

Dealing With Difficult People

PRESENTED BY:

JEFF STELLMACH, LCSW
SENIOR SOCIAL WORKER
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP)

HealthPoint

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

- ▶ EAP is a resource for all benefits-eligible employees, adult dependents or partners, and retirees.
 - ❑ Confidential, short-term counseling
 - ❑ Community referrals
 - ❑ Manager consultation and training
 - ❑ Trainings and groups on a variety of topics
 - ❑ Workplace safety and crisis management
 - ❑ Work/life balance programs (LifeCare)
 - ❑ PRC appointments
 - ❑ Stress Reduction and Biofeedback Center



Overview

- ▶ Shifting focus from difficult people to difficult behaviors
- ▶ Response strategies and effective statements
- ▶ Assertive communication principles
- ▶ Responding to an angry person
- ▶ Managing your own reaction
- ▶ Individuals in crisis and outside resources
- ▶ Responding to a micro-managing supervisor
- ▶ Responding to a passive/aggressive co-worker
- ▶ Questions and comments



Who are difficult people?

- ▶ Demanding, agitated people
- ▶ People who say offensive things
- ▶ Supervisors who micro-manage
- ▶ Team members who aren't team players
- ▶ Supervisors who dismiss your input
- ▶ Co-workers who communicate in a passive/aggressive style
- ▶ People who monopolize discussions



In short, difficult people present us with difficult behaviors.

What are difficult behaviors?

- ▶ Behaviors that disrupt the task at hand
- ▶ Outside of our normal expectations for the situation
- ▶ Negative for both the person with the behavior and the person having to respond



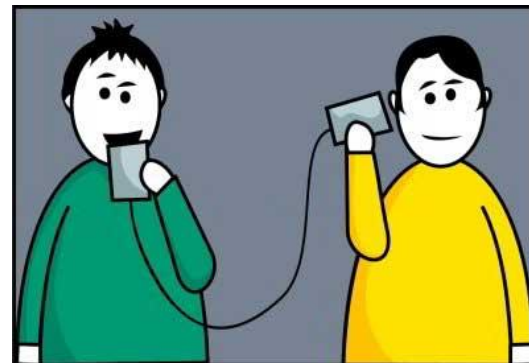
Empathy is ...

- ▶ the power of understanding and the ability to imaginatively enter into another person's feelings.
- ▶ recognition, appreciation, responsiveness, and comprehension.
- ▶ a basic condition that is needed to establish rapport and effective communication.



Responding to difficult people

- ▶ Provide the person an opportunity to express concerns.
- ▶ Validate the importance of his/her concerns.
- ▶ Reflect back to the person that you have heard what they are saying.
- ▶ Set clear expectations and limits for how you will discuss the issue.
- ▶ Initiate problem-solving.



Effective statements

- ▶ “I hear that this is important to you.”
- ▶ “What can I do to help?”
- ▶ “I can see that you take this very seriously and would like help dealing with the issue.”
- ▶ “I hear you saying...”
- ▶ “If I’m hearing you correctly, you would like assistance with...”
- ▶ “What options do you identify for dealing with this?”
- ▶ “I think that the best way I can help you is by...”



Using “I statements” to respond assertively

I notice that (OR)

I hear you saying _____
(observable details about the other person's behavior)

I feel (OR) think _____
(your own thoughts or emotions resulting from the behavior)

When you _____
(the action or behavior in summary)

I'm asking you to (OR)

I expect that you will _____
(your assertion of the behavior you expect from the person)

An angry customer

A customer walks in to your reception area. There are several customers already waiting to be served. He walks around the other customers and comes directly to your desk until he is about 4 feet away, inside your personal comfort area. In a loud tone of voice, he demands to be seen immediately. He says, "You're just going to tell me to wait my turn like everyone else."



- ▶ How are you feeling at this point?
- ▶ How would you address the customer assertively?

Validating concern and initiating problem-solving

I hear that this is important to you and that you would like immediate assistance. I am responsible for responding to customers in the order they arrived. I'll be glad to assist you if you'll please wait for your turn to speak with me.



Customer escalates

As soon as you've finished speaking, the customer takes another step towards you. He points at you and speaks in a louder voice. He says, "Nobody tells me to wait."

- ▶ How are you feeling at this point?
- ▶ How would you address the customer assertively?



Assertive, limit-setting responses

I notice that your voice is raised, and you're standing close to me. **I feel** uncomfortable/threatened **when you** are communicating like this. **I'm asking you to** speak to me in a calm manner.

I notice that your voice is raised, and you're standing close to me. **I feel/think** that we can't make progress on your concern **when you** are communicating like this. **I'm asking you to** speak to me in a calm manner so we can work this out together.



Reviewing our example

- ▶ When the customer escalated, would you have asked for assistance dealing with this client? If not, what developments would indicate a need for help?
- ▶ Who would you go to for assistance?
- ▶ Are there any physical factors (body space, relaxation breathing, tone of voice, etc.) that would be important for you to manage in your own response?



Fight or flight

- ▶ We respond to stressors by increasing heart rate and breathing, directing blood to the limbs and muscles, and scanning the environment for possible threats.
- ▶ We are designed to rapidly respond to stress and challenge, it is adaptive.
- ▶ We are not physically designed to stay in an extended stress response.
- ▶ When fight or flight remains activated, we tend to view all things through the lens of a threat.
- ▶ If we maintain a hyper-focus on a perceived threat, we lose the ability to see other coping options.



What to do

- ▶ DO take a deep breath.
- ▶ DO speak slowly and calmly.
- ▶ DO be reassuring yet authoritative.



What not to do

- ▶ DON'T make sudden movements or physical contact.
- ▶ DON'T respond defensively.
- ▶ DON'T minimize the person's concerns.



Getting immediate assistance

- ▶ Immediately report threatening behavior or violence to the University Police Department at 911.
- ▶ Focus on severity, not whether they identify a specific target.
- ▶ Trust your instincts - err on the side of caution.



Outside resources

- ▶ Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 471-3366 for faculty and staff
- ▶ Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC) at 471-3515 for students
- ▶ Behavior Concerns Advice Line (BCAL) at 232-5050 when uncertain who to call or needing general advice



Dealing with a micro-manager

You have a new supervisor who was promoted from within the department. During his first meeting with you, he explains that he wants more accountability from everyone. Since there have been problems with some employees taking long lunch breaks, he is asking everyone to e-mail him when they get back from lunch. In this e-mail he also expects that workers will inform him what they're working on that afternoon.



- ▶ How would you respond assertively to these requests?

An assertive response

I can hear that productivity and punctuality are important to you. I value having autonomy in completing my tasks and feel that I'm most productive that way. I'm confident that I can keep you updated without having to send an e-mail every afternoon. Can I update you less frequently with the understanding that we can re-assess if that's not working?



A passive/aggressive co-worker

You have just come out of a weekly staff meeting that involved several co-workers and your supervisor. You are leading a new project which will begin in 2 weeks, and you led a group discussion in the meeting in which you clarified the various project tasks and the staff member responsible for each. Right after the meeting you receive an e-mail from a co-worker in which she writes, "That's the first time anyone has told me that I would be doing that task. I was already told that the project manager would be doing that job." You notice that she has CC'd your supervisor on the e-mail.



- ▶ How would you respond assertively?
- ▶ Would you respond in-person or by e-mail? Why?
- ▶ Would you somehow include your supervisor on this communication?

Assertive e-mail responses

I know that clarity is important for all of us, and I can see that there may be some confusion on the work processes we just discussed. I would like to set up a time for us to meet individually to discuss the tasks involved. When is a good time for you?



I know that clarity is important for the whole work group and that there may be some confusion on the project we just discussed. I think it will be best to discuss again with the whole group so that we're all on the same page. Could we discuss it again at our next staff meeting?

Assistance is available

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
(512) 471-3366

<http://www.utexas.edu/hr/eap/>

To read more about dealing with difficult people and other conflict management topics, please visit
<https://www.utexas.edu/hr/documents/ConflictManagementAnnotatedBibliography.pdf>