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Dealing with Difficult Behaviour

By John Ford

Conflict is inevitable in the workplace. However, that does not mean that we cannot work to prevent unproductive **behaviour that leads to conflict**. Difficult behaviour is a good example of an area where a difference can be made.

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Although it is easy to label people as difficult, the real focus should always be on the actual behaviour. Dealing effectively with difficult behaviour is a **skill** that can nip conflict in the bud.

Difficult behaviour is essentially that which **inhibits the performance** of others. Left alone it will get worse, affect more people and continue to incur hidden costs for the organization in which it occurs.

Most difficult behaviour is accidental, but it can also be the result of intentional thought. Sometimes it is **sporadic and takes us by surprise**. At other times it is ongoing and forms patterns.

Difficult behaviour takes many forms. It includes **gossiping**, going over your boss's head, foot dragging, ignoring orders, refusing to talk, **being rude**, yelling, ignoring, **harassing**, and much more.

At the core, most conflict is about needs that have not been satisfied - not just physical needs, but also psychological and procedural needs. Difficult behaviour is often a result of psychological **needs for control, recognition, affection**, and respect.

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In and of themselves there is nothing wrong with having these needs. Problems arise in the satisfaction of these needs when difficult behaviour has been rewarded in the past. For example, **if people always listen when we interrupt we will continue to use this as an effective strategy.** We should try not to reward difficult behaviour.

Beyond reinforcement, if we don't have the communication skills to let people know how we feel, or we lose it when things get emotionally charged, then difficult behaviour can be expected.

It would be easy if there was some **magical cure** that could be applied to all difficult behaviour. The fact that there is no panacea does not mean that we are helpless and that there is nothing to be done. Even so, one shouldn't expect instant results. Changing behaviour takes tact and time.

The following ideas for dealing with difficult behaviour are gleaned from Robert Bacal's book-*The Complete Idiots Guide to Dealing with Difficult Employees* (CWL Publishing, 2000). Lets start with **ideas that don't work:**

- **Ignoring** the problem behaviour despite its impact on performance
- **Responding** in kind,
- **Blaming** rather than problem solving,
- **Labelling** the person as difficult
- **Trying** to psychoanalyze

If these are bad ideas what are things we can do that help?

1. Stay cantered

When we lose our self-control and restraint, the situation does not improve. In fact it is more likely to get worse. Decisions made in the heat of the moment are seldom the best, and lack the benefits of our creativity. Our challenge is to slow down, and **resist a knee jerk**

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reaction. Staying steady, stable and grounded gives us the strong foundation we need to take on the most difficult behaviour.

When we indulge ourselves by taking it personally (forgetting that offense is 10% given and 90% taken) we start playing negative internal tapes in our head.

We tell ourselves that the person is bad, unreliable, beyond reason. The danger

is that these labels become self-fulfilling, and do not give any benefit of the doubt. Rather than putting our energy into problem solving we feel smug blaming the other. We forget that it takes two to make things worse.

2. Reality check

An important question to consider as soon as possible is whether the behaviour **is really causing performance problems**. If it is not, and left alone things will not get worse, then leaving things often makes sense. As we reality check it is important to consider the impact of the behaviour on others and not just ourselves.

3. Focus on behaviour

This is the key to dealing with difficult behaviour. As tempting as it is to focus on the person this should be avoided. By **separating the person from the behaviour** it enables one-to paraphrase Fisher, Ury and Patton in their best seller "Getting to Yes"- to be hard on the problem and soft on the person.

4. Listen

Listening is widely acknowledged as a **core communication skill** that affects the ways we prevent and resolve conflict. When dealing with people whose behaviour is getting to us we should make a special effort to hear the other person out. Even when you disagree! This enables you to validate the psychological needs of the other, and to let them know that you can imagine how they are feeling.

In addition to validation and empathy, asking open and closed questions, **rephrasing and summarizing**, and using “I Statements” are all key listening activities.

5. Give feedback

A common problem with difficult behaviour is that the person is unaware that his or her behaviour is causing a problem. At other times the extent of the impact is not comprehended. By giving **timely feedback** about specific behaviour misunderstanding can be avoided and expectations clarified. A useful formula for giving feedback that deals with both emotions and facts is the “I-Statement.” I feel frustrated when you interrupt me at our team meetings. It breaks my train of thought and I struggle getting started again. I would appreciate it if I could finish with what I am saying.”

6. Use performance management techniques

This is an important preventative technique. A common format is the yearly performance review. It should be used on an ongoing basis and whenever expectations are not clear. The goal is to make sure that responsibility is placed where it belongs. For example, with naysayers it is crucial that responsibility for involvement be returned.

Where there has been discussion about performance expectations, a **physical record that documents the fact of the meeting**, the content and any agreements should be generated.

This is a useful set of questions that can be used to guide an effective discussion:

- ¥ Where are we now?
- ¥ Where do we need to be?
- ¥ How will we get there?
- ¥ What do you need to do?
- ¥ How can I help?
- ¥

7. Third parties

Difficult behaviour can be intentional, aggressive, sustained and extreme. When responsible talk does not work, it makes sense to seek help. Start with Human Resource managers. Be prepared to give a detailed briefing about the situation. In some situations the **support of senior management** may be necessary.

Beyond internal line support, consider using **mediation** if you think you and the other person can find a solution yourselves. Arbitration may make sense if a solution to a particular problem is needed quickly and you and the other person are struggling to communicate.

8. Formal authority

As a general rule, it makes sense to **use power only as a last resort**. When you use power you win and the other loses. More often than not, resentment and alienation accompany this action. Unacceptable behaviour that does not change should be addressed as a disciplinary matter. Ideally an organization will describe behavioural expectations in a code, and specify how infractions will be dealt with. It is possible to retain the right to terminate at will while using a progressive disciplinary procedure. Following **a fair procedure can go a long way** to defend a charge of discrimination.

In addition to using the above techniques to prevent and resolve difficult behaviour, we should be mindful of things we can do to **limit the chances of being perceived as difficult ourselves**. Matching our actions with our words, and our words with our tone and body language is important. Incongruencies lead to suspicion and mistrust. Consistent decision making and achievable promises and commitments will also go a long way.

Conclusion

The reality is that we can all be difficult from time to time. Dealing with difficult behaviour is not easy and so we often procrastinate. We do so at our own peril. Being **proactive and engaging the person in a conversation** about their behaviour is the first step toward conflict prevention

*This article is made available by the author, John Ford.
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