

## Dealing with Difficult People

By Nick Mantia

Recently, my friend Nancy wanted to talk with me about a frustrating person at work. She mentioned that she and an unnamed co-worker were assigned to work on a project together, and she was worried. "She makes things tense when she steamrolls over everyone in the room," Nancy mentioned. "Nobody knows how to handle her."

We all deal with frustrating people in our lives... at work, in our community, and yes, even at home. But as a wise mentor of mine says, "people don't wake up in the morning trying to figure out ways to make your day miserable!" That's a phrase that many of us should keep in mind when dealing with frustrating people.

Many of our clients have found comfort in the process we teach for dealing with difficult people. The process gives guidelines for approaching the situation, empowering you to eliminate the issue from your day to day life. These five steps should help you navigate the world of frustrating people:

### LOOK IN THE MIRROR

There. I said it. Sometimes part of the blame for the frustration comes from our own behaviors and emotions. We can add fuel to the fire without even knowing it.

Although he and I have been good friends for years, John's view of the glass as half empty has always frustrated me. Ten years ago, John was given a very serious diagnosis from his doctor; he immediately withdrew and wouldn't talk about it. Being the optimist, I assured him that "everything would work out... and he would be healthy again in no time!" That didn't sit well with John; in fact, he lost his temper and told me that things like this don't work out magically. I got my feelings hurt when he snapped at me, once again reminding me how frustrating a friendship with John could be!

As frustrated as I get when John plays the pessimist role, he gets equally frustrated with me when I am the eternal optimist; I had never realized that I could be my frustrating person's frustrating person! Once I realized how my behavior intensified his, I began to watch my word choices when I am around him. I still make my point and my feelings known, but not in a way that goads him on.

Many companies are using tools to help people become better communicators at work, with the DISC model being one of the most popular and effective. DISC allows individuals to look at (and own) their behavior, and teaches them to recognize and appreciate other's behaviors. Once they learn this "language," they are taught to adapt their behavior to maximize communication with those around them.

Years after John and I had this discussion, we took the DISC profile as part of an employee development course where we both worked. We recalled this conversation and we were able to easily see how both of us played a part in the frustrating situation.

### PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

After attending a seminar on communication styles, a young woman approached me for advice about her boss. She was very complimentary of him, calling him a great visionary and a motivator. But on top of all

of the great things he did, he was her biggest frustration at work. She told me that he had a habit of “flying in from a meeting and changing everything at the last minute,” which was quite frustrating for her. She felt that she was never able to finish anything before starting something else.

I asked her to take a minute and tell me about his day to day routine. She mentioned his hectic schedule, starting with a daily meeting with the president of the company and a calendar jammed full of meetings throughout the day. When asked to put herself in his shoes, she recognized the pressure he must be under to execute, and the limited time he must have to communicate changes in strategy. She began to take his frantic style less personally, and she was able to focus more on partnering with him for success.

### **TALK IT OUT WITH A CONFIDANT**

If you don't already have a confidant that you can talk things over with, *find one*. This is more than someone to share the “you're-never-going-to-believe-what-they-have-done-to-me-this-time” story, but instead someone who you can share your frustration with in a constructive manner. They should serve as a sounding board for your feelings, but more importantly serve as an unbiased person to evaluate a potential course of action.

My friend Nancy (who I told you about in the beginning of this article) and I have been that person for each other for over five years. When she called me about the “steamroller,” my job was *not* to give her advice, but listen to her and ask questions to help her review the situation. Once she was able to objectively look at the issue (including taking a look in the mirror and putting herself in their shoes), she was able to put together a course of action.

### **CREATE A PLAN OF ACTION**

Creating a plan of action may include a number of things, including having a truthful conversation with your frustrating person or even putting together a plan to not be involved with them.

My friend Donna related a story of frustration involving a man with whom she used to work. She told me that when she got into the office, she was afraid to even say good morning because “she didn't know whether or not she was dealing with the good Bob or the Bob who would rip your head off for no good reason!” After Donna spoke to their supervisor about Bob's behavior, she wrote down some notes of incidents and scripted out a conversation on how she would share her feelings with Bob. She planned to observe any changes in Bob's behavior after their conversation, and would positively reinforce appropriate behavior when she caught Bob doing something good!

### **EXECUTE YOUR PLAN**

Are you ready? Now it's time to put all of your learning to good use. In some cases, executing the plan calls for having a difficult face-to-face conversation. If that is part of your plan, keep the following things in mind:

- **Don't make it personal** – make sure to talk about the frustrating behavior, not about the person who is frustrating you.
- **Give examples** – telling them that something frustrates you might not resonate if you aren't able to say “when we were in our staff meeting last Tuesday, I noticed that you \_\_\_\_\_. Did you notice that nobody said another word after you did that?”
- **Follow up** – remember, this frustrating person may have been caught off guard after your first conversation and needed a little time to digest what you told them. Find an opportunity to thank them later for listening to you and ask what you might do to support them.

So, will this five-step process end the frustrating behavior? The reality is that it really depends on the motivation of both parties. You may find that some people embrace their “scratchiness” and say they

won't change their behavior. If that is the case, you might have to alter your plan and find ways to work around them.

But fortunately for most of us, this process will at least start the process of change, and will help you diminish the frustration you feel.

Nick Mantia is a Certified Professional Behavior Analyst (CPBA) and is the President of Grow to Grow.