

Dealing with people we find difficult

This is the topic most requested! And quite often it's just as much about dealing with colleagues we find difficult as clients! But it applies to all situations, and the better you get at it all situations improve.

I don't talk just about the extremes of behaviour – what affects us most is the little annoyances and irritations, the people who wind us up or we struggle to connect with. And they are different for different people – there is no such thing as a universal difficult person!

This stuff also works, it may sound simple or 'soft' but I can attest that it works and is anything but soft! And I learnt from people who also work with people labelled 'difficult', including the amazing Adam Kahane who gets gangs and tribes who want to kill each other to work together! And those working with traumatised children. Try it, and if you find yourself thinking this is rubbish get curious and focus on what's going on for you.

Bit of theory first though:

Our brain works in patterns and when we are in an uncertain situation it goes 'last time we were in this, or a similar situation we reacted like this'...and recreates how you responded last time. Until you change the pattern. We all do this – it's where both phobias and triggers come from – positive and negative.

And when our adrenalin spikes we look to others to help us decide if that reaction is justified, or OTT, eg if you hear a bang but everyone else is carrying on as normal you relax. If they are running away, you go further into fight or flight too.

Therefore our behaviour is determined by past experiences and how others around us are behaving, but we can learn to react differently. Someone tried to tell me that's not possible until I asked how the police train to deal with dangerous situations then?

My course goes into this in a lot more detail but here are some ideas:

- People are easiest to get along with when they are calm and secure (and that includes us); if someone feels insecure or threatened, they will revert into what I call control behaviours where they try to direct the way things go to feel safer.
- These behaviours are variations/ intensities of anger, verbal tactics (criticism or interrogation), withdrawal or poor me (learned helplessness). We learn which from our childhood – how we had to behave to survive.
- We will have a favourite we go to first and if that doesn't get what we want we will try a second.
- When someone steps into their pattern that usually triggers the other person to step into theirs, ie someone gets angry and the other person either does too or may go into another style, eg poor me. This is where the first person has manipulated the situation to what they feel most comfortable with – drama.

- The answer is for us to stay calm and grounded and NOT get triggered into our pattern. The people we find difficult are the ones we are triggered by due to the patterns we learnt in childhood.
- If we stay centred but still engage with the other person – learning to help them feel safe and secure, they will calm down themselves. If we react, they will become more intensive in their behaviour. We have an influence on how they are as they will react to our energy (look up communication model if you want proof of this – if we say something at odds with how we feel they will trust our feelings and not our words, ie if we tell them everything is fine through gritted teeth they will not trust you!)
- It is our job to learn how to stay calm and grounded with all our clients, not blame them for triggering us. Our clients have probably got trauma in their childhood and that will have made it harder for them to choose another way to be, until we help them feel safe enough to try another way. Telling them to change is like telling this computer to change – it just isn't programmed that way, until it is.
- The key to this is looking at our reaction first – what did they trigger in us and how can we heal that emotional bruise so we can't be triggered again? And then de-escalate the situation so we can reconnect with the person.
- There is never any situation where making the other person feel wrong for their reaction has a good outcome. If they are reacting from pain, you just added to it and reinforced their insecurity. All 4 reactions are equal and yet we tend to see anger as the worst and punish it the most. It is just a way of dealing with insecurity the same as the others.
- This is 100% about setting boundaries but not from a place of us being triggered, it is about setting boundaries to help them feel safe just as much as for us. Shame and judgement are never OK to use so please be careful how you react – it can be very easy to tell people off when we are stressed. I had a chap who had a go at me for not helping him when I had done so much for him, and I was tired at the time so just felt like telling him what an idiot he was and to get lost! Fortunately, I caught myself, took a deep breath and dealt with it...it's OK to wobble just catch yourself as soon as can and return to centre.
- And of course, sometimes it is appropriate to be firm with someone – that's the skill knowing what to use when to de-escalate.

First thought – learning our reaction:

Think of someone you clash with, or who upsets you – what category would you put their behaviour?

- Anger
- Verbal tactics
- Withdrawal

- Poor me

Now think of how you react when they do that? Why? What are you telling yourself, and when does it remind you of?

How can you learn to stay centred with them? Play a situation in your head going how you want (never replay it going wrong – you just reinforce the pattern!)

Practise – you can't get good at this without being tested...so see it to practise rather than a way to get it right. And reflect after on how you can improve. (see my other articles or RESET guide to learn how to improve on this)

It's also important that you process it afterwards both to let go of your stress and to reflect and learn. Be kind to yourself – you are doing your best and that is enough whatever the outcome.

Then ways to de-escalate.

- If you know the person this can be easier, but even if you don't you have to be good at reading people. If we are present, focus on helping them and trust our intuition, you will do this fine.
- It's also easier to stop someone escalating rather than de-escalate, so learn how to sense shifts in emotions.
- For all situations see the pain behind the behaviour and be genuinely interested in helping them – they will tell if you are being sincere or not. The ability to build trust and put people at ease is an underrated skill that I think should be the highest priority. Often the behaviour is a test to see if they can really be vulnerable with you, really be honest about their pain behind the behaviour.
- Never have an intension of making them change, just offer them choice. It's not our place to decide what is best for someone, just help them to and they may not be ready to change. Accept them anyway.
- Also acknowledge the behaviour but in a kind way, do not just ignore it.
- I also ask myself have I ever behaved like that? Maybe to a lesser degree but I have, eg getting annoyed with customer service? Criticizing someone because I am stressed? Feeling nothing is going well? And my favourite – withdrawing? Cos if we have then we can understand where they are coming from and not judge.
- Empathic listening works every time – prove you understand where they are coming from before you try to make them understand you.

And try variations on these suggestions:

- For **anger** you can find a way to convey how sorry you are they are angry and that you do genuinely want to help, but that it will be easier if they took 5 mins out to calm down. I may say *'I am sorry you are so angry and really want to help you, but it is hard to understand how to help when you shout – do you want 5 mins and then I will listen'*. Or you may just let them rant and try to understand from their point of view, and convey that, then offer help. Telling them to calm down or stop shouting is not OK.

Obviously if they are getting to the physical side of anger you need to ensure everyone is safe.

- For **verbal** tactics I sometimes just ask them if they are OK as they seem anxious/ not themselves, or ask what is going on for them/ is that the real issue? I sometimes make a joke out of it if appropriate but be careful with that. Remember they are doing it to feel safe, annoying as it may be! Ask them what would make them feel more comfortable, and if someone is being particularly challenging, I simply ask if they'd like to work with someone else (they never say yes, and often apologise afterwards). You can say you really want to help them but are struggling to concentrate if they keep bombarding you with questions.
- For people who **withdraw** or sulk – again acknowledge they are withdrawing and ask if they need a break before we continue. Trying to draw someone out who is withdrawing to feel safe doesn't work. Sometimes they have just hit their vulnerability limit and need to go, let them so they can trust you with more next time. Or move the conversation to something lighter then return. Do not just leave them alone.
- For **poor me** – again acknowledge but do not indulge and beware of trying to rescue or get annoyed if they have done nothing to help themselves or are blaming others. Tactics I use may be to say *'did we not discuss this before? What did we come up with?'*. You can acknowledge how they are feeling must be painful but focus on practical steps to improve it. Sometimes just sitting while they cry and being OK with that, and then setting a plan, or asking what gets in the way of them taking steps to move forward. I always say this is their decision and I will support them but if they are not ready to move on that is OK too. I also show 100% certainty they can move forward.

What I would also say is some people have behaved this way their whole life so it is going to be very difficult for them to learn a new way, be patient both with them and yourself.

Progress not perfection