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A New View
Managing Conflict and Difficult People
By Alan Ovson

In any office you visit, you'll find them. Whether it's the critical manager who finds fault with everyone, a coworker who complains about everything and everyone, or a demanding client who knows all the answers, you know these people! They are the ones who can make life difficult and frustrating at the office.

In whatever shape these difficult people come in, they can't be ignored. The trick in dealing with them is to understand how we react or respond to their behaviors and then develop strategies that deal effectively with both our responses and actions and their behaviors. We know a lot about difficult people. They play the game according to their rules and that creates conflict and stress for the rest of us. Difficult people share a number of traits in common. They:

- Make judgments that close them down to other information
- Jump to conclusions without much data
- Don't listen actively;
- Become defensive and take things personally;
- Get angry, use aggressive language and stir up emotions;
- Clam up - become passive and withdraw;
- Say 'yes' when they really mean 'no' and don't follow through
- Employ intimidation tactics to get their way;
- Negotiate around egos and not around issues;
- Are generally clueless as to their behavior;

Starting Point: Look in the Mirror

Whenever I coach people on managing conflict and or dealing with difficult people, I ask two simple questions. The first is "How do you work with difficult people and what is the real problem?" The answer is usually, "not very well, and, they create lots of stress and conflict". Then comes question No. 2: "Are *you* a difficult person?" A few people will actually admit that they are difficult. The truth is that all of us, with certain issues and ideas, can become difficult, defensive or aggressive and create conflict and difficulties for others.

Revisit the above list of common traits of difficult people and see if you recognize things you do. If you're being honest with yourself, you probably do. This doesn't make you a really difficult person but, hopefully, it does let you know that when you encounter conflict, anyone—even you—can become difficult. Whether you see yourself, as a difficult person is not the problem. The problem is that we are often unconscious as to how we react to conflict situations and that we fall into an unconscious pattern of behavior. Since our reactions to conflict often determines the conflict's outcome, we better be clear about how we react in the face of conflict.

What's Your Style?

In their study of conflict, the psychologists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilman found that people often react to conflict by behaving, without thinking, in ways learned at an early age. They described people's behavior in conflict situations in two basic dimensions: "(1) assertiveness, the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy his own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns." They used these basic dimensions, assertiveness and cooperation, to define 5 different modes of responding to conflict situations. They called these modes, conflict styles. Check them out – see where you fit.

- **Competing:** assertive and uncooperative. The motto – my way or the highway! Competitors use whatever power is appropriate – skills in arguing, position, economic sanctions, etc.
- **Accommodating:** unassertive and cooperative. Motto – whatever you want, just ask! Appease the other side and forget about your concerns.
- **Avoiding:** unassertive and uncooperative. Motto – please leave me alone!
- **Collaborating:** assertive and cooperative. Motto – let's work this out! This is the opposite of avoiding and means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the opposing individual.
- **Compromising:** moderate assertive and cooperative. Motto – can we split the difference? Try to find a middle ground and make sure everyone is happy without the deep exploration of collaboration.

How Do We Change?

The first thing to change is the way we think about conflict. Conflict is an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of any situation. The more we face up to our own feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and fear the more we grow as human beings and the easier these conflict are to deal with. Since people with differing ideas create conflict, conflict is unavoidable (unless you work by yourself or never speak with anyone). Because problems only get deeper and don't go away if you avoid them, it's essential to become more comfortable dealing with conflict.

Simply put, conflict is about differences, whether it has to do with opinions, principles, feelings or interests. These conflicts then put relationships at risk.

To make this issue more complex, people generally avoid such problems, rather than deal with them, which only leads to greater problems. If we never talk to people about what these differences, we will never get a chance to question assumptions we may make about people who are different from us. By talking about our differences we can begin to understand them. We can see how differences affect our interactions and communications. Once we become more comfortable talking about our differences, it becomes easier to work through them—and allows us to solve problems using broader perspectives to analyze the problems.

If I Can Change, So Can You

After a nasty divorce ending with me ceding everything to my ex, I realized that something was wrong. I rarely got what I wanted either at work or at home. I wasn't assertive and didn't feel comfortable asking to fulfill my needs. I hovered between avoidance and accommodation. I was just like my family – not assertive

-sometimes uncooperative. I began to understand that it was not my ex's behavior that was the problem, it was mine. I wasn't assertive or cooperative and certainly wasn't getting what I wanted. Something had to change! I needed to change the way I dealt with conflict.

I developed an A, B, C model of change. If I was going to make positive change I needed to be Aware of my Behaviors, make Commitments to Change, develop Choices, and become Assertive in my Communications.

A senior partner gave me the opportunity that I was waiting for. He was difficult. He pressed me to do things that I didn't want to do, he asked for my ideas on certain issues but never listen to them, he criticized my work without end, he assigned me work I didn't like, in short, I felt like a bad child around him. I, on the other hand reacted like I was a child. I clammed up in his office, often said 'yes' when I should have said 'no', and got angry and stuffed my feelings inside. I became a difficult person too. I couldn't change him, that was beyond my control. But I could change my behavior, act assertively, and recover my self-esteem.

Following the five-step assertiveness format, I went to my boss and told him what I wanted. AND, he listened. I wasn't angry, I didn't put him on the defensive, I simply planned carefully and asked for what I wanted. I can't say whether my conversation with him changed him forever, but more important, it changed the way I thought about myself and it changed the way I deal with conflict and difficult people.

Going Beyond Conflict to Positive Change

Conflict in your life, whether it's at the office or at home, is inevitable. And while these strategies may not change difficult people, they will enable you to deal with them—and the situation—more effectively. Just remember that dealing with conflict and difficult people is a process and the more you do it, the more it will be like riding a bike - you just get better and better - have a good ride!

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Sidebar: The 5 Step Assertiveness Process for Dealing with Conflict

1. Get ready! Know your goals. Be clear in your own mind what behavior you want and what the consequences are for both of you. Pick the right time and place. Remember, timing is everything.
2. State your feelings in a positive fashion and respect their feelings. Show empathy and respect and a willingness to work the situation through. . "I recognize how important the things are that you are having me do. However, I hope you realize this is very important to me." "I value you as a boss, and I want to be as direct as I can with you."
3. State the problems and negative feelings. Enlist their help in solving the problem. Tell them how the situation affects you personally. "I have a problem and I think you can help me with it." "When you give me the same type of work, I feel like I am not growing at my job." "When I am constantly criticized about the work I do, I feel less willing to do anything."
4. State your goal and request different behaviors. Develop some choices for them to choose from and be open to them adding possible solutions. "If you would give me different work that uses my skills, I would be willing to help someone else with the other tasks. You could give me, or or...."
5. Clearly summarize points of agreement and be clear about the exact terms of your agreement. Write the agreements down and be specific. Sum up points of disagreement and define what will happen next. The agreement is where the rubber meets the road.