

## **You May Be Aiding “Difficult” People to Be Difficult**

Google “working with difficult people”, and you’ll get about 16,800 hits; “difficult people at work”, 10,700; and just “difficult people”, a whopping 1,730,000 hits!

No relationship is exclusively one-way. When any two people interact, the influences flow in both directions.

So if there’s someone at work (at home or at play) who consistently irritates you, peeves you, and just generally gets under your skin, know this: you are almost certainly part of your problem.

There’s no question that in most every organization (home and playground), we come face to face with folks who push our buttons, antagonize, frustrate, or otherwise annoy us, and behave in ways that make us want to scream. They’re commonly referred to as “difficult people”. Some we label simply “irritating”; some we label “rude” and some we label “impossible to work or be with”.

In my experience, however, the question is not so much what makes them “difficult”, but what we tell ourselves about them that makes them difficult - that is, underlying, supporting and triggering our reactivity and characterizations are the stories we tell ourselves about such folks. “S/he is (fill in the blank with your negative judgment, criticism, or descriptor)” that categorizes them as ‘difficult’.

When we drill down to the “truth” of the difficulty matter, experience suggests that it’s not so much that another’s behavior is all that egregious, outlandish, off the charts or aberrant; the “truth” of the difficulty matter is that often the “difficulty” is not so much the other individual as it is the stories we tell ourselves about that person. What often occurs is that we have created a “story” about that person, a story we take as real, a story we assume is true.

So, when we feel the urge to label another as “difficult”, a first step is to check out the reality of the story, the facts. How?

### **HERE ARE THREE SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK:**

#### **1. What is that person doing, or how are they being, that is problematical for me?**

In other words, ask yourself what the observable and measurable behaviors are that point to “difficulty”. Often, when caught up in reactivity, or flooded by emotions, we lose sight of the observable facts and simply respond with a knee-jerk judgment along the lines as: “Well, it’s nothing specific; he’s just being an “a-hole”. Because we are so attached to our story, we often fail to grasp the details that indicate the person is, in fact, difficult. So, ask yourself, “If someone gave me the same feedback I am directing to another person, would I know exactly how to do, or be, differently?” If not, you’re telling yourself a story and you’ll need to be clear on the facts.

#### **2. Do you allow your story to cloud your view of that person?**

When we create stories, we create a way we choose to view that person. For example, if I choose to believe another is lazy, then I turn the radio dial in my head to the station that features only “laziness” tunes and, as such, I’m always on the lookout for, and listening for, ways that person is behaving that I can characterize as lazy, in order to prove the truth of my story.

If I choose to believe my boss is friendlier with a colleague and is ignoring, or rejecting, me and my work, then I turn the radio dial to pick up “rejection” tunes and look for, and listen for, incidents which allow me to say, “See, there she goes again; she likes that other person and is not concerned with me or my work.” We create distortions that support us to prove we are “right”; that our story is true. We look to archive lots of evidence to prove our story. We don’t stand back and ask ourselves:

\*\* “Is this the whole story?”

- \*\* "Is my story, really, really the truth?"
- \*\* "Is it possible I am distorting things just a bit?"

In fact:

- \*\* "Is this person perhaps, just perhaps, not the ogre I make him or her out to be?"
- \*\* "Could I be mistaken?"

### **3. Do you behave a certain way toward that person based on your story?**

The bottom line is that our stories influence our behavior (at work, at home and at play). Our stories (and their attendant beliefs, thoughts, assumptions, preconceptions, misperceptions, etc.) trigger our emotions and feelings and it is our emotions and feelings that drive our behavior (often unconsciously) towards the other.

So, it's important to take steps to become "conscious" of our stories. Two questions that can help in this vein are:

- \*\* "How do I behave toward another based on my story?" And,
- \*\* "Am I building a case against another, or attempting to solidify a case against another, based on my story?"

A next step is to become curious as to whether, in fact, I am perpetuating another's behavior as a result of my story. Am I contributing to that other person's being "difficult" through my story and reactivity? Yes, there are "difficult" people in the world. The question is whether some of these folks are really "difficult" in and of themselves or whether I am a major contributing factor to their being "difficult" through my story, and, more sincerely, honestly, and self-responsibly, how do I know the difference. Finally, I invite you to reflect on the following thoughts that might inform your inquiry into "difficult" people and your stories about them

Everyone is in "chapter three" of their life and often we base our criticisms and judgments of another on the assumption we know what went on in "chapter one" and "chapter two". Truth is, we don't know. Ask yourself: "Why would a rational, decent, fair-minded and well-meaning individual behave like a jerk" (Or fill in the blank with another "difficult" descriptor you use.) And then perhaps compassionately give them the benefit of the doubt before you make up your story or justify your story as "the truth". No one (read: NO ONE) ever gets up in the morning and says, "I'm going to be a jerk today."

### **So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- How do you generally react at work (at home and at play) when you come across a "difficult" person?
- Do you ever give a "difficult" person the benefit of the doubt? If not, why not?
- If you ever labeled someone as "difficult", what did labeling them as "difficult" get you?
- Do you ever make judgments about folks assuming you know all about them (chapters one and two) and what makes them "tick"?
- Have you ever been the "difficult" person? If so, how does acknowledging this make you feel?
- Have you ever asked colleagues, bosses, friends, spouse/partner or child(ren) if you're a difficult person? If not, would you? If not, why not?
- Have you even been judged harshly or unfairly? How did you feel?
- Have you ever been told you were quick to judge?
- Do you ever make up stories about people? How do your stories make you feel?
- Do you ever feel compassionate towards "difficult" people?
- Do you ever defend "difficult" people?

- Do you ever justify your own being “difficult” while admonishing others for their being “difficult?” What’s the difference?
- When the choice is between seeing another as a human being or a villain (“difficult”), which do you normally choose? Why?
- What one or two baby steps might you take this week and next to discern the facts about someone you might have labeled as “difficult” to see if your “story” is, really, really, the “truth?”

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