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COPING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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(summary notes by Jody Pawel, LSW)

PEOPLE WHO AREN'T ALWAYS DIFFICULT:

People with Behavioral Blinders - are unaware and oblivious that their behavior bothers others. If you tell them, they forget and repeat the behavior.
Responses:

a. Make an appointment.
b. Tell them you are concerned about how they'll react.
c. Suggest they are probably unaware.
d. Describe the behavior and how it affects you or others.
e. Prepare for a reaction.
f. Assure them that they are liked and respected.
g. Agree on a signal to use in the future.

Negative Interaction Cycles - If you answer "yes" to 3 or 4 of the following questions, you are in a negative interaction cycle:

- "Did I have a good relationship with this person before and this is a recent change?"
- "Does this person have good relations with others and only has a problem with me?"
- "Did something happen?"
- "Was the change abrupt or a long gradual change?"
- "Do I have a sudden emotional feeling that seems out of control when I'm around this person?"

Responses:

a. Make an appointment.
b. Tell your version of the situation.
c. Ask how they see it.
d. Expect to get dumped on.
e. Listen and paraphrase back what they said and what you think they mean.
f. Clarify the difference between your motives (what you meant to do or didn't mean to do) and what you actually did.
g. Assure them that you didn't mean to hurt them and want to repair the relationship.

7 TYPES OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE: Overriding principle—don't get pulled into their games.

A. Hostile/Aggressive Trio:

1. **Sherman Tank** - is hostile and aggressive, critical, and in-your-face. If you back down or retaliate, you've lost control and show the Tank he/she is in control.
   Responses:
   a. Don't fight back, yell, laugh, ignore, or get sarcastic.
   b. Be ready to interrupt.
   c. Stop, look in the eye. Address the Tank by name.
   d. Make your point, don't apologize.
   e. Suggest a resolution to take care of the problem.
   f. Maintain your self-respect.

2. **Snipers** - take pot-shots, and use sarcasm and jokes.
   Responses:
   a. Bring them into the open and remove their camouflage.
   b. Don't laugh at their jokes or ignore them.
   c. Stop, look them in the eye, and say. . .
   d. "I know you said that as a joke, but I thought I detected a dig. Did you mean it that way?"
   e. They either have to back down and stop, or admit it.
      - Usually they say, "Can't you take a joke?" Or "You're too sensitive."
      - If they do, reply, "Did I sense a dig in *that*?"
   f. ***If you are in a group*** - ask others if they agree. Usually they do not and the sniper, now exposed, usually stops.
   g. ***If someone gossips about you behind your back*** and someone tells you, it was intended to get back to you.
      - Ask the friend's permission to check it out with the Sniper.
      - Meet with the sniper alone and say, "So-and-so heard _____. Did he/she hear you correctly? I'm just checking out the facts so I don't misunderstand anything."
        - If Sniper says "No, I didn't mean it," say "Great! I'll tell So-and-so you said so."
        - If Sniper says "Yes," you can say "From now on if you have any concerns about me, I expect you to come to me, so we can discuss it directly."
   h. ***If someone gossips <u>to you</u> about another person***, ask the gossiper, "Have you discussed this with <u>(name)</u>?"
      - If they say "yes," ask "What did he/she say?" Since the Sniper says he/she already discussed it with person, ask permission to check out whether that's what the person meant. If the Sniper is lying, he/she will stop.
      - If they say "no," say "Well I'm not willing to discuss anything you haven't talked to <u>(name)</u> about."
   i. In either case, gossipers are less likely to gossip if the person they tell or the person they gossip about bring their gossip out into the open.

3. **Exploders** - when pushed too hard, they feel personally attacked and/or threatened and under pressure to do something. They blame others then fight. Or it could be a trigger button.
   Responses:
   a. Do nothing but look them in the eye. Give them time to run down.
   b. Interrupt, stand up slowly (if sitting), say the Exploder's name, and say "I am interested in what you have to say, but not in this way." Make sure you express respect for them.
   c. Suggest a private discussion. Then get the facts straight and remedy the problem.

B. **Indecisives** - 2 types

1. **Analytical** - they lose themselves in details and don't meet deadlines.
   Responses:
   a. Give a deadline. (If it's your boss, still give a deadline of a different kind.)
   b. Offer a rationale for the deadline.
   c. Show you're like him/her—sensible and thorough.
   d. Reveal the consequence of missing the deadline and follow through.

2. **Be Nice** - they listen, nod, ask questions, but don't follow through and make excuses.
   Responses:
   a. Get the problem to the surface by asking the staller to share what is really bothering him/her and other non-defensive questions.
   b. Do problem-solving, explain a past solution, or offer a possible solution to problem.
   c. When they make a decision, tell them they made the right decision—they need to hear it or they'll analyze the decision.
   d. Watch for signs of frustration. Leave and come back. Then tell them what you plan to do if you haven't heard from them.

C. **Complainers** - can believe/act one or more of the following ways:
- They feel powerless and believe other people and circumstances cause their problems.
- They see that the world isn't fitting their mold of the way it should be but believe they are powerless to change it. They seek others to fix the problem.
- They want everything to be perfect, but nothing is ever good enough. They believe, "My job is to tell you what's wrong and your job is to fix it."

Responses:
a. Listen with honest attention, even if you are impatient.
b. Paraphrase what they said—you don't have to apologize or agree.
c. Ask helpful questions to get more information and ask them what *they* can do. Empower them through problem-solving.

D. **Negativists** - are "wet blankets," think things are impossible, and only see the negative or barriers to success. This is different from critical analysis, which is a thoughtful consideration of possible problems followed by suggestions to avoid the problem. Negativists believe there is no use trying, because nothing will work.
Responses:
a. Be prepared, they can drag down the whole group.
b. Prevent the problem by giving them as much information, explanation, and lead-time as possible.
c. Make optimistic, realistic statements, or share examples of how it could work.
d. Don't argue or offer quick fixes.
e. Set up a worst-case scenario—what would happen?
f. Use their negative comments constructively, focusing on whatever value the statement has.
g. Do it alone if you have to.

E. **Clams** - can be silent for several reasons:
- To avoid uncomfortableness.
- To be passive-aggressive (silent treatment)
- To avoid being put on the spot.

Whatever the reason, their silence is *intentional*.
Responses:
- Look for non-verbal clues to tell what they are feeling—angry, confused, frustrated, shy.
- Your mission is to get them to talk.
- Start the conversation.
- Give a friendly expectant stare and patiently wait through their silence. Don't feel the need to fill it with conversation.
- If they are still silent, ask open-ended questions they can't answer yes/no. "Are you afraid of how I'll react or are you confused?"
- If still silent, comment on the situation and ask "What's going on?"
- If they are *still* silent, reveal what you plan to do if they don't talk.
- If they talk, don't interrupt.

F. **Know-it-alls** - There are two types:

1. **Bulldozers** - are very knowledgeable and bowl over others with facts and figures. They really do know a lot but are arrogant and even hostile. They have poor people skills and make others feel stupid. They believe and/or act like they are superior to others. They interpret different opinions as personal confrontations.
Responses:
a. Be prepared and know the facts.
b. Share your respect for their knowledge.
c. Restate the facts as *you* see them.
d. Raise disagreements by informing them with questions.
e. Ask questions to re-examine the facts.
2. **Balloons** - are full of hot air because they don't know what they are talking about. They

have pieces of information with rumors mixed in.
Responses:

a. Don't blow their cover or they might become a Sniper or Exploder. Deflate them quietly and gently.
b. Tell them in a protective way (if in a group) that you know the facts (or tell them alone).
c. State the correct facts or *your* perception and move on.

G. **Super-agreeables** - are super nice but super unreliable. They agree to everything but don't follow through.
Responses:

a. Work hard to get to the real issues behind their delaying. Pay attention to their humor, it often reveals their real feelings.
b. Clearly tell them you value their opinion and they won't offend you.
c. Ask how you can improve.
d. Offer a win/win solution.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS

- People can be difficult in different ways. Adjust your coping method for the type of *behavior* you see, not the type of person they are.
- When their behavior changes, change your coping method.
- Rehearse, if the behavior is predictable, and visualize yourself responding helpfully.
- Write or plan a script so you won't get as frazzled and tongue-tied.