

Dealing With Difficult People

“The Ministry would be fun, if it weren’t for people!”

My father-in-law was also my pastor. He came to Bethany Baptist Church in Grand Blanc, MI, when I was just 12 years old. I was saved under his ministry, discipled, and commissioned as a minister of the Gospel. The saying above was one of his favorites. He knew, of course, that there would be NO MINISTRY without people. He also knew, and I learned, that some people can be difficult.

Dad and I enjoyed fishing together on the Great Lakes. He is with the Lord now, but I can see him sitting in the back of the boat when some difficulty arose. He would begin to sing, *“I have the joy, joy, joy down in my heart.”* It was his way of telling me to calm down, everything would be alright. Sometimes I really needed that reminder in the ministry, in fact, I still do!

The Apostle Paul summarized our ministry to people by commanding us:

“Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” -- I Thessalonians 5:14

Like it or not, we will be dealing with difficult people all of our lives.

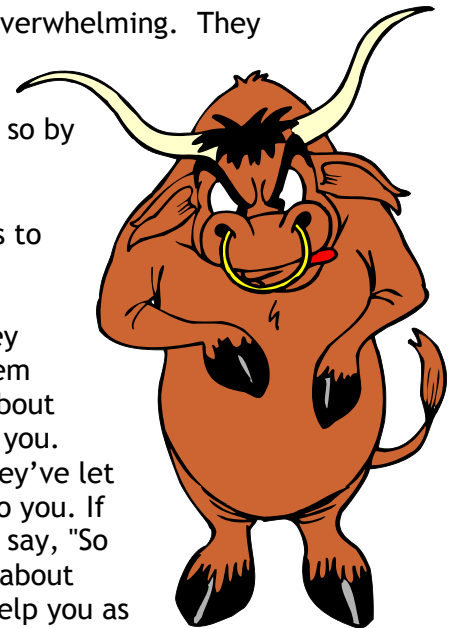
I. Types of Difficult People

A. **Warriors** are aggressive, hostile, abrupt, intimidating and overwhelming. They can be classified into 4 sub-types:

1. **Bullies** are those who want to intimidate and usually do so by exploding (see Grenades)
2. **Know-it-alls** are aggressive, arrogant, and look for ways to tell others they know more than anyone else.

When dealing with a know-it-all like this, ask yourself if they seem to have an excessive need for control. Or, do they seem insecure, but want to appear to have all the facts on just about everything? Maybe these difficult people are threatened by you. First, let the know-it-all vent within reason. Often, once they’ve let out all their “hot air,” then they’ll be more likely to listen to you. If not, and they start talking over you, it may be necessary to say, “So and so, I really have listened to everything you have to say about such-and-such, and if you’d give me just a moment, I can help you as far as....” Be direct, yet polite and tactful.

3. **Grenades** are those whose explosive outbursts and temper tantrums announce their displeasure and demand attention.



When dealing with such people, proceed with caution. Wait until they're finished "erupting" and have "cooled their jets." You may be better off not saying much at all. Approach them again when they are in a good mood. If they are never in a good mood, approach them when they are in a better mood.

4. *Snipers*, who stealthily throw little digs your way, are tricky contenders.

After they toss innuendos in a sometimes sarcastic tone and you show that you're hurt, they accuse you of having "no sense of humor." In this case, consider ignoring them altogether. In the future they'll be less likely to throw in little digs because they won't get the reaction they're looking for from you. As Zig Ziglar once said, "No one can get your goat if they don't know where it's tied up."

B. **Whiners** are pessimists and see themselves as imperfect and powerless. Their attitude is that life is one big problem. There are two types:

1. *Blunders* - "It is all my fault"
2. *Blamers* - "It is someone else's fault"

Research shows these difficult people often have an excessive need to be liked and want sympathy. By complaining and being negative, they think they'll gain attention. These difficult people gain attention but not in a positive way. It pays to be tactfully direct with the negativist. For example, saying to them, "I understand this is something you want to talk about, and at the same time I want to make sure I get back to performing my work." Dealing with difficult people this way will usually cause them to move on to someone else; a more "captive audience" who they think will listen to their excessive whining.



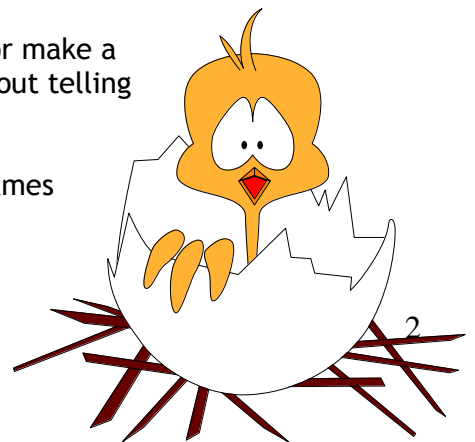
Blamers can be gossips - apparently believing that they can make themselves look "good," by making others look "bad." Gossips don't realize that when they're gossiping about everyone else, that people are silently wondering, "I wonder what she/he says about me when I'm not around?!" Sometimes gossips "gossip" as a distraction and to procrastinate and put off important tasks.

Often what they're gossiping about doesn't even affect them. Next time this happens, listen intently, then politely say, "And how does this affect you?" or "Why would I want to know that?" They'll get the point.

"He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends." (Proverbs 17:9)

C. **Wafflers** procrastinate and put off making a decision, or make a decision and then "change their mind" sometimes without telling you.

*"A double minded man is **unstable** in all his ways."* (James 1:8)



When dealing with these people, remember that they are motivated by fear, afraid of making a mistake. They need encouragement and reinforcement. Be positive!

II. Tasks for Dealing with Difficult People

“Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”

(Galatians 6:1)

- A. **Communication** - This is the communication age, so there is no excuse for us not communicating with one another.

Your school should have a handbook, with clear rules and guidelines for students, teachers, and parents. It is a great resource -know it and use it!

Your school should have a newsletter. Keep parents informed about events and decisions. If you are the pastor, don't ignore the school in the bulletin or announcements.

Teachers and Principals should keep careful records of disruptive behavior, grades, etc. and communicate with parents. Being able to show several letters, records of phone calls, etc. can diffuse an angry parent.

“He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.”

Proverbs 18:3

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”

Proverbs 25:11

“A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”

Proverbs 15:1

- B. **Compassion** - Christ died for everyone, even difficult people!

“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, [being] of one accord, of one mind. [Let] nothing [be done] through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Phillipians 2:1-4

“If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

I John 4:20

- C. **Counsel**

“Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors [there is] safety.”

Proverbs 11:14

"Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end."

Proverbs 19:20

- **Know your limitations.** You can't solve every problem, please every person, etc. Get advice when you need it.
- **Take your time before you answer.** You may want to say, "I need time to look into this, and think about a solution. I'll get back to you by _____." Be sure that you get back to them by the appointed time.

D. **Confrontation:** No one likes to do this - but everyone has to do so from time to time.

"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear [thee, then] take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell [it] unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

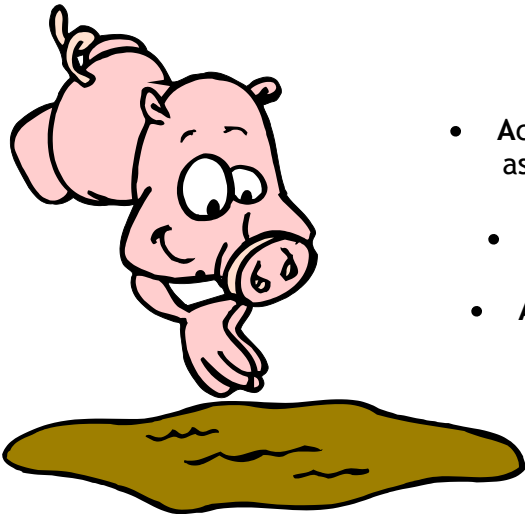
Matthew 18: 15-17

Jesus commanded that we use a three-step approach to settle conflict:

1. **Go Privately** - *"go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone:"*
2. **Go Plurally** - *"take with thee one or two more"*
3. **Go Publically** - *"tell [it] unto the church:"*

The Goal of each step is to be reconciled to our brother.

III. Tips for Dealing with Difficult People



A

- Acknowledge their concerns and feelings -this is not the same as "agreeing" with them.
- Admit your mistakes - if the critic is right.
- Accept your limitations

B

- **Be realistic** - change takes time; appreciate the small steps of improvement.
- **Be friendly** - work up to the more difficult topics; don't make negative comments. Focus on the positive.
- **Be optimistic** - remember the good things about this person; try not to generalize criticisms (do not use "always" or "never").

C

- Clarify the problem - Use Listening Skills
 - Encourage the person to talk - this provides you more understanding of the “real” issues involved and often provides clues for possible solutions.
 - Ask questions to clarify if you are unsure
 - Paraphrasing - rephrase content - “Let me see if I understand what you are saying. You believe ...”
 - Reflection - rephrase feelings - “I understand that you are angry...”
 - Summarization - “The problem as I understand it is ...”
- Chill - be careful not to take conflict personally
- Create a solution, if possible
 - As much as possible, do so collaboratively.
 - Ask what he or she has done to try to resolve the problem.
 - Provide an opportunity for everyone to “save face” if possible.
 - Offer alternatives - if possible
 - Identify a common goal - “What do you want to accomplish?”
 - Try to turn the problem into a WIN/WIN
- Choose your own battles - Every hill is not worth dying for. There are times when you won’t get your way. Let it go. Know when to speak up and when to move on when dealing with difficult people.

“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” Romans 12:18

