

How to Handle Difficult People

Difficult behaviour is predictable even likely in the workplace, particularly the healthcare sector Barry Winbolt says why and offers some ideas on how to deal with it.

Ask anyone in the care sector about where they work and pretty soon the subject turns to what is wrong with it. Explore a little further and almost without fail the question of someone else's behaviour will crop up. And they won't be talking about good behaviour. It'll be the negative aspects of this or that person's way of acting at work. Difficult behaviour tops the list. In fact, according to a poll I conducted a few years ago among about 1,000 people in the sector – nurses, care assistants, social workers and so forth – poor relationships at work was the main reason that people changed their jobs. Money was important, and so were resources and working conditions generally, but over 90 percent of people said that the quality of their working relationships had influenced a change of job at sometime.¹ Some had even left the job as a last resort because of difficult behaviour they had been subjected to.

Other people's difficult behaviour can affect us in many different ways. If we are fortunate, it will simply irritate us, but when it is extreme it can cause more serious problems. When I first started looking at how to cope with difficult people some years ago, I naturally turned to any literature I could find on the subject. There was no shortage of books and articles. Some identified just one kind of behaviour, for example, 'manipulative types', 'nasty people' or 'jealousy'. Others were wider ranging, and categorised difficult people under a number of headings, such as 'party poopers', 'gossips' or 'loud bores'. One thing that struck me was that they almost always approached the subject light-heartedly, with cartoon illustrations, quips and anecdotes that illustrated the behaviour, and then recommended steps for dealing with it. They mostly treated their topic in a jokey way, as though other people's difficult behaviour is something that has to be endured, and which, if we have the right tools, we can circumvent or change.

But, as anyone who has had to put up with difficult behaviour knows, it is not funny, and often people won't change. It may be that their discordant behaviour is relatively low-key, such as the simple but repeated avoidance of a task that should be part of their job, or claims that they should be excused certain duties on the grounds that their health is not up to it. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, their behaviour might be viewed as outright intimidation or harassment, illegal in the workplace.

Viewed by an observer, such conduct may seem a little bizarre or even comical but when you are on the receiving end of it, it causes a great deal of

heartache. The personal cost in terms of stress and unnecessary investment of time and effort to deal with the behaviour is immense. In the workplace both the staff and their employer will suffer, though it could be argued (and indeed often is) that it is the inevitable side-effect of people working together and does no real harm as long as it is contained. This is a lame argument which is often used as an excuse for doing nothing, and it can have crippling and far-reaching consequences.

The nature of the problem

There are two things that must be said at this point. First, we can all be difficult sometimes and, of course, we may be deliberately obstructive or argumentative when we are unhappy about something. The second point is that, though I use the term Difficult People I am really talking about difficult behaviour. Apart from the fact that it is not very nice to label people in this way, it also obscures the fact that it is the way the person is acting we want to target, rather than re-constructing their character, (though this can be a tempting option sometimes it would not work). Identifying the behaviour as the problem rather than labelling the individual also gives us more choices in dealing with them. A key point here is that the way we think about someone will influence the way we respond to them.

Take a moment to think about someone who has done something inconvenient or unpleasant. Chances are you identify them as the problem with some of those neat phrases we use about people we don't like. Now change the way you think about them. Disregard what you feel about *them* for a moment and identify the *behaviour* that has caused the problem. Most people notice a slight shift in their perceptions when they do this exercise. When dealing with someone we find difficult, thinking about the behaviour in this way rather than the identifying the person as the cause of the problem empowers us because we are likely to remain more emotionally detached and therefore more objective. We are more likely to focus on what needs to change for the better, rather than seek revenge.

We all have successes

So, since we can all be difficult, and since any group of people working together are likely to have their tricky moments, why talk about difficult people? One thing that is usually overlooked is that most of us handle our daily interactions pretty well most of the time. We all have dozens if not hundreds of little interactions with the people we meet each day. Whether it is a thirty-second conversation to buy a train ticket or a lengthy discussion about the welfare of a patient; a one-off meeting where we will never see the person again or part of a longer-term relationship; we handle most of our interactions with skill and flair, getting the outcomes we want. We are generally

resourceful and good at handling our relationships. In this context the odd little misunderstanding or even a spectacular flare-up causes no real problem; such events are a part of life with other people and we know how to make amends and avoid the damage they might otherwise cause.

But sometimes things go wrong. We all meet people who appear to persistently use tactics we find difficult, to get their way. I am referring here to the types of people who routinely act in a way that causes upset or inconvenience to others. It may be that they shout, throw tantrums, threaten or intimidate us. This is the sort of thing that immediately springs to mind when we think about difficult people and something we all tend to want to avoid. There is another side to the coin though. Some of the most difficult individuals to deal with can be those who are not overtly hostile or aggressive. It may be that they are perpetually negative about everything; they may be very nice to us face-to-face and then gossip maliciously about us when we are not there; they may be silent and unresponsive or they may simply be an 'expert' on everything and refuse to listen to our point of view.

The topic of other peoples' difficult behaviour is a serious one because the effects can be so far reaching. One difficult person can demotivate a whole team, one angry service user can cause untold stress and take time and tie up resources which could be better used elsewhere, someone who is persistently negative or who gossips destructively can bring down a whole project. The cost in personal and financial terms are huge. Despite the enormous costs in human and economic terms, very few organisations decide to take the question of behaviour in the workplace seriously by training managers and staff in how to deal with it. The result is that most of us find ourselves alone when confronted by behaviour we don't like. So we are left to our own devices. This need not be too difficult if you know where to start.

Why is it so common?

This first thing to understand is just what we are dealing with. If we wanted to design a system to bring out the worst in people we could not do better than the modern workplace. This throws groups of people together at random, puts pressure on them to get results, very often depriving them time or opportunity to build effective working relationships with their colleagues. The care sector in particular suffers from this. Staff levels may be lower than the ideal, low pay, long hours and the high demands of the job all contribute. I think that there is another factor too. Nursing and its allied professions all need a high degree of 'people awareness'. The ability to empathise and understand others is critical to working well with patients and service users. But this brings with it a degree of vulnerability. Staff may start to override their own needs and put others first a little too often. They may be unable to see other peoples' difficult behaviour in its true light, making excuses for it and even putting up with

bullying because, as people have told me more than once 'I just couldn't believe it was happening, after all we are supposed to be carers.'

There are many other factors which explain why difficult behaviour is predictable, even likely, in the workplace, particularly the healthcare sector. Chief among these is that stressed individuals can act in a variety of alarming ways. The behaviours we indulge in when we are pressured, anxious, afraid or insecure will drive others to the brink of despair and we ourselves may be unaware of it. Added to that, it is often not easy for employers and managers to pinpoint just what it is that needs tackling in difficult behaviour because, by definition, it is often vague and can be put down to quirks of character rather than a deliberate attempt to cause trouble. They are unsure how to deal with it.

Whose problem is it anyway?

Even though employers have a responsibility to protect their staff from identifiable hazards at work they usually don't recognise that the stress and other effects of dealing with difficult people falls into this category. Some jobs, particularly ones which, by their very nature, mean employees will have to deal regularly with verbal aggression, threats and hostility carry a greater risk to staff of stressful side-effects such as increased anxiety, stress-related illness and even emotional harm in extreme cases. Not for nothing that rates of absenteeism in health and social care are almost twice the national average.² Whatever the source of the aggravation – whether it comes from colleagues or service users – the effects on staff can be the same. There are cases where employers are, in effect, harbouring a known risk to staff welfare. I regularly hear of people who their colleagues find difficult to work with being 'moved sideways' to other departments or services, rather than the situation having been handled responsibly by the employer. 'Handled responsibly' of course is easier said than done, but uncertainty does not remove the obligation.

It also has to be said that, since difficult behaviour always happens within the context of a relationship, employers are often unable to know about difficulties staff are having. As you know if you have ever been on the receiving end of difficult behaviour, complaining to management can simply make things worse if the matter is not handled sensitively, and where the behaviour is subtle or not witnessed by others it is the complainer who starts to look 'difficult'.

In an ideal world the formula for limiting the impact of difficult people involves good communications between staff and in the organisation generally, a high level of interpersonal skills vigilant and supportive management and responsible and aware employers. The more such things are in place the less

likely it is that difficult behaviour will occur and when it does, the better equipped individual staff members will be to deal with it.

What to do about it

'Pigs might fly' as they say. The mood has begun to change with regard to what we will tolerate at work, but there is still a long way to go. While we are waiting, here are a few tips for dealing with difficult behaviour (Box 1).

The common trap that we all tend to fall into when confronted with behaviour we don't like is that it 'pushes our buttons'. In other words, we begin to act as though we are being attacked. Whether we are or not – the other person may have it in for us or we may simply feel as if they have – as soon as we react in this way we weaken our own ability to respond with dignity and respect. The next point down on the slippery slope to conflict is that we start to 'point score' or in some way make the other person 'wrong'.

What typically happens is that, filled with a sense of injustice at the other person's actions we start to become emotionally involved ourselves. The result, as most of us know only too well, are hurt feelings and a sense of powerlessness. This often leads to alienation or a prolonged dispute.

Understand where you want to go

In order to break this pattern I recommend few basic, but essential, steps:

1) Know your goal.

It is essential to understand the outcome we want otherwise we won't know what it is we are aiming for. If the goal is revenge or harming the other person, forget it. That will simply make matters worse. Likewise, if you want to change the other person that will probably fail too; most of us dig our heels in when someone tries to change us. Think instead in terms of what you would like to have happen as a result of your intervention.

2) Seek first to understand

Misunderstanding is at the root of many disputes. My mantra is, if in doubt, listen. If something is not working there may be something we have missed. And remember, we do not have to *like* what we hear from the other person. As long as they put their points respectfully we should be prepared to listen because the better our understanding of what is going on for them the more effective we can be. Once you have understood the other person's points it is also a good idea to summarise your understanding of what they said back to them. This checks for accuracy and also helps to build rapport.

3) Know your boundaries

Understanding where our own limits are is critical to effective relationships. Eleanor Roosevelt said 'No one can make you feel inferior without your

consent'. The problem is frequently not *what* is being said but *how* it is being said. There is no job description which requires us to put up with rude, aggressive or insulting behaviour.

4) Communicate clearly

If you know what you want out of the relationship then you can express it clearly, but if you are not clear yourself you will not be able to. Make sure the other person understands that you are trying to move towards your goal in a collaborative way.

5) Affirm your good intent

Do your utmost to ensure that the other person knows your intentions are good, that you are not attacking them and that it is a productive outcome that you are seeking.

Conclusion

If you want to start having more productive outcomes with the difficult people in your life you can start today. One thing I have found through speaking to literally thousands of nurses and other healthcare workers over the past ten years in my seminars and workshops, is that they intuitively know how to handle difficult behaviour. Where things start to go wrong is when that behaviour becomes repeated or persistent.

The pointers above will help. There are a few closing thoughts to bear in mind though. No matter how skilled we are at dealing with others, some people may have invested heavily in a particular course of action and may not be willing, under any circumstances, to behave more appropriately. Others may be under so much pressure – either at work or elsewhere – that their stress levels render them unable to cooperate (extreme stress can make even the most mild mannered of us appear difficult), and a few may be so genuinely unhappy or mistrustful that they can't enter into useful dialogue.

This final point takes us back to the magic component. All successful relationships are built on respect and trust. None of us works well when we believe we are not respected, and few of us go out of our way for people we do not trust.

Box 1

Separate people from problems

Focus on what needs changing rather than problem behaviour, avoid recrimination and blame and look towards a solution rather than trying to identify causes

Focus on ideas, not positions

An 'I am right, you are wrong' stance only makes things worse. Look for

common ground, ask for suggestions and seek to satisfy joint interests.

Insist on objective criteria

Aim for measurable outcomes. What is it you want to achieve and how will you know when you have got there? Beware of abstract concepts like 'harmony at work' or 'appropriate behaviour'. What are people doing when work is harmonious? What specific actions constitute 'appropriate behaviour'?

Generate a range of possibilities

If you only have one choice, how many choices do you have? Create a range of different possible courses of action. If the first idea fails you can then move on. Keep dialogue open and avoid 'stalemate'.

Work together towards a solution

A collaborative stance is always best. Work with the difficult person wherever possible towards a joint outcome. It is unlikely to suit them if someone else's 'solution' is imposed on them.

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¹ This was an unofficial poll during one of my seminar series in 1999. Asked if they, or someone they knew had changed job in the last year, delegates were then asked if this decision was influenced mainly by a) money b) the quality of their working relationships. Almost all said 'B'.

² Social Workers are Sick Leave Champions, T Robbins & D Brown, *The Sunday Times*, 24 June 2001.