



Conflict & Difficult People

A View from Impact Factory

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'It's not my fault!'

Most of the things that happen when communication goes wrong are usually the other guy's fault. Like driving a car: 'I'm a good driver; it's all the other idiots who don't know what they're doing.'

Indeed, not only is it the other guy's fault, but if that person would only change, my life would be great. If he/she would just listen to what I'm saying, return my calls, be more patient, see things my way, understand where I'm coming from, then we would get on just fine, thank you very much.

This is kind of what happens with most of us around conflict and people we find difficult.

Inside our heads, that is. Our thoughts go round and round and round as we inwardly accuse the other person of all sorts of nefarious deeds. We also make long mental tick lists of what the *other person* needs to change in order for there to be less conflict.

Not only that, because we know just how everyone else should behave around us, when they don't (and do things we don't like), we're quite capable of thinking that they're doing it *deliberately*. How could they *not* know that what they're doing is upsetting to me?

These are the kinds of thoughts that are swimming around inside our brains when we're dealing with awkward people.

On the outside it's usually quite a different story.

Here are a few of the options that people take around conflict and difficult people:

Avoid conflict as much as possible

Disagreement can really feel uncomfortable and threatening, so if we don't bring stuff into the open, we can carry on as though things are all right, even if we really know they aren't. Conflict avoidance = denial.

Part of avoiding conflict is this fantasy we have that somehow it will all fix itself without us having to do anything. Magically, the conflict will go away and the other person will change. More denial, coupled with a bit of delusion as well.

The thing about denial is that eventually it will come round and bite you on the bum.

'Evidence collect'

We're pretty good at keeping our beady eyes peeled for any little misstep our difficult person makes: 'See, I knew I was right, just look what so and so has done now!'

This serves a dual purpose. Since we are so fixed at looking for what's wrong in the other person, we barely notice if they've done anything positive. We get to reinforce our belief that they are difficult over and over again.

We heard of one situation where a manager felt that one of his employees was making too many personal calls. He found her difficult to talk to so he didn't say anything. He occasionally, however, gave her 'the look' when she was on the phone. He knew what 'the look' meant; he assumed she knew what 'the look' meant, and in turn then assumed that she was deliberately ignoring his signals and taking the mickey.

Anyway, this went on for about six months without him saying anything to her. Instead, he kept a diary of every time she made a personal call. Then he took the whole lot to HR to sort out for him, requesting a disciplinary.

He may have felt uncomfortable telling her he'd prefer her not to make so many personal calls during company time, but it certainly would have precluded the type of escalation that took place.

Here's something else to think about. When we like someone, we tend to forgive them their mistakes and even make excuses for their behaviour. We're understanding and might very well have a conversation with them about it in a reasonable manner. In fact, we do the very opposite of evidence collecting.

But have our difficult person do the very same things and forgiveness is the farthest thing from our minds. We don't want to concede them an inch. Moreover, we're not likely to have any conversation with them at all but will...

Talk to the wrong people

To make doubly sure that our difficult person stays firmly in their place as being a problem, we let everyone else know just how difficult they can be. We present our carefully collected evidence to just about anyone who will listen, of course, with the primary aim of getting sympathy and more people on our 'side' so we can feel totally justified in how we feel.

This is a terrific way to deal with conflict. Tell everyone but the actual person what the problem is.

Be right while the other person is wrong

If we occasionally do confront the other person, we are capable of spending huge amounts of time and energy trying to convince them how right we are and how wrong they are. We may even try to verbally bludgeon the other person into submission by walloping them with arguments, justifications, defences; pointing out just how they misinterpreted what we said, what they obviously didn't understand and what they should have heard and said instead.

We're great at pointing out to them the error of their ways.

Let them have it between the eyes

This kind of goes hand in hand with being right, avoiding conflict and the bum-biting stuff. What happens is that all the while we avoid conflict and evidence-collect, we're also storing up little resentments, hurts, 'I can't believe...', frustrations and annoyances. Then there's the last straw – the camel back-breaking one – and whoosh, it can all come out in a great wave of rage.

None of these strategies help in any way to resolve conflict or deal with our difficult person effectively. They are designed to make us feel better, or at least justified in our feelings and actions, but they don't change the situation and they most certainly will make it worse.

It's You Not Them

If you find someone rubs you up the wrong way, someone who you find really difficult to deal with, then it is almost certainly about you and not them.

Yes, the world every once in a while, throws up someone who is universally recognised as difficult. But for the most part, if you have a problem with someone, look to yourself first, instead of immediately placing the blame on him or her for being difficult, and the onus on them to change to make it better for you.

Get this: they are not responsible for how you feel – you are!

And if you make them responsible for how you feel, you give them a whole lot of power, and you can easily make yourself a victim to them. Under these circumstances, they are in control of the relationship, whether they know it or not (or even want it or not).

Yes, of course, there are people who bully – and that's horrible. You may have a client or colleague who takes every opportunity to try to humiliate you – and that's awful. But the bottom line is still that you can either choose to be a victim to their personalities and communication styles, or you can take charge of the relationships and manage them, instead of letting them manage you.

When it comes to defining difficult people, it's completely subjective. One person's difficult person is another person's friend. You might be the only one in the office who doesn't get on with this 'monster'; alternatively, you might be the only one who does.

Here's an example of something that happened at Impact Factory quite a few years ago, and we think it serves to illustrate this point beautifully.

We had hired someone to handle the administration. She thought Jo Ellen was fantastic: empathetic, understanding, patient, fun, easy to talk to. She found Robin cold, disinterested, withdrawn and unapproachable.

She eventually went on to other things and we hired a new person.

She found Jo Ellen sarcastic, impatient, lacking in empathy, a spoilsport. She found Robin entertaining, patient, humorous, and easy to get along with.

Now, we hadn't magically changed our personalities between one person coming on board and another. Something in each of us triggered something in each of them: they responded from their own history, expectations, projections and personality style. We, however, remained the same people.

I'm Fine. It's Everyone Else

Here's something else even more startling to think about.

You are someone's difficult person. *Yes, you are.*

We all are.

Someone, somewhere finds each of us really difficult to deal with. Just as in the above example at Impact Factory, it can feel quite disturbing to recognise that someone else thinks we are a problem.

Inside ourselves we think we're OK. When we look out at the world through the filter of our own eyes, it can be very hard sometimes to 'see' that the world looks very different to someone else.

That in turn makes it difficult for us to 'see' that they approach communication differently as well. And this is where difficulties are likely to arise. When we expect other people to treat the world the way we do: to be attuned to the things we are attuned to; to respond the way we do.

When this doesn't happen; when someone else's communication style seems diametrically opposed to our own, then real conflict will come to pass and we find it hard to know what to do.

First let's look at you.

How are you difficult? What do you do that might get up someone's nose or that they might find problematic? We're not saying they're 'right'. We just want you to give some thought to the fact that there are people out there who find you just as difficult as you find your difficult person.

Given that it's you and not them; given that you are someone else's difficult person, how likely is it that you're going to get a personality transplant and become how they might wish you to behave?

Pretty unlikely.

In turn, how likely is it that your difficult person is going to go out, get a personality transplant, and become how you want them to be?

Equally unlikely.

If things stay like this, you get to maintain the status quo, but you're still no closer to resolving conflict, are you?

The Good News

Yes, in all of this there really is good news. Earlier we mentioned that the more you make your difficult person responsible for how you feel, the more power they have in the relationship. If you do nothing to change the current dynamic, you stay passive and let things happen to you.

So, change the communication.

The more active you are in trying to change how you communicate, the less of a victim you are, then the more power you can wrest back.

By change the communication, we mean change what *you* do and what *you* say. What you do, what you say and how you say it will all create changes in the dynamic between you and another person. You may not always get what you want, but you will certainly be in charge of what happens between the two of you.

Here are some things you could try to help resolve conflict and help you get on better with your problem person.

Figure out what's really going on

There are many triggers that create conflict, but as far as we're concerned, the primary purpose of conflict is to achieve some kind of resolution. By this we mean that if there are the rumblings of conflict between you and another person, something has to be underlying it.

It could be poor communication, unspoken expectations, feeling let down or unsupported. It could be you think the other person is unprofessional or thoughtless. Whatever it is, if you make it your job to determine what might be underlying the conflict and just why you find your difficult person difficult, you'll have the bigger picture.

It will then make it much easier to enter the resolution-seeking arena.

Deal with things as they arise

This can be really hard for conflict avoiders to do. It really does mean that you have to give up the fantasy that the conflict will get fixed all by itself, without human intervention.

By dealing with things as they happen (however small and petty they may seem), you open up an on-going dialogue with the person, rather than keeping them at arm's length, which is what usually happens with our difficult person.

Avoid blaming

If you do manage to open this dialogue, it's better by far to let them know the affect their behaviour has on you, rather than pointing the accusing finger of blame. Who wants to be blamed for a bunch of stuff that someone else has been accumulating?

Build bridges

You could even take some of the responsibility for the difficulty between the two of you. Take time and invest some energy in trying to see the other person's point of view. Let them know that there indeed have been times when your own communication hasn't been top-drawer. Give them some credit, look for opportunities to acknowledge and praise the other person. Pretty much everyone likes to be praised and it costs you nothing to do it.

The way this works is, that if you make a couple of forays into their territory (like laying a plank or two from your end of the swamp), it's pretty much human nature that the other person will feel compelled to put down a plank or two in response. It doesn't always happen, but it happens more than you might think.

Set clear boundaries

Now hold on to this because this is important. A boundary is not for you; it's for the other person.

What setting clear boundaries does is to get the stuff that's in your head out in the open so they know what's going on for you. You know what's going on in your head; the other person doesn't.

Giving them a 'look' or expecting them to know what bothers you is simply not on. By taking charge of the situation, you can be really clear what would be helpful to make the relationship work better.

You don't have to go it alone

Sometimes it can be a big help to enlist support; perhaps someone who could act as an objective mediator. A good mediator allows each person to present their point of view and then looks for ways to resolve the conflict with you. They're not there to take sides, but to objectively assess the situation and keep things on track.

Stop colluding

When other people come to you to complain about their difficult person, turn them away. If they want to tell you what's wrong with 'X', a simple response could be, 'Tell X, not me.'

The more *you* stop colluding with other people, the more you will become aware of your own behaviour in seeking other people's sympathy of your difficulties.

Walk Away

It may seem an extreme alternative, but if there are situations that simply defy resolution, you don't have to stay in them. You don't have to engage with them if the cost is too high.

If you've tried all the techniques, got support, tried to bridge build and you still are at an impasse, you can simply walk away. If you don't, and find yourself continually thinking about your difficult person – what they did, what they said, what they didn't do – then you have given them too much power and you get to stay in victim mode.

Walking away will look different for each person, but it definitely is an active choice, not a passive one.

Conclusion

You are always going to have difficult people in your life. You'll find people difficult; someone else will find you difficult. However, with a bit of practise you can ensure that they don't rule your life, your thoughts, your feelings.

You might even get to the place where you initiate conflict just so that you can get to a resolution!

If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on Conflict & Difficult People, please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: enquiries@impactfactory.com