Dealing with difficult people

Leadership Dimensions	Inspiring shared purpose	Leading with care
Holding to account	Developing capability	

We all come across difficult people from time to time and we often have to deal with their negative behaviour. If we don't handle them well, the result is frustration, anger and counter productive activities.

What makes someone 'difficult'?

People seem difficult because of the effect they have on ourselves or others who are working with us to achieve common goals.

They make us feel uncomfortable or frustrated. They obstruct us when we are trying to do something that matters... and then we react and simply set up a *behavioural cycle* that triggers more of the 'difficult' behaviour.

Why *DO* people behave in this way?

Basically, because they CAN - there is something about our behaviour that they see as giving them implicit permission to behave the way they do. In other words, *people behave the way they do if the behaviour of others allows them to!*

To change *THEIR* behaviour, we need to change *OUR* behaviour.[1]

When to use this resource.

If you have to deal with a 'difficult' person, use this tool to find strategies and techniques for turning their behaviour from a negative to positive influence on the situation.

What to do.

1. Match the behaviour that is worrying you with the description of a 'difficult' behaviour type. Just reading the behaviour profile will help you understand why the other's behaviour is affecting you so negatively.

2. Carefully *review the suggested strategies* for turning someone's negative behaviour into a positive for you and your team. Try the strategies out. If one strategy doesn't work, try another.

   If the person worrying you is a combination of behaviour types, try strategies that apply to each type, depending on the particular behaviour at the time.

> **Tip.**
>
> Prepare a script identifying what you want to communicate using the difficult conversation planner.

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[1] The introductory comments for this tool and the content in the tool have been adapted from a training module delivered by Skills Development Services Ltd.

Which 'difficult' behaviour are you dealing with?	Behaviour type	Strategies to turn negatives into positives
General principle for dealing with **ANY type of difficult behaviour - use a script!** ■ Write down what you want to communicate. ■ List the "What ifs" and "Buts" that may be raised. ■ Write down how you will respond to these objections.		
■ Like to control other people. ■ Use tactics like threat, humiliation and a willingness to escalate issues. ■ They inspire fear. ■ Tolerate different opinions poorly. ■ Can be unpredictable. ■ May get very emotional	**'Autocratic dictators'**	■ Avoid confrontation, but if you're in the right you should stand your ground. ■ Stand your ground by being assertive ■ Listen out for implicit threats and make them explicit. ■ Replace BUTs with ANDs, and offer alternatives - . ■ Make your messages short and sharp, not long-winded. ■ Stall if emotions are strong.
■ Use silence or disengagement as a weapon, refusing to discuss issues or giving monosyllabic answers ■ Often show disagreement by failing to do things or undermining them. ■ Use negative body language. ■ Leave you feeling anxious or guilty because they make you feel they are in the weaker position.	**'Passive aggressives'**	■ Use open questions exclusively to prevent Yes / No answers. ■ DON'T comment on the lack of responses. ■ Learn to tolerate the silence ■ Rephrase ANY expression of views positively. ■ Use expectant body language. ■ NEVER jump in and NEVER leave the interaction without a conclusion.
■ Hate committing themselves - put things off (delay) ■ Agree to things that they don't do -often the first to volunteer but don't follow through. ■ Are often very agreeable - need to be liked and like to be socially popular. ■ Naturally good networkers - always very flattering and appear seductive. ■ Don't want people to know their shortcomings.	**'Soothing delayers'**	■ Keep all interactions business-like - avoid informal situations. ■ Encourage the person to disagree with you - invite them to come up with negatives. ■ Be specific over time scales and shorten them. ■ Put agreed actions in writing and circulate copies - reinforce and remind afterwards. ■ Privately identify your bottom line.

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■ Betray confidences, attacking from behind, not directly. ■ Back stabbers engage in underhanded tactics that make you look bad. ■ Use put downs, digs and start rumours (sometimes false, sometimes half truths). ■ Pick on those most vulnerable but hand out bullets for someone else to fire. ■ Seek status within their peer group and need to have peer group on their side. ■ Behave differently 1-on-1 than in-group.	**'Back stabbers'**	■ Maintain your positive sense of self and don't turn into a back stabber yourself. ■ NEVER be matey, laugh at their jokes or agree with them. ■ Calmly confront the back stabber about their behaviour ■ Squash rumours and let them know you have caught them.
■ Present themselves as all-knowing - often very detailed. ■ Are condescending and aloof - infer they are far better than anyone else. ■ Find fault in others - 'never' do anything wrong themselves. ■ Rarely open to feedback. ■ Would love to manage the place but don't have people skills. ■ Feel undervalued and under-recognised - have a need for more status.	**'Constant criticisers'**	■ Treat them as an expert - acknowledge their criticisms. ■ Give them a formal, project-based role to rise to the challenge. ■ Transform criticisms into problems to be solved. ■ Get them to break criticisms down and list each one in turn. ■ Avoid seeing them as a sniper on the edge of the team - present disagreement as either questions or as parallel points.
■ See everything around them as a problem - pessimistic about anything new. ■ Infer it is always someone else's fault or responsibility. ■ Is often vague and can go on and on. ■ Often complain about others to you and then, to about you to others. ■ Have a symbiotic relationship with back stabbers	**'Constant fault finders'**	■ Listen but NEVER agree, not even non-verbally - just stare and don't react. ■ Set time limits, communicate and keep to them. ■ Get them to define the problem - make them give exact points. ■ Encourage them to generate solutions but don't accept a nebulous view - make them give exact points ■ Encourage expression of positive aspects - ask questions like "Tell me why you are still in the job?"

Next steps

1. Identify one or two elements each day that you can give 100% commitment to putting into practice.

2. Define what you are going to do behaviourally and set yourself a timescale to make it happen.

3. Identify an appropriate reward for yourself.

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