Dealing with Difficult People

BY ANDREW REIMER, MANAGING DIRECTOR
LG Performance Tasmania

Most of us are faced with having to deal with a difficult person at some time in our lives. An appropriate response may not come naturally - but it can be learned.

Often we are shocked by the experience of someone who is “difficult”. We are immobilised because we have our own view about how others should behave and when someone is outside those parameters we are taken by surprise. There are a number of different strategies that can be used to deal with a difficult person but there is a logical process in deciding which will be the most effective. Consider the following three choices:

1. You can stay put and do nothing, or you can vote with your feet and leave;
2. You can change your attitude about the difficult person; or
3. You can change your behaviour OR change your level of assertiveness.

These are really your only choices. Understanding this framework is helpful in applying the following strategic steps in dealing with a difficult person:

First, is understanding of your own personality type and level of assertiveness. Choosing between your own ‘behavioural options’ will greatly affect your choice of response.

Second, is the decision to take action. This takes a clear appraisal of the consequences of not doing anything. The easy path is to withdraw or avoid the difficult person; resulting in resentfulness and frustration. These feelings may actually intensify the situation - it is only natural to complain to other people around you. You yourself could end up as being labelled as the problem!

However, sometimes the right decision is not to respond. Whatever you decide in the second step, the third skill is the most important and the hardest to learn - detaching emotionally from the person or situation, and seeing the behaviours objectively instead.

Rather than asking why the person is difficult, it is useful to ask, “What is going on that I don’t understand?” This opens you up to the possibility that there may be more to the situation than you are aware. Rather than just narrowing it down to a ‘problem’ with the other person, you may recognise that there are other issues impeding the relationship. This puts you in the driver’s seat in reaching a satisfactory resolution.

It is useful to have a process to follow when trying to manage a difficult situation. Having a step-by-step guide makes the task less daunting. Taking a project management approach assists us to remain detached and not become bogged down in the drama. It is not constructive to see any relationship as a struggle, with the aim to gain the upper hand. It is much more effective to see it as an opportunity to develop specific skills. In other words, the best way to deal with difficult behaviour is to adopt a strategic approach and to apply it. This allows us to avoid win-lose situations.

I am not trying to advocate a standard approach, or a definitive solution, rather, a process that will work best for all involved. Remember, if all else fails, try something different. If the negative aspects are overwhelming, you might want to redirect your energy to considering other options. It could be very rewarding.

LG Performance delivers workshops for Tasmanian Councils to develop emotional intelligence in the workplace. For enquiries, please contact LG Performance on (03) 6236 9055, or email Annette@highperftraining.com.au.
Communications for a New Council

BECHER TOWNSHEND, MANAGING DIRECTOR
Font Public Relations

Welcome and congratulations to newly-elected and re-elected members of Local Government. The great thing about Local Government is there is no level of public life that so directly involves issues that impact on the community, so it’s essential for newly-elected members to quickly familiarise themselves with the issues facing their municipality and Local Government in the state.

One of the most important roles for elected members is to promote the interests of the community by facilitating regular and effective communication between council and the community it represents.

Time for Review

With a new council raring to go, it is a perfect time for councillors and council managers to review internal and external communication strategies and policies to ensure they underpin a well-run and professional sphere of government and invite the confidence of the community, including the media.

Many of us who work in Local Government take for granted that the community understands what we do, however, the reality is many people have a limited understanding of the various services delivered by the sector. If your community is well informed of what council does, at least when they are asked to cope with something they may not be happy with, they will have a better understanding of why it is occurring, thus reducing the negative impact.

There are a few simple things to consider when reviewing your Council’s communication strategies:

- Does council have a procedure in place around its media spokesperson or spokespeople?
- Is your current media spokesperson equipped to be a good strong representative of council? If not, it may be worth considering media training to provide them with some practical tips for dealing with the media and to build their confidence.
- Are all staff and councillors aware of the communication strategies and policies in place at council? It is essential that all levels of council are aware of the procedures around communication strategies, particularly crisis management.
- Is council adequately prepared for unexpected and sometimes serious events? If council does not have a solid crisis communications plan in place, it’s time to review your existing strategy or develop a new one.

Time for Change

Once you have established your Council’s position on internal, external and crisis communications, you can pinpoint areas that need improving and initiate change. Communication policies and strategies are among the most important, as they drive the public’s perception of council and Local Government as a whole. This is your chance to refresh the profile of council so that the community is reassured of an efficient, effective and essential tier of government.

To arrange media training for representatives of your Council, contact Font PR, phone (03) 6223 3333, or visit www.fontpr.com.au.

Centre for Tasmanian Industry
‘one stop shop for business’

We provide HR, IR OHS, Performance Management, Training, Compensation, Mediation and Counselling. We work with Council Management to help maximize personnel output and minimize issues and cost.

We have Links with: Small Business Council, Business Enterprise, Dept of Economic Development (DED), Enterprise Connect

Helping business manage personnel and risk with effective business solutions

t: 03 6231 3100  t: 03 6231 3311
Centre for Tasmanian Industry (CTI), 19 Brisbane St, Hobart 7000
f: 03 6234 3500  e: admin@centretasindustry.com  w: centretasindustry.com
We each have 24 hours a day, 60 minutes per hour and 60 seconds per minute. Yet some of us seem to achieve more with what is available, while some of us are frustrated with how little we achieve. So we grasp for a concept called ‘time management’.

Rather than think about ‘time management’, it is more useful to think about ‘event management’. In other words, what are the events that seem to consume my time? Alice in Wonderland said to the White Rabbit, as he hurried by, “Excuse me, am I on the right road?” “Where do you want to go?” asked the Rabbit. “I don’t know,” replied Alice. “Then any road will do,” responded the Rabbit disdainfully.

Stephen Covey, author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, tells the ‘Big Rocks’ story. The story involves fist-sized rocks, gravel, sand and water, and the task is to fit as much as possible into a bucket. The ‘bucket’ represents those 24 hours a day that we all have. The point of the story is that it is essential to put the ‘big rocks’ in first in order to maximize the contents of the bucket. Therefore, it is essential that we know in advance what our ‘Big Rocks’ are. In other words, what are those events or activities that are most precious to us? What are our priorities? If you do not know that, then ‘any road will do’. For many of us, we allow ourselves to be distracted by the ‘sand’ and the ‘gravel’, issues that arise uninvited and which erode our available time. We let the ‘urgent’ get in the way of the ‘important’.

So what might we do about this? Priority planning prevents poor performance. Sit down quietly for a few minutes and make a list of the ‘big rocks’ in your life, those priority issues to which it is essential for you to pay attention. To help you, consider your ‘big rocks’ in the following key areas: health, relationships, work, finances, careers, hobbies. If those topics do not work for you, generate your own.

In relation to each topic, decide for yourself the goal you wish to achieve in 12 months. Then break up each goal into monthly, then weekly chunks. You now have your priority ‘big rocks’ identified for each week. Now schedule these across your week. Then allocate time for each one in your diary.

Yes, just as you use your diary to make appointments with other people, also use it to make appointments with yourself. Use these allocated times to progress your ‘big rocks’. Just as you would not allow a third person to claim a spot in your diary if you had already allocated it to an important client, remember that there is no ‘client’ more important than you. And there are no ‘events’ more important than those you choose in advance as being your ‘big rocks’, or ‘the right road’.

As you achieve each priority ‘event’ in your diary, give that item a big tick. This gives you a sense of empowerment and accomplishment. At the end of the week, review how you have gone by asking “What worked?”, “What didn’t work?” and “How can I do even better next week?”. One observation that will come to you very quickly is that, whenever a ‘sand’ or ‘gravel’ issue tries to hijack your time, just say “No!”

Dr Ian Plowman, PhD is a Psychologist, Facilitator and Social Scientist. For further information, visit www.plowman.com.au, or email ian@plowman.com.au.