

## WORKING WITH “DIFFICULT” PEOPLE SUPPLEMENTARY HANDOUT

### DEFINITION

#### What is a difficult person?

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

1st level – everybody, some of the time

2nd level – affect more than just a few people in a negative way on a regular basis

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

### KNOW YOURSELF I

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

### KNOW YOURSELF II

#### Reacting vs. Responding:

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

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

#### Avoid mindless mirroring

Don't let the DP define your reaction: When you respond, you're in control, you retain personal integrity; you're not buying into DP's framework

### KNOW YOURSELF III

#### Pay attention to your stories, which can escalate or improve a negative situation

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 us; with each telling the villain becomes more vile and we 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

### DYAD ACTIVITY – WORKING WITH YOUR DP

Pay attention to your emotions – how do you feel; how does Dp feel toward you?; how would you like to feel?; how would you like the DP to feel toward you?

What is the story you're telling about the DP?; is it a useful story?; if not, can you change the story?

### **HANDLING CONFLICT STYLES: WHAT STYLE ARE YOU?**

Competitor (I win, you lose)

Collaborator (win-win)

Compromiser (your way/my way)

Avoider (I lose, you lose)

Accommodator (I lose, you win)

### **OVERVIEW STEPS FOR DEALING WITH A DIFFICULT PERSON I**

Take a breath/pause

Decide what your goal is (shame other, work better together, persuade to your point of view, take better care of pt)

Decide where on the yielding-assertive action continuum you want to start

Let it go (but then, really let it go)

Setting a strong limit (filing an incident report)

Somewhere in between

\*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)

### **BE SPECIFIC, NOT GLOBAL**

In working toward change, Define the problem, not the person:

We usually define the problem globally: "She's so negative"; "He's such a know-it-all";

Our demands for change equally global: "Be more productive"; "Show some initiative"; "Keep me in the loop"; "Be a team player"

Instead, be specific: What is the problem (specific); how might it change?)

**GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO MAKE A GLOBAL PROBLEM SPECIFIC**

### **DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT**

Identify your sensible, but ineffectual, behavior as well as the response of the DP

**WHAT IS AN EXAMPLE OF SOMETHING YOU KEEP DOING THAT DOESN'T WORK?** (hoping it will get better)

Break the dysfunctional pattern – 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

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

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. EXAMPLE OF OPPOSITE**

**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. EXAMPLE OF DIFFERENT DYNAMIC**

**Change: 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. EXAMPLE OF CONSEQUENCE**

**Change: 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. EXAMPLE OF TELLING THEM TO DO IT MORE**

**Change: 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:**

**EXAMPLE: You keep telling team member they MUST do it this way, but they don't. EXAMPLE OF COLLABORATION.**

**Change: Instead of "telling" something to carry out a task, try "I'd appreciate it if you would..." "Would you consider doing this...?"; instead of saying, "That's a terrible idea," try "That's an interesting point. Let me think about it."**

**FIND OUT WHAT THE DP WANTS/NEEDS**

**Figure out a way to give it to them:**

- Usually understanding
- Acknowledgment, validation
- Inclusion, appreciation, recognition
- Being right
- Achieving the goal

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

**POSITIVE INTENT**

**Even if it doesn't exist, 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: ASK FOR EXAMPLE - "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"

State your own positive intent directly

"I want to make sure we do what's best for the pt; I want us to feel we're all on the same team"

Remember: Negativity breeds negativity: positivity defuses negative situations

## FINDING COMMON GROUND

Look for ways of reducing difference between you and your difficult person:

Find common ground (blending) – ASK FOR EXAMPLE

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..."

\*DP can be your best teacher (not your enemy) - what can you learn from them?;  
ask them directly to help you – learn to be more forthright, more task-oriented, hold to higher standards

\*Making sure DP feels seen, heard, understood

Active listening skills

paraphrasing, clarifying, summarizing

"Do you feel I hear you? Is there anything else?";

REMEMBER, listening is not agreeing but conveys respect

## AVOID SPLITTING/ENGAGE DP

Be inclusive, not exclusive

Don't divide into good/bad

Don't gossip about DP

Ask for DP's ideas about how to resolve disagreement

Use I statements (from my point of view; the way I see it)

Avoid blame

Notice/reinforce small changes/baby steps

## APPRECIATE CRITICISM/ATTACKS

Don't take it personally

Don't be defensive (always passive or aggressive)

Apologize without accepting blame: "I'm sorry you feel that way"; "I'm sorry this situation has been so upsetting for you"

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"

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

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY – Problem-solve challenging work situations

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## **IMPORTANT GENERAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

**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)**

**When you confront someone directly, and they become defensive, don't attack – instead, try to understand their perspective and acknowledge their feelings**

**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...”)**

**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 3rd alternatives)**

**– Use softening words (What do you think of this idea? Maybe... perhaps;**

## **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 3rd 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 it requires follow-up, you 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**