

Quick reference guide

How to deal with difficult people

Barry Winbolt MSc

www.barrywinbolt.com
info@barrywinbolt.com



How to deal with Difficult People

Nobody is 'difficult' except in the context of the relationship where their difficult behaviour occurs which can arise in many different settings. Remember we too are involved in the interaction. For this reason it is better to understand the **PRINCIPLES** of handling the behaviour than it is to learn **PRESCRIPTIONS** for specific types of behaviour.

The three 'C's

- ▶ What is the **Context**?
- ▶ What is the **Cost**?
- ▶ Have you got the **Commitment**?

Guiding Principles

- ▶ Maintain dignity and self-respect for all concerned
- ▶ First, seek to understand
- ▶ Remember, other people can't be changed
- ▶ Be honest about your point of view

The six KEY skills

- ▶ Preparation
- ▶ Setting boundaries and goals
- ▶ Staying cool
- ▶ Speaking clearly
- ▶ Listening to understand
- ▶ Knowing where to end.

Active listening

- ▶ Give them your full attention and keep a clear mind
- ▶ Ask the other person to explain exactly what they mean
- ▶ Summarise your understanding of the speaker's comments
- ▶ Ask pertinent questions to further clarify the situation.

The ASSUME technique	The SALVAGE Strategy
allows you to assume a position of control	for dealing with angry people
A is for ASSESS the situation	S Smile openly
S is for STOP wishing they were different	A Anticipate their hostility
S is for STEP BACK	L Listen non-defensively
U is for UNDERSTAND your strategy	V Verify their precise grievance
M is for MASTER the situation	A Agree with the true parts
E is for EXPECT to have to do it again	G Guarantee that something will be done
	E Encourage them to change direction

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Stress and difficult behaviour

When under stress, the fight-or-flight response also restricts our ability to think and problem solve. Psychologically people adopt 'conditioned stances' to ward off threat.

The Satir Categories

Virginia Satir, the American psychologist, identified 'default' patterns of behaviour that people adopt as defence mechanisms when they feel under attack.

People **BLAME**, so they appear strong, but are generally very critical

They **PLACATE**, so that others don't get angry and they often seek approval

They **COMPUTE**, in order to neutralise the threat and are cool, calm, collected

Or they **DISTRACT** to draw attention away from the threat

These four stances underlie most human negotiations when there is any sort of tension or pressure. Understanding and recognising them is a key factor.

SEVEN CATEGORIES OF DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR AND HOW TO HANDLE THEM

The Steamroller

These people need to control the environment around them and are often insecure, aggressive and hostile and insist on having their own way.

- ▶ Stand firm verbally and in body language
- ▶ Avoid arguing. Stick to the point. Control your need to retaliate
- ▶ Acknowledge what they say, tell them you take the facts seriously
- ▶ State clearly if you disagree and ask them for more information
- ▶ If they cut you off, say “You interrupted me”, and continue.

The Guerrilla

Guerrillas use destructive sniping tactics, often behind your back.

- ▶ Build rapport before tackling them. Say something positive to disarm them
- ▶ Without blaming, identify the time they sniped at you
- ▶ Say that, if they have a criticism of you, you would prefer they say it to you directly so that you understand and, if valid, can learn from it.

The Grouser

Grousing people continually highlight problems and are eternal pessimists.

- ▶ Acknowledge their complaints and feelings, but don't agree
- ▶ Confirm their negative statements without challenging, then add your own positive suggestions. Use “and” to link your statements rather than “but”
- ▶ Acknowledge their insight. Ask for suggestions in a factual, problem-solving way
- ▶ Thank them for their observations, but let them know that YOU will be going ahead anyway. However do note any real obstacles they have drawn attention to.

The Shadow

Shadows know that information can be power. However, their facts are not always as accurate as they might be. They may act hurt and shocked if challenged.

- ▶ Help them voice their concerns without getting drawn into a web of intrigue
- ▶ Let them know that you are not interested in oblique comments
- ▶ Ask precise questions to clarify and simplify what they are saying
- ▶ Clearly define the Shadow's boundaries
- ▶ Provide support where appropriate, but without compromising yourself
- ▶ Before finishing your conversation, check if there is ‘any other business’
- ▶ Maintain your authority while still being supportive.

The Silent Type

Silent types respond minimally without committing themselves and getting anything from them takes special skills.

- ▶ Put them at ease with some small talk before tackling the main issues
- ▶ Ask open-ended questions
- ▶ Maintain open and expectant body language
- ▶ Question their lack of response
- ▶ Tell them what you expect and make simple demands
- ▶ If you plan another meeting, write down what you expect
- ▶ If the conversation tails off, be comfortable with the silence
- ▶ End the interaction yourself. Look forward to future meetings. Be sincere.

The Expert

These people have a fully formed opinion on everything and the right way to do it. They may be unable to discuss a topic to arrive at a consensus, so they tend to withdraw. They are useful people, but often frustrating to work with.

- ▶ Make sure you know your subject
- ▶ Actively listen and paraphrase their points back to them
- ▶ Ask for more information in a detailed manner
- ▶ Use the Expert's knowledge by asking them to predict likely outcomes
- ▶ Make relevant and factual statements and stick to the point.

The Critic/complainer

Critics home in on things going wrong or that are not up to their standards.

- ▶ Separate the behaviour from the person
- ▶ Actively listen to the problem and check back that you have understood
- ▶ Offer an expression of regret
- ▶ Ask them what their preferred outcome would be; get a factual answer
- ▶ Tell them what you are going to do about it
- ▶ Thank them for bringing it to your attention.

FURTHER READING

Difficult People, A Guide to Handling Difficult Behaviour
Barry Winbolt, ISR Publishing, 2002

Difficult conversations, how to discuss what matters most
Stone, Patten, Heen Penguin Books 2000

Emotional Intelligence
Daniel Goleman, Bloomsbury, 1996

You Just Don't Understand
Deborah Tannen, Virago; London, 1998