or frightened or temper-tantrum child

**Your goal: come from mature adult; or sometimes nurturing parent or playful, creative child**

#### **Main goal in working with DP: stay in control of yourself**

**Pay attention to your emotions, thoughts, behavior/actions (verbal/nonverbal behavior)**

#### **Catch it, Check it, Change it:**

**Be aware of your emotional, cognitive, verbal, nonverbal responses (catch)**

**Make sure they're what you want them to be (check);**

**otherwise change them (change)**

Avoid flight (passive) or fight (aggressive) reactions – instead, try for a steady presence

Stand your ground with self-control, integrity, kindness, and understanding

Emotions: Recognize your emotions, but don't be driven by them

Never be defensive – it's always either aggressive or passive

Gaining control of your emotions moves you out of victim mode, connects you with who you want to be

Negative emotions are not bad – they show us something is wrong

No one can "make" you feel anything – it is always a choice

Identify emotions, don't stuff them

Only two emotions: love and fear

EX: How do you feel with DP (angry, frustrated; use descriptors, bodily sensations); what are you afraid of? How would you like to feel? (this is your bottom-line emotional goal)

Thoughts (Cognitions and Stories)

Your cognitions about the DP are expressed through the stories you tell about the DP; stories reinforce feelings and vice-versa;

Ask yourself, does your story about the DP improve the situation or does it simply negative attitudes, become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and escalate conflict?

We tend to tell global stories that justify our emotions: "He's such a jerk. No wonder I can't get him to be a good team member."

Once we have a story, we tend to stick with it, despite disconfirming evidence; so we ignore better behavior in the DP

Our story is just that – a story – from our perspective; we tend to focus on how difficult, stupid, mean, irresponsible the other person is and how unfairly they treat you; with each telling the villain becomes more vile and you become more virtuous

Unfortunately, usually the story doesn't solve the problem

The one-sided view represented by most stories keeps you from really seeing the other person's perspective; without doing that, you can't move forward

Change negative stories to more positive stories

EX: What's your story about the DP? Tell a more positive one. What's the DP's story about you?

DPs can be your best teachers: about yourself; about how to work with other DPs in difficult situations

Turn DP into mentors – what can you learn from them?; ask them directly to help you – be more forthright, more task-oriented, hold higher standards etc.

EX: What can you learn from your DP?

**KNOWING YOUR "ENEMY"**

Difference is most common cause of difficulties between people

When people have the same priorities, misunderstanding or conflict is unlikely – people with different primary intents can drive each other crazy

### Different personality types

- Get it done – task-oriented
- Get it right – perfectionistic
- Get along – approval-seeking
- Get appreciated – attention-seeking
- Everyone wants to be cared about, treated with kindness, compassion

When people want to get it done and fear it is not being done, they become more controlling; when people want to get it right and fear it will be done wrong, they become more perfectionistic; when people want to get along and they fear punishment or rejection, they become more withdrawn or approval-seeking; when people want to get appreciation and fear they are not, their behavior becomes more attention-seeking, forcing others to notice them

For a team effort to succeed, everyone needs to feel valued and appreciated, even the difficult person: avoid splitting, separating team into good and bad

Find out what the DP needs: usually understanding, acknowledgment, validation, inclusion, appreciation, recognition, being right, achieving the goal

Then give it

Figure out what's important to the person and acknowledge – “If I understand you correctly, this is why this is important to you...”

EX: What does your DP need?

### Positive Intent

Even if you're wrong, look for the person's positive intention – trying to help team, trying to bring concerns to light, trying to contribute, trying not to make a mistake  
Always acknowledge intent overtly – “I see you're trying to get the task done, trying to get the task right, trying to build cooperation in the team; I appreciate your efforts”

Assume the best motives, rather than attacking which leads to defensiveness

State your positive intent directly – “I want to make sure we make the deadline; I want us to feel we're all on the same team”

Remember: Negativity breeds negativity: positivity defuses negative situations

Kindfrontation rather than confrontation, but combined with honesty

Try to bring compassion to every interaction; also patience

### **DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

If you can't get someone to change, the way you're going about it is probably wrong  
We usually try common sense strategies – sometimes they work, but when they don't work, we just keep trying them because they *make sense*

When the DP doesn't respond, we try more of the same (only louder)

Underlying dynamic: The more we keep trying the failed strategy, the more the negative behavior increases (dysfunctional pattern)

## To change someone's problem behavior, change your solution

### STEPS TO CHANGING THE PROBLEM

1. Step 1 – define the problem.

We usually define the problem globally – “She’s so negative”; “He’s such a know-it-all”; then our demands for change are equally global: “Be more productive”; “Show some initiative”; “Keep me in the loop”; “Be a team player”

It’s better to be specific: Who is doing what to whom and how is this behavior a problem?

2. Step 2 – figure out what you’re doing that is ineffectual, however sensible, or even seems to encourage the frustrating behavior
3. Step 3 - do something different

a. Try the opposite

**EXAMPLE:** Someone is always negative in team meetings. You keep telling them they need to be more supportive. They become more negative than ever. Change: Try the opposite. Tell them to keep it up, the negative input helps the team. Frame it as a positive to the entire team. The behavior may change, or at least become less intense.

b. Change the dynamic:

**EXAMPLE:** Let’s say the dynamic is push-pull. The more you push, the more the difficult person pulls away. You keep asking your co-worker to pull more of his own weight. He persists in blowing you off. Say instead you’re stuck. You don’t know how to complete the project. Back off. Let him experience the *natural consequences*. He may step up.

c. Create consequences:

**EXAMPLE:** A team member is disruptive and uncooperative. When a project comes along she really wants to work on, tell her no, she gets too upset under these pressures, and constitute the team without her.

d. Tell someone to do it more:

**EXAMPLE:** Someone is yelling at you. Instead of rejecting their anger, tell them they seem to have a lot to get off their chest, and encourage them to keep going, let it all out.

e. Try collaboration rather than ultimatums, nonconfrontation rather than confrontation:

**EXAMPLE:** Instead of “telling” something to carry out a task, try “I’d appreciate it if you would...”; instead of saying, “That’s a terrible idea,” try “That’s an interesting point. Let me think about it.”

f. Learn from effective role-models: Watch other people who handle the difficult person better and figure out what they’re doing

## **IMPORTANT GENERAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

- 1. Speak directly to the offending person, don't gossip about them (sometimes you may want a third person present, but usually it's better initially to talk one on one)**
- 2. When you confront someone directly, and they become defensive, don't attack – instead, try to understand their perspective and acknowledge their feelings**
- 3. Blending – reducing differences between you and dp; finding common ground, building rapport; nonverbal behavior is important in blending (tone of voice, posture); get on the same side as the person (use first person pl. language – “what do you suppose might happen if *we* were to... What would be the result if *we*...”)**
- 4. Listening skills – people want to be heard and understood; always first listen (and show listening – tracking behavior, hmm-mmm, repeating words) and understand (and show understanding – paraphrasing, clarifying, summarizing); confirming – “do you feel I hear you? Is there anything else?”; REMEMBER, listening is not agreeing but conveys respect**
  - **Ask Dp's perceptions of the problem *and of you***
  - **Let DP go first – don't interrupt or defend; be patient**
  - **Always respond positively and with appreciation to feedback: “Thank you for talking with me; I appreciate hearing your perspective; thanks for taking the time to let me know how you feel”**
  - **Don't take things personally**
  - **Don't be defensive: Avoid yes-but**
  - **Don't counterattack, this just escalates the situation**
  - **Don't withdraw**
  - **Clarify, paraphrase**
  - **Acknowledge feelings**
  - **Apologize without accepting blame (“I'm sorry you feel that way”; “I'm sorry this situation has been so upsetting for you”)**
  - **Avoid blaming DP**
  - **Compliment DP**
  - **Ask if DP wants to hear your perspective**
  - **I statements (from my point of view; the way I see it)**
  - **Stand your ground – command respect**
  - **Set limits – don't accept abuse, insults, shouting – but kindly**
  - **Be brief**
  - **Ask for ideas on how to resolve disagreement, move forward**
  - **Be willing to negotiate, compromise, collaborate (find creative 3<sup>rd</sup> alternatives)**
  - **Use softening words (What do you think of this idea? Maybe... perhaps; bear with me a moment; I was wondering...)**

## **ADDITIONAL DP-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES**

**Dealing with bad ideas** – acknowledge positive intent rather than content; “I like your energy.” “I can see you’re really thinking about this problem”; disagree using I language – “From what I’ve read...”; link their idea with your information and act like they’re somehow related – “Glad you brought that up; it really highlights...” then go back to your idea

**Dealing with anger:** Get their attention carefully – tactful interruption – repeating name or title without anger, but persistently – “Joe, Joe, Joe” acknowledge anger, frustration directly – “There’s obviously something troubling to you here, and we’ll deal with it”; reduce intensity – “Let’s sit down”; “let’s all take a breath”; “let’s take a break until we can talk about this calmly”; “I really want to talk with you about this once you calm down”; summarize the *main* problem briefly; stand up for yourself without fighting – speak from your own point of view (I statements)

**Confronting 3<sup>rd</sup> party (indirect) communications (snipers)** – Surface issue directly: “Please don’t pass along gossip or concerns; let’s go talk to X about that right now”; confront indirection (“You seem disapproving/skeptical; do you have any concerns you’d like to share with me directly?”)

If someone is harboring a grudge against you, the best way to clear the air is a private meeting; if need follow-up may need neutral third party present  
Create an institutional culture of direct communication

**Working with a “Yes person” who lacks follow-through**– Use affiliation to make them more reliable: “It’s important to me to be able to count on my friends, and for them to be able to count on me”; don’t be threatening; get them to think what they would do differently, how they can follow through

**Getting a team member more engaged** – “I’m curious about what you’re thinking”; “Well, if you were to have an idea, what direction might it take?”; “Take a wild guess”; look persistently in the person’s direction

**See the good in a No person** (negative, always finding fault, critical) – Use them as the early warning system, teases out all the problems; get the entire team to see them this way; ask them for solutions – “Great analysis, what should we do about it?” Paradox – “I bet even you couldn’t find a solution to that problem”; be more negative, get there first – seize their role

