



Five Guiding Principles

for Handling Difficult People

Barry Winbolt

in association with





When dealing with difficult behaviour

Over the years that I have been speaking to people about managing difficult behaviour in others, I have found it useful to outline what I call the 'five guiding principles'.

These are common-sense pointers to keeping interactions healthy, respectful and balanced. They will help you to avoid the typical pitfalls of dealing with difficult behaviour, such as loss of respect, power struggles or embarking on a strategy that will only make matters worse. It is important to consider these points:

The Five Principles

1. Listen well and with empathy

The catchphrase to remember here is 'First seek to understand'. You have probably noticed that most of us, particularly when we feel we are under pressure, work hard to put our own point of view across first. This will very often interrupt or interfere with our ability to really hear what is going on around us.

So, if you want to have better outcomes when dealing with a 'difficult person', it is important to develop your listening skills and that you demonstrate a listening stance to the other person.

2. Maintain dignity and self-respect

When we are on the receiving end of somebody else's difficult behaviour it is not long before we start to harbour vengeful thoughts. Indeed, many of us are sustained by the thought that someday we can 'get even' with the other person. Unfortunately, such a point of view, deliciously seductive though it can be, will actually disempower you.

It's a natural human trait (and probably one dictated by nature for the survival of the species) to label those we see as our adversaries.



To counter our natural tendency to depersonalise a ‘difficult person’ it is useful to actively adopt a stance designed to respect their integrity and dignity. You don’t have to like them or their views, but, as any negotiator knows, you can respect their right to hold those views. Lawyer and mediator Brian Muldoon says, *“It is not necessary to agree or sympathise with our enemy, but it is foolish not to understand them.”*

Some people are uneasy with this idea. However, it is one of the guiding principles for the persuasive reason that it will make you more effective in dealing with difficult behaviour. It serves as a way to control your own emotional reactions, helping you to look beyond your own assumptions and opinions. This is a necessary first step if you want to be effective in your dealings with a ‘difficult person’.

3. Remember - People can’t be changed

You might think this rather odd because of course people change and evolve throughout their lives.

The point to keep in mind, though, is that any strategy that requires the other person to change in order to improve a relationship is liable to have the opposite effect. At best it’ll be short-term, at worst it’ll just produce resistance.

When faced with pressure to change most self-respecting people dig their heels in. So, any time we want to change somebody else’s behaviour it is useful to remember that it’s the behaviour, not the person that we are trying to change.

True, people do change, but most of us do it when we are ready and in our own sweet time. Very few of us respond (even when it is someone close to us) by graciously thanking them for drawing our attention to what they see as our faults.



4. Express your own point of view

In any relationship, personal or professional, we must be free to express our own point of view. When this is not possible, it indicates a relationship which is not functioning too well.

One person will be dominating the relationship with the other unable or unwilling to express themselves or put their point of view forward. This means that in dealing with difficult behaviour we should, of course, allow the other person to express themselves, in an appropriate way, but that we too should be free to express our point of view.

Relationships that work well are symmetrical. They are balanced in such a way that each participant can express themselves freely and equally. Ideally, everyone should be able to express their views as they need to, and should be allowed equal time to do so.

As a guiding principle in dealing with difficult behaviour, reminding ourselves that we must be free to express our point of view acts as a memory-jogger. We need first to have reflected on just what that point of view is. By extension, we should also be ready to seek out the other person's point of view.

5. Win the day, not the fight

When we feel we have been wronged, or that we are losing control, the focus is usually on the short-term gain - surviving the argument, getting our own way or preventing ourselves from being treated unfairly.

Though it is counter-intuitive, you'll be in a better position to get the results you want by focussing on collaborating, rather than winning. Victory comes in many guises, so remember to avoid the win/lose pitfall. Aim for a collaborative conversation and you'll have success of a different kind.



Summary

It can be a challenge dealing with behaviour that you don't like. These five principles can act as a guiding framework to help keep your conversations on track, and to put you in control.

Using these principles to prepare yourself for a difficult encounter ensures several things, among them:

1. It will give you a better chance of really hearing the other person's point of view, and in particular their cares and concerns. It will also help you, the listener, to still your distracting 'inner voice'.
2. It is impossible to listen effectively if you are adding your own interpretations and anticipating their motives and intentions. Focusing your attention fully on the other person ('listening deeply', as it has been called) means that you avoid the distraction of your own thoughts.
3. It helps you to remain objective because you are attending to something outside yourself. This reduces the risk of being swamped by your emotions.

These Guiding Principles will help to ensure you fully understand the other person's point of view. That means listening to them and understanding their needs rather than your own interpretations of what they mean, or your own needs. It is particularly powerful in dealing with difficult interpersonal relations because when you demonstrate that you are truly listening it will help to engender respect and rapport.

Adopting a longer-term view linked to our own personal development can be a source of energy and guidance that can help the decision-making process when handling difficult behaviour.

By showing that you are really working to understand you'll be practising de-escalation and offering respect. If you do nothing else in a tense situation this will at least start to open up the lines of communication.



Adapted from:

Winbolt, B., (2005), *Difficult People; a Guide to Handling Difficult Behaviour*, ISR Publishing, Seaford.



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