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How to Handle Difficult Behaviors

by Ken Cloke and Joan Goldsmith



“Define the problem as a person and you’re in trouble; define it as a behavior and you can do something.”

Think of the most difficult person in your organization—yes, the one who popped into your mind the minute you read these words. Maybe it’s the woman who shoots down every new idea, or the guy who’s always angry and complaining. If you can learn to work productively with this person, we think you’ll experience a transformation—and not only in the immediate situation but in your ability to work with anyone, anywhere.

To begin, try changing how you define the problem. Everybody talks about “difficult people” and “difficult personalities.” But labeling individuals like that shifts attention from what they did to who they are. Define the problem as a *person* and you’re in trouble: your only remedy is to fire the offender (often impossible or illegal) or send him elsewhere (to become someone else’s problem). By contrast, if you define the problem as difficult *behavior*, you can do something about it. People can’t change who they are, but nearly everyone can change the way they act.

Think, for example, of meetings you’ve been in, where people are personally attacking one another. If a facilitator gets consensus on ground rules banning personal attacks, the same people are likely to work together more effectively. We watched a team of managers trying to reach agreement on the design of a change process. One person refused to go along with the group, and her “difficult behavior” created conflict. But she persisted, until group members realized there was indeed a flaw in their design.

Every difficult behavior represents a question that hasn’t been asked, and the answer to this question suggests a strategy for stopping it. Here are questions to start the process:

- **What makes the behavior difficult for me?** Often, problematic behaviors trigger issues we’re sensitive to, or provoke reactions inappropriate to the situation. Maybe a troublesome colleague reminds you of a troublesome family member.
- **What effect has my response had on their behavior?** Negative responses can reinforce difficult behaviors. If you’re dealing with an employee who has a poor self-image, she may actually need your criticism or rejection to remind her that she can’t accomplish anything.

- **Is the behavior a way of coping with a dysfunctional system?** Ask whether there’s any truth behind a colleague’s criticisms or negative actions. When organizations don’t encourage input, people naturally feel they have to shout to be heard.

- **Is the organization somehow rewarding negative behavior?** Most organizations provide substantial payoffs for dysfunctional behavior. They make concessions. They let complainers control group decisions. They even promote difficult employees just to get rid of them.

Strategies for Addressing Difficult Behaviors

Understanding the situation allows you to be softer on the person and harder on the problem. Some strategies to consider:

Get it out in the open. Ask team members to evaluate their actions on a checklist of positive and negative behaviors. Identify those they need to develop, minimize, or eliminate.

Agree on ground rules for communication. In a work group, ask members to set simple ground rules, such as no personal insults allowed.

Act promptly...When something negative is happening, interrupt the behavior and ask whether the conversation is working. People know it isn’t.

...and frequently. People who have been “rewarded” for difficult behaviors need ongoing support to change their patterns—regular feedback, coaching, and problem solving.

As managers shift from blaming people to solving problems, they create healthier organizations. They also learn how to transform difficult behaviors into opportunities for continued organizational growth and enhanced personal effectiveness. ❖

*Ken Cloke and Joan Goldsmith are consultants and trainers specializing in conflict resolution, mediation, and organizational change. They are coauthors of *Resolving Conflicts at Work: A Complete Guide for Everyone on the Job*, published this month by Jossey-Bass.*
