

## Dealing With Difficult People: Practical Tips

### Munn-Sense for Difficult Situations

#### DO

Listen to them.

Understand them and tell  
them what you understand.

Explain with care so they  
can understand you.

#### DON'T

Rush. After you understand  
each other, solve the  
problem together.

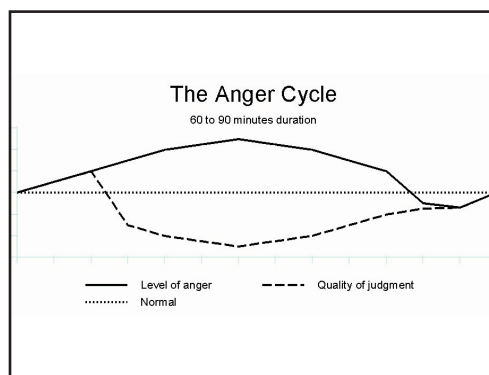
Be a difficult person  
for them!

At several recent presentations I asked "What is a difficult person?" I wrote their ideas on a flipchart: angry, won't listen, negative, opinionated, always right, controlling.

Then I asked "How do you feel when you encounter a difficult person?" They said and I wrote on another sheet of paper: Frustrated, angry, annoyed, challenged, afraid.

"Have you ever been involved in a conversation with a difficult person that bounces back and forth, each time escalating?" I asked. "They make an angry statement, you respond in kind, they respond - each time kicking the emotional level up a notch. What is their experience of you in that situation?" As the group responded someone commented on the similarity to the list of characteristics of a difficult person. And there on the other sheet of paper was the list of emotions they likely feel about us.

One theme running through some of the characteristics of difficult people - which means all of us at some times - is anger. It may be expressed as cold silence, a slow simmer or boiling hot. When we become angry there is a physical response not just a response in the mind. As adrenaline is pumped into the bloodstream in our ancient fight or flight response, the heart rate increases, we breathe faster, the skin gets flushed, the



muscles tense, the voice gets louder and the pitch may alter, the eyes may change shape, the pupils enlarge and the brows fall. At the very beginning of the adrenaline rush we may see things more clearly and our quality of judgment is actually increased. As the adrenaline continues to pour in and we get angrier the quality of our judgment decreases by a similar amount. Thus when we are at the peak of anger we are least able to make good decisions. Then after the crisis of anger passes the adrenaline leaves the bloodstream gradually and our ability to reason gradually improves as the adrenaline leaves. After the normal physical levels have been reached

the body enters a short period in which the heart rate slips below normal. In this brief period the person may be feeling regret and depression causing them to continue to function at below-normal in their quality of judgment. This is the period when they may agree to anything and regret it later. Finally, 60 to 90 minutes from the time the person became angry, he or she returns to normal levels.

There we have the background: a difficult person is often an angry person and all of us may be seen as the difficult person, even at the same time and by the same person we see as difficult. Here are five practical tips for dealing with those difficult people.

#### 1. Listen to them.

Listen without defensiveness. This is not easy especially on those occasions when you are bursting to "give them a piece of your mind". Not only your words but also your tone of voice and your body language must communicate that you are really focused on understanding their point of view.

An attitude of open curiosity will overcome a great deal of weakness in technique because people will generally respond to a genuine willingness on your part to make the effort to understand their point of view. The flip side is also true: the most wonderful communication skills in the world will not make up for a lack of willingness to genuinely understand.

#### 2. Understand them.

The focus of your listening is to understand them, for you to "get it". To let them know what you "got" use basic communication skills such as paraphrasing and summarizing. This is also a way to check with them that your understanding is accurate. Acknowledgment is very important. Reframing, a more complex communication skill, is also very helpful. Restating a point of view with which you strongly disagree is difficult. Remember that you don't have to agree to understand. You can preface your description of their ideas with phrases like "Your point of view is..." and "You think that...".

If they repeat the same thing two or more times, generally it means that they think you haven't understood that idea. You need to focus on letting them know what you "got" of that specific concept they are repeating.

#### 3. Explain with care.

Make it easy for them to understand you. This is the skill of assertion, being able to express your point of view without

# Munn-thly Memo

**Q. We have a about 15 key employees in our manufacturing plant. Their job is to work with the production line workers to help them resolve conflicts as quickly as possible. Each one is assigned to a different area of the plant and they are spread across the shifts. These are people who have been promoted from jobs on the line because of their personal communication skills and the general regard that their co-workers have for them. Ten months into using this process we think it could be improved if we provide additional training for those key employees. What do you suggest?**

A. The role that you are describing involves a combination of mediation and negotiation skills. The mediation portion would be the part when they are acting as an impartial outside person helping two other employees to resolve their dispute. Negotiation is when they include concerns of their own in the discussion. From what you have said it is not clear how much of their work would be as negotiators or as mediators. In some companies this role is a blend of negotiation and mediation because the key employee role always includes making sure the outcome agreed between the disputants is consistent with company policy, for example Human Resources policy.

What I suggest is specialized training in both mediation and negotiation. The communication components of both of these should be included. The training should bring a practical focus, so that there is an opportunity in the educational setting to try out the concepts being taught. This will help to make the application of the concepts clear and comfortable even if the key employees have a range of educational background. The best situation would be a training program designed specifically for your setting. I provide such training programs by working with company representatives to design a course with the appropriate emphasis on skills of both mediation and negotiation. Working with day-to-day situations from their jobs, the training helps the key employees learn new methods and skills to build on their existing base of knowledge.

alienating them. How can you do this when your point of view is very different from theirs?

Use "I" statements rather than "you" statements. For example instead of "You never give a straight answer." say "I didn't understand your answer." Instead of "You don't know what you're talking about." say "I'd like to explain my perspective to you."

A sentence which starts with "I feel..." is a good way to express the emotional impact of this topic for you. It invites the person to understand rather than to argue. Argument is the likely response to a sentence starting "You always..."

Use neutral language. This means describing the situation objectively with a focus on the specific, concrete issues not side issues such as attitude or personality.

Don't blame or judge them. This is easier to do if you stay away from discussion of attitudes and personalities.

## 4. Don't rush.

This is the fundamental concept of interest-based negotiation. It seems to contradict the apparent efficiency of the model of jumping straight from the problem to the solution. You are more likely to get the problem solved if you first form a joint understanding of the interests. Interests are the underlying motivations of each party, the many layers of reasons why each is taking this position. For more details about interests and how to uncover them see Common Ground # 10 Sept/Oct 2000 at [www.munnncrs.com](http://www.munnncrs.com).

As we explore the interests of both of us we also identify our common interests. Then using that understanding of interests we develop a variety of options which, as much as possible, meet the interests of both of us. Only then do we decide from amongst our options the agreement we will reach for resolution.

## 5. Don't be a difficult person for them!

The only person I can control is ME. It is important to make sure that you are not the difficult person for them. It will be less likely for the conflict to escalate if you do not contribute to its escalation, if you resist the temptation to "kick it up a notch".

If you start to get angry, take a break to try to reduce your emotional level and give you a chance to think about how to handle the situation. If reducing the emotional level is not possible because of the degree of anger of either of you, disengage. You need to find a way for the passage of the minimum of 60 to 90 minutes necessary for reduction of the adrenaline level to normal. Stop now and promise to resolve the situation later. "I see that we're both getting angrier as we talk about this and I feel that I'm not going to be able to bring my clearest thinking to work this out. I want to resolve this situation with you. Would you be able to meet at 9:00 tomorrow?"

If you have questions about using these ideas for dealing with the difficult people in your workplace and your life, or comments about how the ideas worked for you, please contact our office.

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I am pleased to fill requests for presentations about mediation and negotiation at meetings of professional and business groups. Call or e-mail to make the arrangements.

### Electronic Common Ground

If you prefer to be on our e-mailing list please send us an e-mail.

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