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## Difficult People

This information is based on the book "Coping with Difficult People" by Dr. Robert M. Bramson (written in 1981). The book is pretty good and is a good reference. ISBN 0-440-20201-9.

### Classes of difficult people

There are several classes of difficult people (as defined by Bramson):

Attacking Hostile Aggressive	Sherman tanks
Covert Hostile Aggressive	Snipers
Reactive Hostile Aggressive	Exploders
Complainer	Whiner
Silent Unresponsive	Clams
Super agreeable	Wonderfully nice
Negativist	Wet blanket
Know it all	Bulldozers
Phony know it all	Balloons
Indecisive	Staller

### Steps for dealing with difficult behaviors

Some of the basic steps to coping with these behaviors are:

- 1) Assess the situation.

Find out if you are really dealing with a 'difficult' person:

- Has the person acted differently in 3 similar situations?
- Am I reacting out of proportion to the situation?
- Was there a particular incident that triggered this?
- Will direct, open discussion relieve the situation?

- 2) Stop wishing they were different.
- 3) Step back from the immediate problem. Detach yourself from the individual and situation and get some perspective.
- 4) Formulate a plan.
- 5) Implement the plan.
- 6) Monitor the progress and modify as appropriate.

Note that this looks very similar to a TQC or a process improvement model, but applied to personal interactions.

### Approaches for dealing with difficult people

What follows are specific behaviors, reasons and coping mechanisms for the various types of difficult people.

#### **ATTACKING HOSTILE AGGRESSIVE**

Behavior	They usually come out attacking. They can be described as abusive, overwhelming, arrogant or intimidating.
Reasons	They have this behavior because

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they need to prove themselves</li> <li>2) they think they know the 'right way'</li> <li>3) they think they know what you should do</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stand up without a direct fight</li> <li>• give them time to run down</li> <li>• don't worry about being polite</li> <li>• get their attention, get them to sit down</li> <li>• maintain eye contact</li> <li>• State your opinions forcefully, not aggressively</li> <li>• Don't cut the other person (or their ideas) down</li> <li>• Be ready to be friendly</li> </ul>

### **COVERT HOSTILE AGGRESSIVE**

Behavior	They usually make subtle digs, side comments or talk about you when you are not present.
Reasons	<p>They have this behavior because</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they like subtlety or don't like/want direct attacks</li> <li>2) they think they know the 'right way'</li> <li>3) they think they know what you should do</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surface the attack</li> <li>• Provide a peaceful alternative to open warfare</li> <li>• Don't capitulate to their view</li> <li>• Seek group confirmation or denial of the criticism</li> <li>• Deal with the underlying problems</li> <li>• Don't be a 3<sup>rd</sup> party allowing sniping</li> </ul>

### **REACTIVE HOSTILE AGGRESSIVE**

Behavior	They will blow up or cry or get very upset.
Reasons	<p>They have this behavior because</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they feel thwarted and threatened</li> <li>2) they are triggered by an action or blockage</li> <li>3) they use the anger to take control of a situation</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give them time to run down (regain self control)</li> <li>• If they don't stop, break into the tantrum with a neutral phrase (like "stop")</li> <li>• Show them you take them seriously</li> <li>• If necessary, take a breather or get them alone</li> </ul>

### **COMPLAINER**

Behavior	They point out real problems, but in a fashion that causes defensive or placating reactions out of others.
Reasons	<p>They have this behavior because</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they feel powerless</li> <li>2) they think they know the 'right way'</li> <li>3) by complaining they shift responsibility and blame</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen attentively</li> <li>• Acknowledge (by paraphrasing)</li> <li>• Don't agree or apologize (don't buy in)</li> <li>• Avoid accusation/defense/reaccusation pattern</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State and acknowledge facts without comment</li> <li>• Move to problem solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ask specific informational questions</li> <li>• assign limited fact finding tasks</li> <li>• ask for complaints in writing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Last resort - ask “How do you want this conversation to end”</li> </ul>
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### **SILENT UNRESPONSIVE**

Behavior	They are silent or unresponsive, when you need a response from them. It is frustrating because you don't know why they're quiet or the needed information.
Reasons	They can have this behavior for several reasons: 1) it is a way to handle painful personal interactions 2) it is a form of silent aggression 3) “better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt”
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't make assumptions about the meaning of silence</li> <li>• The key is to get them to talk: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask open ended questions</li> <li>• Wait calmly</li> <li>• Don't fill in silence with your conversation</li> <li>• Make sure you have enough time (don't rush)</li> <li>• If no response, comment on it and end comment with an open ended question</li> </ul> </li> <li>• When they open up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be attentive</li> <li>• Make sure you stay on track with issues</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Avoid the polite ending, set up another meeting if necessary.</li> </ul>

### **SUPER AGREEABLE**

Behavior	They are always agreeable and appear helpful. It is frustrating because they don't follow through with results.
Reasons	They can have this behavior for because: 1) they want to be liked 2) this helps them be accepted 3) but their need to be liked is in conflict with the reality of the situation that requires resolution 4) so they commit to an action they can't deliver on
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Let them know that you value them</li> <li>• Discuss aspects that will impact your 'relationship'</li> <li>• Get at the underlying barriers to delivering</li> <li>• Be careful of open conflict</li> </ul>

### **NEGATIVIST**

Behavior	They are always pointing out why “it won't work” or the problems. It is frustrating because they will sap others energy and get people on a downward spiral.
Reasons	They can have this behavior because: 1) they think most things are screwed up 2) they feel others can't (or shouldn't) be trusted 3) they feel powerless 4) they feel resentment when others try
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't get sucked in</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Point out previous successes (optimistic/realistic)</li> <li>• Don't argue them out of pessimism</li> <li>• Discuss alternatives only after adequate discussion</li> <li>• Bring up concerns yourself about alternative</li> <li>• Recognize negative comments as risks to be considered</li> </ul>
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### **KNOW IT ALL**

Behavior	They are experts who have all the answers. They don't listen. They can be productive. It is frustrating because they will blast over people leaving them feeling inept or not involved and if things go wrong they blame others.
Reasons	They can have this behavior because: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they want to be secure or superior</li> <li>2) they don't like uncertainty</li> <li>3) they know the power to affect their lives is in their own hands, and not in anybody else's</li> <li>4) they feel they know 'the right answer'</li> <li>5) by being experts, they have control</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be thoroughly prepared (materials, accuracy, facts)</li> <li>• Listen carefully to their ideas, paraphrase main pts.</li> <li>• Avoid stating opinions as facts (don't be dogmatic)</li> <li>• Use questioning approach to disagree</li> <li>• To re-examine plans, ask extension style questions</li> </ul>

### **PHONY KNOW IT ALL**

Behavior	They think they are experts but they just have snippets of information. It is frustrating because they actually think they know and can convince some people or at least waste other people's time.
Reasons	They can have this behavior because: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they want to be seen as intelligent</li> <li>2) they are alert to information (and get lots)</li> <li>3) they generate ideas and think their ideas are valid</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State correct facts descriptively</li> <li>• Give them a way out (to save face)</li> <li>• Be ready to fill the conversation gap</li> <li>• Talk with them alone (when facing facts), if possible</li> </ul>

### **INDECISIVE**

Behavior	They just can't decide. It is frustrating because you need them to make up their minds and get off the dime.
Reasons	They often have this behavior because: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) they want to help and be honest</li> <li>2) they don't want to cause anybody distress</li> <li>3) they don't decide as a way to compromise</li> </ol>
Coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give them an easy way to tell you about the problem</li> <li>• Listen to clues about cause of indecision</li> <li>• Help them examine the facts and solve the problem</li> <li>• Give support to a decision</li> </ul>