

SOURCE LINES

Difficult People

The only way you can change someone else is by changing yourself in relation to them.

More often than not the stress in our lives comes from strained relationships in our personal lives and at work. **Relationship collisions** are most likely to occur when dealing with difficult people. They can diminish self-confidence, increase stress levels, destroy morale, decrease productivity, and even be abusive and toxic. We tend to view others as difficult when they are not like us, and consequently can end up spending a lot of time and energy expecting others to change... after all, we're the one who is right!

In reality, at one time or another we have all been difficult to deal with. It is important to distinguish between those of us who are difficult from time to time from those with long-standing patterns of difficulties with others. This information is a guide to understanding who the other person is, what strategies to use and what expectations to have.

Basically, when we look at human behaviour, people respond in either non-assertive, aggressive, or assertive ways to other people and situations. Difficult people routinely resort to aggressive or non-assertive ways in dealing with others.

Non-assertive responses happen when people suppress their opinions or needs, mainly because they want to avoid conflict. Non-assertive people can be well-liked because they can make life easy for those around them. But they can become difficult when overwhelmed by the demands of others and resort to withholding responses to regain some balance in relationships. Aggressive responses are usually motivated by need for control or power, and can manifest through intimidation, intense emotions (usually anger), or insensitivity for the moment.

What makes people difficult?

Psychologist Vijay P. Sharma, in his article "*Understanding "Difficult" People*" summarizes:

People can be difficult because:

- They are unduly critical and intolerant of those who fail to measure up to their standards.
- Nobody taught them the basic social skills and appropriate ways of interacting with others. They have not learned things which others take for granted.
- They are stuck in the past. They harbor, often justifiably, a lot of anger against people of the past and they relate to those in the present as if they were someone from their past.
- Their sense of self may be so fragile that they have a need to protect it by keeping others at a distance. They achieve this by being demanding, difficult or even offensive. After all, if you don't like yourself it is likely that you would dislike others.

Besides complaining or whining about the difficult behaviours of others, what else can one do?

When dealing with difficult people, you want to separate the people from the problem. Asking whether the problem would go away if so-and-so were not involved may give you a clearer perspective of what has to be done. Prepare yourself, do your homework. Ask questions about 'why' each of you wants what you want. Figure out whether you are really compelled to work with the difficult person or whether you have an alternative. Another step to take is to listen carefully to the difficult person. ***We all learn more with our***

mouth closed and our ears open. Check the assumptions you have made in your preparation. We are all put off by certain behaviours, but in some cultures, those may be normal behaviours, so sometimes we run risks if we assume that people are knowingly trying to offend us.

One of the initial questions is to ask ourselves in what ways we may be contributing to the difficulty. It is not unusual for people to behave with others in ways that maintain difficult behaviours. In these instances the difficult behaviour may be excused, rationalized, minimized, ignored, even covered up. The bottom line is that it is not addressed directly. It may be talked about behind the difficult person's back but the difficult person remains unchallenged for his/her actions.

Assertive responses aim to resolve conflicts in ways that are satisfactory to yourself and others. They include labeling problems, feelings, needs, and wants in ways that aim to preserve respect for the rights and dignity of yourself and others. Psychologist R.Z. Peurifoy describes an approach to resolving issues with difficult people underlined by assertiveness, which focuses on three skills: describing, expressing, requesting,

1. **Describe** the problem behaviour that you want to see changed objectively and specifically. This includes reference to the times and places the problem behaviour occurs. Always refer to the behaviour, not the person.

Avoid vague words or descriptions (i.e. "sometimes" "maybe") and generalizations for "all

time" (i.e. "you never" "you always"). Also avoid guessing at the other person's motives or intentions.

2. **Express** your opinions or feelings as your own, without blaming the other person.

Avoid denying or holding your feelings in, but don't express them through emotional outbursts, or words that ridicule, shame, or attack the other person's character.

3. **Request** the changes and actions you want. Try to request one change at a time, by describing the specific actions you want stopped, and those you want done. Also, consider the losses involved for the other person in complying with your request.

Avoid implying or hinting at what you want changed; do not ask for changes in vague terms. Do not ask for major changes of character; this is a much harder task. Avoid asking for changes that only satisfy your needs without consideration for the impact on the other person.

With practice and persistence the above skills can go a long way toward making your relationships more functional. The key remains to replace defensiveness with openness when attempting to resolve conflicts. As one respected state leader once said: "You can't shake hands with a clenched fist".

Random Thoughts

The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don't do anything about it. — Albert Einstein

Fear is that little darkroom where negatives are developed. — Michael Pritchard

Honest criticism is hard to take --- especially when it comes from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger. — Franklin P. Jones

SOURCE LINE INC
94 CUMBERLAND STREET, SUITE 604, TORONTO, ONTARIO, M5R 1A3
Email: reachus@sourceline.net Web Site: www.sourceline.net
416-234-1316 or 1-800-394-8015
Offices in Toronto, Mississauga, Woodbridge and Newmarket
With EAP Associates Across Canada