



National Association of Institutional Linen Management

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DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE Part I

By Dr. Larry c. Bobbert

The world is filled with all kinds of people and some create “close encounters” of the worst kind. This article is based on a web course title “Coping and Communicating with Difficult People” available free to NLM members who can enroll and explore the course free for the next 90 days.

Like it or not most of us face difficult people every day. In this brief space we will explore the following realities.

1. When we can communicate or effectively cope with people, we become more content with ourselves which helps us enjoy life more and get more accomplished.
2. When we know more about ourselves than others know about us, we can better handle ourselves in difficult situations.
3. When we know more about others than they know about themselves, we can control a situation.

Bottom Line- When you understand how to handle, communicate or cope with difficult people, you can get more done and feel better about doing it.

To accomplish all this we need to provide many types of people an atmosphere in which they can get what they want or need. When dealing with people nothing is simple because there are so many types, so we will discuss some generic techniques that work with most people-nobody is liked or works with everyone easily. That’s why we have political parties, marriages and divorces, friends and enemies, treaties and wars.

So where to start? First stop and think of a person who you believe is difficult. What makes them “difficult” for you ? Stop reading. Think about one difficult individual. It would help if you wrote down a description of the person- maybe even give them a secrete nickname like “Mr. Steam Roller” or “Ms. Know-it-all.”

Nervousness and Fear

Now you have a description of the person with whom you would like to work more effectively. Which is a nice way of saying, “get along with the lunkhead that irritates you.”

We all tend to be difficult to someone when we are nervous or

fear some coming event. The fear can even prohibit us from making a decision in a timely fashion. Think of the first time you ever had to speak in a room full of staring faces-{}r asking or accepting that first date. Now hold that thought and the feelings of fear. We may get to the first kiss later. but if not remember I am old and forgetful. Forgetfulness or lack of concentration also can make us difficult.

Coping with nervousness

The secret to coping and communicating is to remember fear and nervousness can be harnessed and used to help you. In front of an audience fear can help you do a better job by giving you more energy. Practice controlling your nervous feelings and you can more easily cope with difficult people. The old "count to ten" has merits, but try concentrating on taking 20 slow breaths the next time the difficult person enters the room. Practice alone by slowly breathing in your nose and exhaling through your mouth. You can practice anytime you are waiting for someone, a call, an appointment or anything. Well, maybe not "anytime." Do this loudly in a crowded room, and you'll be the difficult person.

Fear is controlling

Some people reject new ideas or are difficult because they fear something. You need to explore the possible fear in a difficult person. It may be as simple as fearing change. "What ain't broke don't need fix'n."

Questions

Using questions can be very effective in dealing with people. Now of course you can carry it too far. My wife, a counselor, uses questions all the time. I asked her. "Why do you always answer my questions with questions." She replied. "Do I do that?".

You can use questions to cope and communicate with difficult people. You might try, "Shannon, if we do this how do you think it might affect you?" Then listen until the person is completely finished talking before making any suggestions. When you start with "how do you think" you must never interrupt-barring a fire or other catastrophe.

Suggestions

After listening the very best you can, begin your suggestions with "If I hear what you are saying, you think (use the same words they spoke). Well, I've considered that and here's how I see it " Follow your explanation quickly with "Does this make sense?" and listen again.

Why will this work in many situations. When you say:

A. ". ..if we do this, how do you think it might affect your'

You show you are interested in their opinion. Often resistance lowers if we only let people express their opinion. Once people perceive that you are really listening they become more open to listening to you.

B. "If I hear what you are saying, you think. ..' You show that you really listened and you

appreciate their opinion. By repeating their words implies that you understand their point of view.

c. "Well, I've considered that and here's how I see it "You show that you too have been thinking about alternative solutions and theirs is one worth thinking about. You have listened and now you can relate your opinion couched in the same words and ideas that they expressed. My wife likes this but would rather hear, "Yes! That's a great idea. Any thing you say dear."

D. "Does this make sense?"

Avoid saying "Do you understand." Do you understand demands that the person "understand" and in many cases give tacit agreement. "Does this make sense?" permits the person to express disagreement and opens the communication process to more discussion.

Memorize these sentences. Read them over right now and try them. If they don't work, you can appreciate that you tried.

Self Exam

Next, examine the possibility that the person may be more difficult with you than with others. If this is the case, what about you causes the problem. Accept the fact that some people just won't like you. Me, I am a Yankee in Kentucky who is often reminded that "You are not from around here. Are you? After 29 years here-1 am, but my Yankee accent tells a different story .

Now that I know that I can recognize that I have to be more discrete in my suggestions than I might otherwise be. When I really want something I find others who also want it, have the right accent and encourage them to pursue the activity. I actively support their efforts and we all win. It is surprising what you can get done if someone else gets the credit.

Your permission

Remember no difficult person can make you feel inferior, angry, sad, depressed or "bad" without your permission. When someone says something that can make you react a specific way, they control the situation. Sometimes we cannot help the way

we feel, but we can always help the way we act. To combat these feelings say “I cannot help the way I feel right now, but I can help the way I think and act.” Walk away trying to feel good about yourself because you “coped.” At first you reacted as usual, but then you coped by telling yourself that you could “help the way you think and act.”

Let it go

Less than ten percent of your daily communications is in the words you say. Over half of the words you hear are completely forgotten within twenty-four hours. But most of us tend to remember what happens in a stressful situation. So remember as my dad used to say. “You never have to eat words you don’t say.” This is another way to cope. Go home type a nasty letter then destroy it. You cope!

Next time we will offer suggestions on coping with specific types of difficult people. Among the difficult people we will look at are the “steam rollers” who are pushy people who demand you do as they wish.

Internal jogging

Laughter has many beneficial effects on our body’s physical systems. Psychiatrist Dr. William Fry calls laughter internal jogging” This is a terrific idea for me. Laughing is much easier than exercise. Its uses are many in the arena of coping with difficult people. Have you ever seen two people arguing while laughing. Even old or bad jokes can take the edge off a difficult situation. Of course, we aren’t advocating dirty jokes- they can really cause an occasion for coping and seldom communicate effectively the way we want or think they will.

Will Rogers told us, .’We are only here for a spell, so get a few laughs.” So when you can’t cope or communicate with a difficult person try to find some humor in the situation.

Me, I cope with my most difficult person by laughing as I remember when he got his car towed and ended up going to jail when he tried his steam rolling tactics on the local law enforcement officers.

“He who angers you. Conquers.”

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