

Understanding Other People: The Five Secrets to Human Behavior

What Makes Difficult People so Difficult?

by Beverly D. Flaxington

Throughout 25+ years of my career in both individual work through hypnosis and career counseling, and through corporate work in my consulting business, I've been asked to help people deal with other "difficult people". The subject is a passion of mine and I developed and taught a graduate course called "Dealing with Difficult People" where we explored different ways to deal with the difficult.

What's interesting about difficult people, though is the difficulty we have in defining who is "difficult"? Why is one person who speaks in a boisterous fashion (some would say "obnoxious") difficult to you, but not to me? Why is someone who is unwilling to speak up and back up another's position in a group setting (some would say, "too timid") difficult to me, but not to you?

In my graduate class we started off by trying to define "difficult". There were as many definitions and approaches as there were students in the class. It's true that there can be someone that many people dislike, or find hard to work with, for example, but often there is even one exception to the rule. While many people may not get along with someone in a given work place, or group, there is often *someone* who likes the person and finds them agreeable in some fashion. How can this be? If a person is just plain hard to get along with, how can anyone find some redeeming quality or qualities with them?

But those difficult people are out there for all of us -- why does so much of our life involve trying to figure out how to get along with folks we don't like, find annoying or generally seem to disrupt our day? The truth is that we want to fix those other people. We want their behavior to change, and we want them to act differently towards us. Have you had a spouse or teenager that, as much as you may rant and rave to them, they don't seem to change their approach at all? We spend a lot of time viewing the other person and thinking about all of the ways we need them to behave differently so that our lives can be more pleasant!

The problem with trying to fix the difficult ones "out there", is that in reality we often need to look inward before we can look outward. Most of the time what bugs us about someone else is really something about ourselves that we either keep hidden, or don't like. I don't want someone to show me something that I fundamentally don't like that's inside of me!

Then there are just the basic differences we encounter in our style, our thought process and our values structure. If I'm a fast talking, fast moving person and you are more slow and methodical – guess what? You bug me – and I probably bug you! Or, if I care about the environment and social causes, and you throw your soda cans into the trash instead of

recycling them, you bug me. And, if I bring it to your attention – I probably aggravate you.

Much of the time we are either pushing away something about someone that we feel lies within us, OR we are reacting to something that we simply don't recognize. And, if it isn't about us, it must not be good. The truth is that we can't eradicate the difficult people from our lives, much as we'd all like to. There will always be people who push our buttons in one way or another. So, what can we do to make our lives happier, and lessen the impact of those difficult people's actions toward us or others?

Try implementing these steps for effectiveness:

1. Instead of reacting immediately, step outside of the situation and become the "detective" trying to understand what's going on. What is it about that person, or situation that makes it so difficult for you? Try and assess what is happening so you can learn more about what is bothersome to you and how it affects you.
2. Watch your triggers—what sets you off? When you are tired, or hungry, or stressed you are likely to react with more passion than when you are not so. Or, if someone reminds you of a person you don't like or have had trouble with in the past, it may be difficult for you. Many people still feel like the child with a parent chastising them, or the sibling getting picked on. See where you are triggered so you don't let your emotions run away with you without your consent.
3. Stay calm but alert. This is so hard when we're in the midst of frustration. We want to either react in the form of lashing out, or go inward and ignore the whole thing! Practice reserving your energy for calm alertness. You want to respond appropriately but not without considering your options. Sometimes anger is appropriate. Sometimes doing nothing is appropriate. We need to learn what is right in each situation but we can't do that if we aren't alert and aware.
4. Consider the long term. My grandmother used to say, "This too shall pass" and it's good advice to remember. Although it may feel as though that co-worker, or boss, or sister-in-law owns your life, they don't. Somehow they will move along one way or another. Try and keep perspective on their place in your life. If it's your spouse or your child that you find difficult, it's worth taking more time to figure out what's amiss. But, many people just simply aren't worth the time and energy we devote trying to fix them!
5. Most importantly, give yourself and others a break. We're all trying to do our best most days with what we've got. Some days we do a better job than others but communicating is overall very difficult for most people. Do your best – make the effort and often times you'll find people responding in a like manner to you. Like does attract like!

Good luck and call me at 1-888-580-WISE (9473) to let me know of your success!