Conflict Resolution - Winning With Difficult People
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By Bruce Lee

Why are some clients, whether building owners, government bureaucrats, or others, so difficult to deal with? How can I talk to them without getting as mad or as disturbed as they are? What, if anything, did I do to create a tense situation and cause them to lose control?

The reality is we all have difficult people in our lives -- professionally they are clients or people we work for; personally, they can be people we live with or gave birth to! People become difficult for several reasons. Perhaps their needs are not being met, or they have experienced poor communication or service. Perhaps the culprit is their lack of authority to deal with something like project changes or delays.

Some people rise to anger quickly and take their frustration out on the nearest live body they perceive as lower in status than themselves. And we let them. Worse yet, we react negatively by taking their anger personally instead of professionally. We get angry back and "fire the client" by being difficult ourselves. In other words, we have successfully become the problem.

There are two primary types of conflict. One is performance based. This type of situation is caused when a person's work performance -- whether it's an issue of quantity or quality -- is not meeting expectations. It creates stress and problems for everyone.

The second type of conflict is relationship based. You don't get along with the client or business associate for various reasons, but particularly because the other person's behavior and personality clash with your preferred communication style. They might be overly aggressive or demanding, too detail orientated, or just slow to respond.

Ironing things out

Upon finding yourself in a tense situation with someone, one solution is by "results management." Start by becoming very clear about what the problem seems to be, write it down, and work on creating constructive win-win solutions.
We have choices, ranging from doing nothing and continuing to feel guilty about possibly causing the situation, to changing our attitudes about the other person and the event. Our attitudes can range from, "that's just the way they are and I can live with it because it's not about me," to a full blown decision to resolve the situation once and for all!
If you decide to try to iron out the situation, you will have to meet or talk with the other person. When you do so, seek to understand them and ask lots of questions. Also, keep these strategies in mind:
* focus on what happened, not who caused it;
* assume a positive intent by them (it may just be that their personality style does not allow them to communicate effectively);

* let them know your positive intent -- you want to find a solution;
* reinforce what your shared goals are. As the client, their goal is what they hired you for; yours is to create and deliver the service;
* set a time frame for solving a problem when it arises; let nothing stay unresolved. Conflicts are best handled within 48 hours. Remember how bad you felt the last time you had a difficult situation and then how good you felt when it was resolved quickly?
* resolve to learn from the situation and share your findings with everyone involved so it does not happen again;
* commit yourselves to change. This might mean more frequent communication until trust is re-established.

Personality styles

The easiest way to reduce conflict is to know the other person's basic personality style and use it on them! Here is a short but simple way to "read" them.

The "Director." Direct, strong-willed, to the point, sets lots of goals, makes decisions, wants results and punctuality. Can be seen as aggressive. Solution: Go directly to the problem, be specific about actions and results. Don't waste their time

The "Inspirer." Fast-acting, fast-talking, a high-risk taker, competitive, personality plus. Exerts influence with high verbal skills. Solution: Talk about ideas, use energy and listen to them.

The "Supporter." Passive and slow to change, flexible about time, cares about people. Help is his or her middle name. Gets the work done. Solution: Talk with them to them about them. Pace their concerns, take away their fears of being challenged.

The "Critic." Analytic by nature, number cruncher, well-organized, inquisitive, slow acting, low risk taker, follows the rules, co-operative, creative. Solution: Be accurate, collect information, show logic and link steps.

Remember, everybody is different in how they manage others and in their expectations for how they in turn are managed and supported. You must have different solutions to every situation. As Abraham Maslow said: "If the only tool is a hammer, you treat everything like a nail." This article suggests several tools, but the best tool is having great communication and clarity every step of the way.

A final reminder: there are two main sources of difficult behavior –
- the other person or you. Make certain you are not the cause of it!