

Information Sheet - Institute of Welfare

Dealing with difficult people

A problem, any problem, is the difference between what you have got and what you want. Whenever you think this difference comes about because of someone's actions or behaviour, you have what we are going to call a people-problem. It does not matter whether you are right or wrong in your thinking; all that matters is that you are aware of a gap between what you have got now and what you want and believe it is being caused by someone's actions. The actions may be those of your spouse, your children, your friends, your colleagues, your subordinates, your boss, your competitors - anyone, in fact, and even yourself.

Difficult relationships

Conflict or discomfort among people can result from a number of behaviors, including:

- Unbalanced teamwork
- Lack of support
- Disagreements over approaches to particular issues
- Competitiveness over areas of responsibility or expertise
- ... or any number of problems that occur when people 'just don't get on'

The common factor is conflict: a direct disagreement between participants. Disagreements consist of both the objective point at issue and the subjective emotional involvement invested by the participants. Both elements must be addressed for effective resolution. Resolving the emotional side requires you to understand the situation from the other person's point of view. This can be particularly hard when your personalities are very different.

We cannot get on with everyone we meet. All of us have character traits that will cause difficulty for others. We need to understand those differences in order to cope with them. We also need to understand how conflict can arise in dealing with a difficult person.

Different personality types react in characteristic ways in conflict situations. Recognising these dynamics is the first step to coping with the situation, and you can begin by recognising your own role: are you the difficult person?

Improving your own response to conflict

- Learn to recognise and control your defence mechanism
- Learn to listen
- Be open and receptive

- Ensure that you understand what is being said to you
- Learn about yourself, your own strengths and weaknesses
- Try to work on your weaknesses

If you feel that your own behaviour is not the only factor in the conflict, perhaps the source of your difficulty is an inability to find a shared basis for communication.

That's why knowing about different types of difficult people can help: personality types are a framework to assess your responses to someone and so understand how much of the problem is them and how much is you. You can then alter your behaviour accordingly in a controlled way to get results.

There will obviously be situations in which you do not have time to diagnose a personality type, but there are some useful tips you can use:

- Watch the person to see if there are repeat occurrences of the behaviour. If it happens more than twice, it is unlikely to be an accident.
- Think about stress, not only for the person involved but also yourself. Stress clouds the judgement and alters your world-view.
- Try talking on a personal level to the individual. It might not resolve the difficulty in itself, but it will certainly help in your assessment of your mutual situation.

Sometimes an external facilitator or mediation service can assist when two or more people would like their relationships to be better. This can often prevent problems from escalating and keeps the control of the outcome with the parties concerned.

The rest of this information sheet looks at seven distinct types of difficult behaviour and at tactics for handling them yourself.

Know it alls

Symptoms

Apparently very confident, the condescension implicit in this behaviour is hard not to resent. A know-it-all may actually know what he is talking about, but can equally fake or falsify knowledge to maintain the same aura of invincibility. The know-it-all, however, usually brooks no opposition or admits any other opinion.

Coping

Be prepared is the key motto here: make sure that you have a solid grasp of all key facts. State your position in a less dogmatic, more open way but be careful with correcting errors: leave him a way of saving face.

This coping strategy is, at first sight, submissive, but the aim is to get the over-confident person to accept you so that you can work together. Controlling a situation does not always involve being dominant.

Moaners

Symptoms

Complainers are usually easy to spot. They often are people who are very comfortable in the way they themselves do things but feel powerless to change the issue at hand. They may be very prescriptive, so that any deviation from their accepted norm is automatically a source of complaint. Complainers rarely offer solutions, however, as a solution may involve challenging their own perfection.

Coping

The best initial strategy is often to take the moaner at his/her own self-worth. Listen carefully to the complaint and summarise it back to show that you have understood it. You can then reflect the complaint back to the person by asking for solutions: "What do you want to happen?" "How would you handle this?"

You therefore engage the moaner into the conflict resolution process and force the person to look for positive responses.

Procrastinators

Symptoms

Delay and indecision characterise the procrastinator, but this does not necessarily imply weakness. Apparently indecisive people can often have a particular solution in mind and they use stalling tactics until they get their way, or they may simply be unable to represent their actual position confidently. Such people may be highly sensitive to external opinion.

Coping

Procrastinators will often need your active support to make clear the reasons for their indecision. You have to work to make communication easy for the person and instill confidence that they will be heard. Try to avoid putting such a person on the spot: having drawn them out, work actively with the person toward a solution.

Bullies

Symptoms

Hostility, anger and selfishness are all qualities associated with the bully. They may be immediately apparent, or concealed behind civility and adherence to social norms. A bully's attempts to assert dominance may sometimes take physical form.

Coping

Bullies try to overwhelm opposition, so you have to make your point cogently and with confidence but non-aggressively. Give them the opportunity to say their piece: let the bully run out of steam and take a more tractable attitude.

If you feel in physical danger, maintain eye contact and try to get the person seated. You will probably have to deal with the issue raised there and then. To that extent, the bully may be perceived as having got his or her way, but the key thing for you is to discuss rationally the point in a way with which you feel comfortable.

Persistent or serious bullying is a form of harassment and is covered by legislation. If you have tried reasonable measures to cope with a bully and have had little or no success, you can take more formal action, either by yourself or with the help of colleagues. Keeping a record of your attempts to deal with the bully may be helpful later. Being on the receiving end of bullying behaviour is never pleasant and can be very stressful. You do not need to be alone as you consider your best options and develop your coping skills.

The 'quiet ones'

Symptoms

These people handle difficult situations by shutting down, withdrawing all but the basic minimum communication methods. This can be aggressive as well as defensive behaviour, deliberately withholding a response to sabotage a process. The key difficulty is that because of the withdrawal of communication, you have less information on which to assess the behaviour and plan your tactics.

Coping

You need to provoke some sort of response, so you should ask open questions which cannot be answered simply by Yes or No. You may need to invest a good deal of time in this process. When they finally do open up, engage with the person actively but sympathetically; let them steer for a while.

If no response is immediately forthcoming, end the situation yourself and arrange another time for a meeting. Do let the person know what actions you intend to take as a result of the meeting.

'Killjoys'

Symptoms

Killjoys disagree with anything put forward, and sometimes even with the process itself. Often, such a person actively seeks to pick holes in whatever is presented, just for the sake of it. This person may have some personal issues, but in work-related cases, such an attitude is often linked to a feeling of powerlessness and disappointment.

Coping

The main strategy is to accept their pessimism while projecting optimism yourself. You can also raise potential problems and negative points yourself, so as to pre-empt negative comment. Make sure all points are discussed before promoting your own solution but ultimately, you may need to be prepared to take action on your own.

'Nice' people

Symptoms

Nice people cause difficulties too. Someone can be personally agreeable, apparently sincere and supportive, but will they deliver? For them, keeping everyone happy can be more important than dealing with solutions.

Coping

Since these people have a need to be liked, show that you like them. Then you can actually begin to address the issues. Often this means dealing with personal matters before the real issue at hand, such as enquiring after family. Often nice people make a lot of jokes, which can hide deeper issues, so listen carefully to them.

Tips for dealing with negative aspects in others:

1. When you see someone go into attack mode or excess defensiveness, recognise that it is useless to argue with them.
2. Realise that the person is feeling very insecure at that time.
3. Don't continue to push them because they will only get worse.
4. If the symptoms only seem to occur when the person is under stress, wait until another time to pursue the discussion.
5. If they are always overly defensive or always attacking others, you may need to find another person to work with who does not have the same problem.
6. Keep your own sense of self-confidence and don't allow yourself to be verbally abused.
7. If the difficult person is your boss, reconsider whether it's time to find a job elsewhere.