Getting Unstuck: Dealing with Difficult Behaviors, Part 3

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Do Negative Ned, Late-Arriving Laura, Jerry the Joker, Demeaning Dave, My-Way Mary, Minimal-Effort Mike or Tammy the Tangent ever show up at your meetings? Of course they do. And does their behavior make you feel like becoming No-Show Nancy for the next meeting? If so, congratulations, you're a normal human being!

Difficult behavior is a drag on emotions and a drag on productivity. Putting up with people's difficult behavior is no fun. Unfortunately, most of us are more likely to put up with it than we are to try to change it. But in this age of teamwork, empowerment and personal responsibility, here's the deal: If the behavior is bothering you, then you are the person who needs to do something about it. Keep breathing - here's what to do!

Do the Prep Work

First, consider the offending person's intentions. Actually ask yourself: Is this person out to intentionally sabotage our meetings? If you think they are and can prove it, then take the steps to get them off the team and out of the organization. In most cases, however, you'll probably decide that the person, deep down inside, has positive intentions. That assessment should ease the stress a little for you and put them in a different light. (After all, how many of us have never exhibited difficult behavior?) But the major benefit to all involved is realizing that you're not dealing with a difficult person, but with difficult behavior. And behavior is much easier to deal with.

Next, become an objective, detached anthropologist. Observe and record the specific difficult behavior that's causing the difficulty. This is the most challenging part of the process since most of us skip over observing the behavior and jump right into judging and labeling the person. So, if Smokestack Susie is tapping her foot, crossing her arms, and gazing skyward while exhaling with...
her lower lip stuck out so that she's blowing her bangs up in the air, then write that down! Don't record that she was mad, angry, peeved, annoyed or getting ready to blow - those are your interpretations of the behavior.

Lastly, consider whether you are better off tolerating this behavior or talking to Susie about its effect on you and the team. Knowledge about how to confront directly and supportively may help you make this decision, so consider the following "how to" steps.

**Giving Feedback about Behavior**

Okay, you've decided to be brave, do the responsible thing and talk to Susie. Here's how to proceed:

1. Take a deep breath and consider your own feelings. Giving feedback about difficult behavior is a never easy. So acknowledge your own fear, doubt, courage or commitment.
2. Ask permission. Remember that we can't tell anyone anything that they aren't willing to hear. So be courteous - even if they weren't - and seek an invitation. Say "May I have ten minutes to discuss a concern I have about how we work together?"
3. Report on the observed behavior or specific incident: "Susie, I noticed in the meeting that you had your arms crossed." Do so in an even voice, using non-judgmental words and tone. Remember that observations are difficult to deny while labels or judgements - even if accurate - can easily inflame a situation and cause defensiveness.
4. Link the observed behavior to the negative result caused by it: "And Susie, I noticed that everyone else quit talking and started finding excuses to leave the meeting before we were done." Remember: if there's no negative result, then the behavior must not be a very serious problem.
5. Stop, invite their point of view and listen. Your assumptions might be wrong.
6. Lastly, ask for what you want to be different in the future. "Susie, I'd appreciate it if in the future we could voice differences of opinion without getting upset."

Feedback can be a wonderful and appreciated gift. Learn to give it often.

**Helpful Hints**

Match the time and intensity of the feedback to the level of concern.

Give feedback as soon after the incident as possible and in
time to allow for correction.

You'll be more successful to the extent that you allow for the possibility that your feedback might be incorrect or off-base.

Feedback is about how a person's behavior affects you, so remember to report your observations, assumptions and feelings in "I" statements.

**Suggested Reading**

- Getting Unstuck with a Willing Team
- Getting Unstuck: Dealing with Unmotivated Team Members
- Meeting with People Who Don't Like Each Other

**Related Products**

- 3M Office Products
- 3M Meeting Network Meeting Process Tools

**About the author**

Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D. speaks out at conferences and corporate events about how smart, competitive and independent thinkers work together most productively. His company, Partnerwerks, supports collaborative leadership with corporate seminars and custom services. For more resources offered specifically to Meeting Guide readers, click here [http://www.partnerwerks.com/MG/MG3.html](http://www.partnerwerks.com/MG/MG3.html)