



WI Society of Association Executives

How Much is Too Much When Dealing With Difficult People?

by Victor Gray

Editor's note: The following is one of three articles in this issue of *Vantage Point* written by participants of the 2008 WSAE Speaker Showcase held November 12, 2008 at the Grand Geneva Resort & Spa.

To know how much you can live with when dealing with a difficult person requires that you are honest with yourself. A common leader fear is to deny that a problem exists. In our minds, we may believe that if we deny the existence of the problem, we can then convince ourselves that we have no responsibility to address the problem. We have chosen to live in D.E.N.I.A.L. (Don't Even kNow I Am Lying to myself about the problem.)

Do you have a difficult person problem?

In order to determine if you have a difficult person problem, and how big your difficult person problem may be, answer yes or no to the questions that follow.

The behavior of the difficult person:

- Affects your work?
- Affects the work of others?
- Affects the difficult person's work?
- Impacts or significantly impacts the organization negatively?

Does the difficult person's behavior negatively impact:

- Time loss?
- Costs increasing?
- Behaviors that are contrary to policies or your reasonable expectations?
- Safety/Security procedures sidestepped or violated?
- Quality of output?
- Quantity of output?
- A feeling in your gut that things just aren't right?

If you have responded yes to several of the above questions, the likelihood is good that the behavior of your colleague, direct report or the boss is not meeting your expectations AND their behavior is having a harmful affect upon others and the organization. It is time to consider whether to communicate your displeasure concerning the difficult behavior.

Before you criticize

Should you criticize your boss, peer or direct report? Here are some steps to keep in mind before you criticize.

1. Examine the risks. Misreading the situation could result in a deterioration of the status quo and putting a work relationship in jeopardy. The receiver of the criticism, not the giver decides the result of the exchange. This receiver of the criticism decides if the criticism

is accurate, specific or whether it should be challenged or rejected. As the giver of the criticism you only control the preparation of the criticism, not what the other person will do with it.

2. What's your chance for success? Have you criticized your boss, peer or direct report before? If so, did it lead to a positive outcome? If you've been successful in offering constructive criticism to this person in the past, and this person is receptive to your opinions, the chance for success is good, but not guaranteed. If your previous attempts to criticize your boss or peer have failed, perhaps you should strongly evaluate whether to try it again. If nothing significant has changed in your work relationship, there is no reason to believe you'll be successful this time. Have you been asked for your opinion? Does the culture of your organization encourage employee involvement and giving feedback? Some work relationships expect or find it acceptable to offer unsolicited criticism.

3. Are you sure, you can't live with it? Does this situation significantly affect your work, the work of others, or carry risks to the organization? Is the problem on-going or a one-time event? Was the person having a bad day or in a difficult situation? Difficult situations include such things as unrealistic management expectations or a belief that directives being given are illegal, unethical or unsafe. If the difficult person does not have a history of difficult behavior, or is difficult only with you, consider the possibility that you might be difficult to work with. Do you lack information about upper management decisions or conflicts? Unless the issue seriously affects your ability to do the job you may first consider consulting an objective third party. Perhaps your human resource person or mentor can help you see the situation differently, and give new insights on how to handle the problem.

4. Count up the costs of giving constructive criticism. Bosses will criticize subordinates, but the reverse is not always true. Your boss controls a valuable commodity – your freedom. Peer relationships can be tricky. Egos, seniority and rank make peer criticism vary from situation to situation. If you don't have a clear understanding of whether it's acceptable to bring up criticism with the boss or peer, ask the person about their willingness to receive constructive criticism at a time when you don't have any criticism in mind. You can gather information without anything being at stake. Clearly, if the possibility for success is low or unknown, the risks or benefits must be weighed. Furthermore, a difficult direct report can slow down the pace of the work, influence work quality, and perhaps pressure other employees to do the same. Many supervisors have stopped doing their jobs because of a fear of what an employee might say or do. Despite the

ambiguity, the bottom line is that you are paid to do a job, it may be time to get it done!

Steps for dealing with difficult people

It is important to prepare for a meeting with a difficult person. The following steps include the things you should say and do before, during, and after the meeting. These steps should prepare you for most situations.

5. Go to person — not to the break room or the local gossip. Consider an appropriate time (usually not 8 a.m. Monday or 4 p.m. on Friday) and place (comfortable, neutral and private). Sometimes a third party – either another manager or a representative from HR may participate, if appropriate or required.

6. State the problem. Use “I” Statements to share how you feel or think. Say something like, “When the production reports I prepared were tossed in the trash and you walked away, the effect was we missed the boss’s deadline for the second week in a row. I feel really aggravated and concerned.”

7. Ask their feelings. Don’t take any remarks personally. Anger can likely result when people feel attacked. Consider saying, “How do you feel about what I have just said?” (After pausing a moment) “You look a bit defensive about what I have said. I really want to know your feelings on the matter.”

8. Clarify understanding. Paraphrase by saying something like, “If I understand you correctly, you felt upset by my comments in the sales meeting last week, and . . .”

9. State your feelings calmly. Proceed carefully, do not resort to emotion or arguing at this stage. You say something similar to, “Based upon what you stated, here’s what I think . . .”

10. Offer a deal. Although some negotiation may be needed, try this technique to encourage buying on their part. “If I do this, will you do that?” “Please note that what I’m asking you to do is less than what I’m willing to contribute. Can we give it a try for two days and see how that works?”

11. Follow up. When your offer is accepted, check back to see if the agreement is still on track. Ask, “How’s our agreement working?” If the agreement is working well, then continue. If the agreement is not working, then state, “Our plan has not been successful. What else can we try to resolve the problem?”

Offering feedback and constructive criticism is crucial in organizations, but it is critical to think before you act.

Are you in D.E.N.I.A.L? Have you grown weary of dealing with difficult people issues? Want to learn more about handling difficult employees? Request Victor’s free report on the “Top 15 Mistakes Managers Make in Dealing with Difficult Employees” at <http://victorgray.com/report/>

*Victor Gray is a speaker, trainer, and coach. (888) 977-3257, Victor@VictorGray.com, www.VictorGray.com Copyright, 2009 Victor Gray, Lead Change With No Fear LLC * All rights reserved.*