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## National Association of Institutional Linen Management

*About the author: Dr. Bobbert is an international speaker and author who has made presentations in 33 states and 3 continents to Fortune 100 managers, trainers, and employees. At Eastern Kentucky University Media Resources he has written, produced and directed hundreds of educational videos, interactive CDs and live satellite productions. His background includes degrees in education, communications, and computer multimedia program development.*

### **DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE Part II**

By Dr. Larry C. Bobbert

Ever have someone just push and push until you give in? We call them Bull Dozers and Sherman Tanks. Snipers and Complainers are two more difficult people we have to deal with. In this article you will learn how to cope and communicate with these and other difficult people. We all encounter difficult people and there is little we can do to change their natures, but the right techniques can help us deal with them.

In Part I, we talked about how the world seems filled with difficult people. We explained that our articles are based on a web course title "Coping and Communicating with Difficult People" available free to NLM members who can enroll in the course free for the next 90 days. Contact Dr. Bobbert at his web address: [larry.bobbert@eku.edu](mailto:larry.bobbert@eku.edu)

#### **We explored the following realities.**

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

Again, we suggest you stop a moment and think about a person you believe is difficult and what makes them "difficult."

In Part 1, we discussed how Fear is controlling and how you can use questions to effectively deal with difficult people. We suggested exact dialogue to help readers get what they wanted. In this article we will again suggest exact dialogue to cope with certain kinds of people.

#### **HOSTILE AGGRESSIVE "Bull Dozers" and "Sherman Tanks"**

Let's start first with the person who tries to run right over you to get what they want. The psychologists call these people hostile aggressive. They try to bully and overwhelm you or make cutting remarks. Sometimes they even throw tantrums and blame you for their errors. Most of them tend to be "know-it -all's" but they are usually highly productive. Dr. Bramson in his book, *COPING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE*, suggests that you can learn dialogue coping techniques, and all you have to do is practice them until you feel good trying to use them. After you cope with the difficult behavior and get some control of the situation then you can try communicating. Remember, when you learned to walk you fell a few times. Well, trying these techniques will lead to some failure, but you can cope and feel good that you tried and at least were in control of your self.

When others make you angry or "feel bad" you are giving them permission to control the situation. When you use coping techniques you are at least getting self -control. With practice you can get good enough with the techniques that they work then you take control of the situation.

#### **BULL DOZERS**

Back to the Hostile Aggressive's, "Bull Dozers." Bramson says try the following first when an aggressive person approaches -" be proactive."

## **I. Analyze the situation.**

Your first job with all difficult people is to assess the situation. Think about what each of you did the last time. What probably will happen? You can turn conflict into communications by being ready for the aggressive person. Ask yourself some questions:

- a. Has the person in question usually acted differently in three or more situations?
- b. Am I reacting out of proportion to what the situation warrants?
- c. Was there a particular incident that triggered the troublesome behavior?
- d. Will direct, open discussion relieve the situation?

When the bully approaches, take a breath and analyze the situation then you choose how you will behave. (A suggested course and dialogue follow.)

Most of the time you are not responsible for the actions of Bull Dozers and you definitely have no reason to take their abuse or rude behavior. They believe your actions or even inaction triggers their behavior, but THEY are responsible for their behavior. Once you believe you do not cause the behavior, dealing with them becomes much easier. These Bull Dozers will blame you and are often rude. They interrupt you, but practice the dialogue (script) and you 'll learn to cope.

## **2. Determine whether the person is really hostile or just trying to get some action. If a person is**

just upset and is not normally a Bull Dozer then avoid this technique and just turn on your ears and listen.

## **3. Turn conflict into communications by first coping with their behavior then talking about the situation.**

### **STAND UP TO HOSTILE AGGRESSIVES**

To cope with Hostile Aggressive you must stand up to them without fighting. Remember they are good at confrontation, so you have to be skillful. Try the following:

1. Give them a little time to run down.
2. Get their attention. Don't worry about being polite, speak up. Call them by their name. Use their first name unless it is inappropriate.
3. Begin by trying to get them to sit down, but don't sit first. If you are sitting when they arrive STAND to be on their level, and looking directly into their eyes.
4. Maintain eye contact.
5. State your own opinion forcefully, but just use the facts.
6. Avoid arguing or trying to cut them down.
7. Just state your opinion or use the script that follows.

### **INTERRUPTIONS**

When Hostile Aggressives interrupt you, be ready for them. Practice the following script to get your message across. It was modified from one recommended by Dr. Bramson and it does work. Remember to stand if they are standing. We'll call this Hostile Aggressive Mr. S Tank since he or she will try to run over you like a Sherman Tank.

S. Tank: "You promised me that material would be ready by noon."

YOU: (Calmly and slowly) "You said you needed it tomorrow ."

S. Tank: "Of course, I didn't. You knew it was due today."

(He/she will blame you)

YOU: (Slowly and steady) "Both Mr. Jones and you agreed that it would be tomorrow."

S. Tank: (Interrupting) "You know I would never have agreed to that."

### **STEP 1**

YOU: (Slowly repeat what you started when interrupted) "Mrs. Jones said that..."

S. Tank: (Interrupting again) "You know that is not true!"

## **STEP 2**

YOU: (Avoid emotion. Talk slowly and use their name )

“-(name)-,-” or “Mr. (name)-, you interrupted me. Mrs. Jones said that...”

Each time the Tank interrupts say the exact same thing. “ \_\_\_\_\_, You interrupted me.” Then try to continue.

This is the coping part, and you may have to repeat Step 2 several times before S .Tank stops and listens. Ultimately S.Tank will give in and listen. To communicate or “Deal” with S. Tank just tell him or her the facts. Then wait. You may be very pleasantly surprised and the next time S Tank comes around you may be treated differently. If not, you know how to successfully deal with the Bull Dozer.

## **FEEL GOOD ABOUT COPING**

Regardless of the outcome, after the confrontation tell yourself how good you feel being able to cope and maybe even communicate with the hostile aggressive. If Mr./Mrs.Tank launches into a long explanation on why they are right. Interrupt and ask, “How do you see that working in the near future ? (a year from now?) or (in our current environment?)”

## **SNIPERS. Action is the key.**

Another hostile aggressive is the SNIPER. The sniper takes “pot shots” at you while you are talking. Another Sniper makes remarks to people around them. These people hide and “snipe” or tease. They hide their envy and anger and reduce victims to polite inaction, so ACTION IS THE KEY TO DEALING WITH SNIPERS. Bramson tells us to “smoke out” these people and confront them. This worked the first time I tried it and for over six years the person has not done it to me again. You basically explain that you thought you heard a criticism in their remarks and want to know if they meant their remarks as a criticism.

### **Try this script.**

First get the sniper alone if possible.

YOU: “I thought I heard a “put down” (criticism) in what you said at the meeting. DID YOU MEAN IT THAT WAY?”

The fast thinking sniper may retort with “Can’t you take a Joke?”

YOU: “I thought I heard a “put down” in what you just said. Did you mean it that way?”

A practiced sniper may come back again with, “Why are you so sensitive?”

YOU: (Quietly and controlled) “I thought I heard a “put down” in what you just said. Did you mean it that way? It works. When I tried it the person just shook his head after the first “Did you mean it that way?” and walked away.

## **COMPLAINER**

Another difficult person is the Complainer. Bramson describes them as people who find fault with everything. They gripe about business, your messy desk or the weather. They make you believe they think it is your fault. By putting you on the defensive, Complainers evade responsibility for their own actions, so Bramson suggests the following:

1. Listen attentively and this can be difficult as their whining irritates. Listening is always a powerful tool. ‘As they spout off they relieve their passive anger and sense of powerlessness, and it lets you plan what to do.
2. Acknowledge that you understand what they’ve said and you know how they feel, but DO NOT AGREE. Agreeing only confirms their belief that they are blameless and that it may be all your fault.
3. Be prepared to interrupt. Listen until you understand what they are talking about then stop them- politely but firmly.
4. Give them the facts. Complainers tend to distort and exaggerate. State just the facts without comment or apology.
5. Pose specific, practical questions, then switch to problem solving. Complainers live in the past, but assign specific, limited tasks they could do to alleviate the problem.
6. Then politely make them understand that you have to get “back to work.”

## **EXPLODERS**

Exploders are very difficult people to deal with. When they feel threatened or thwarted in their endeavors they throw tantrums. These explosions are seldom planned, but they intimidate others into silence or at least passivity. People usually just get out of their way or endure the embarrassment. You no longer have to. Try coping by doing the following:

1. Give the Exploder time to calm down. Again listening has value. It lets the loud voice calm down and gives you time to think.
2. If the person doesn't calm down try interrupting by simply saying, "Stop! Stop!" or "Wait a minute." Sometimes just a sharp, "Yes, Yes!" will do.
3. Make it clear that you take them seriously, but don't discuss the subject. This can help reduce their frustration.
4. Call for a break in the meeting- even if you are not in charge. "Can we please just take a break?" Sometimes you have to just leave, but make it clear that you will be back. The intermission will help you compose yourself and give the exploder time to get himself under control.

## **DISAGREEING EFFECTIVELY**

Finally, there are times you must be the difficult person and disagree. Here are some tips from my book, Don't Talk! Communicate.

When you disagree say:

1. Blame it on someone else. "If( ) were here, he/she might say. ..(voice your disagreement).
2. Ask a question. "How would you answer the question. ..(voice your disagreement as part of the question).
3. Listen and repeat. "Your idea is interesting, but I cannot agree that. ..(state the exact area of disagreement in their words)  
EXAMPLE: "Your idea is interesting, but I cannot agree that spouse beating is correct, but we don't have to agree on everything to work together. Do we?"
4. Remember to add "DO WE?" "...We don't have to agree on everything to be friends (teammates, colleagues ), DO WE?  
Adding the question "Do we?" is very important and then you must stop and listen-again. Then you push the idea that you can disagree and still get along- avoiding the disagreement, but moving onto something constructive.

## **SUMMARY**

So in summary, you need to remember that you are somebody important and dealing with difficult people is as much a part of life as breathing. Sometimes you breath fast and other times you slow down and just let your body take over. Taking time to listen to people first is that slowing down part of life. Using coping techniques to deal with difficult people can bring you a lot of fun. Treat it as a game. My boss accuses me of using our staff meetings as a "clinic." He is not far wrong. When you practice the above techniques in times when "things" are not so important, you are ready when you really need them. Memorizing the dialogues suggested is your first task. Make it a game. Have fun and when you get one of the techniques to work, tell me at [larry.bobbert@eku.edu](mailto:larry.bobbert@eku.edu).

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