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This book is dedicated to all who have known organizational pain and injustice and who remain committed to turning around destructive workplace dynamics.

The time is always right to do what is right.

—*Martin Luther King*

PREFACE

TROUBLED RELATIONSHIPS, PEOPLE PROBLEMS, AND problem people are a ubiquitous challenge of life in families, groups, and organizations. Failed relationships produce angst and wasted effort. They leave people feeling frustrated and helpless, wishing they knew better ways to respond to a chronic source of distress. At work, it could be a problem employee, a bully boss, or a constantly complaining co-worker. Beyond work, it might be a mean-spirited neighbor or a troublesome relative. We, our students, and our clients all have stories to tell—many worthy of a TV mini-series for their power and pathos. As authors, educators, and scholars long-committed to the study of organizational effectiveness, we know from deep experience the power of relationships for good or ill. We have experienced the excitement and joy of relationships characterized by trust, respect, support, and caring—and have seen the collaboration, growth, and productivity they foster. We have also known the pain and misery of relationships that undermine best practices, erode confidence, and block us from doing the things we most care about.

In an earlier work, we included a chapter on "Leading Difficult People,"[1] and many readers told us it was one of the most useful and important parts of the book. They encouraged us to look deeper, write more, and help them acquire the skills and deeper understandings needed to transform difficult relationships into productive partnerships. We appreciated their feedback, and we listened. This book is for them—and for all who struggle to turn around destructive workplace dynamics.

Search the Internet for "bad bosses," "managing difficult people," or "people problems at work," and you will encounter an almost endless stream of books, articles, websites, and blogs. [We identify some of the best in our notes.] It takes very little time to verify this as a topic that has garnered an enormous amount of attention. We learned much from studying the existing literature and resources—and from some powerful ethnographic fieldwork—and understand better why many find existing resources less helpful than intended.

Too often the advice focuses on fixing whatever is wrong with someone else—the personality flaws, obnoxious behavior, character defects, or psychopathology that make some individuals impossible to live and work with. At first glance, deep change in your difficult person may seem like the obvious solution, but that usually turns out to be mission impossible. Few managers are trained mental health professionals—and even those who are lack the time, mandate, and platform from which to facilitate the complex personal development interventions that would likely be needed. Deep personal change only comes when someone recognizes the need for it and commits to all that it takes.

Playing amateur psychiatrist also courts disaster, leading you to step into more than you are prepared to handle. Some personality types cannot deal with the reality of a mirror being held up before them. You may set off an unanticipated wave of rage, aggression, and blame aimed at you or others. It can be intellectually satisfying to confirm, for example, that you work for a skilled narcissist[2] who cannot accept disagreement, is interpersonally exploitive, sucks up and pounds down, and lacks capacity for true empathy; but that clarity may help less than you might hope. It may even exacerbate your stress and feelings of hopelessness while providing little guidance about what to do beyond run away as fast as you can.

Advice to fix someone else also puts the emphasis on the wrong place. Human behavior always happens in a social context. Blaming others or finding a scapegoat is tempting, but too often oversimplifies the problem and steers us in the wrong direction. Sometimes bad systems bring out the worst in good people, and clarifying roles and ground rules can have immediate and seemingly miraculous impact on individual behavior. That's worth remembering.

We believe a better approach emphasizes relationships, learning, imagination, and engagement. That is what this book is all about. It offers a four-step model organized around the acronym SURE: when facing a difficult people problem, you want to follow these four *rules of engagement:*

Stop, look, and learn.

Unhook.

Revise the script.

Engage your difficult person—evolve or exit.

The SURE acronym makes the basic ideas easy to remember, and we have worked to distill a complex set of issues into a framework useful across a range of situations and grounded in research and best practices. When skillfully applied, we know it works—empowering you to see more (and more clearly), embrace new options for yourself and your organization, and strengthen your confidence and impact. The four rules provide a road map to guide you through the twists and turns of challenging relationships.

A road map, however, only helps if you know how to use it, and that's where our leadership story comes in. We introduce the SURE basics in the *Introduction*. We then offer a universal leadership tale about a manager named Vicky, entering a new work situation that looks nearly impossible—a failing operation, a troubled team, and a boss from hell. All that Vicky faces could be a recipe for failure; but she is smart, savvy, patient, and courageous. The story allows you to watch Vicky at work, see how she thinks and uses advice from others, and explore the impact of what she does and says. Our leadership tale also provides specific examples of how each of the SURE principles can be successfully applied across a range of relationship difficulties and everyday managerial challenges. The book is organized to go back and forth between Vicky's story and *Interludes* that illuminate key lessons as you go along. An *Epilogue* summarizes the model.

We have not forgotten the request from our readers, clients, and students for skill building help and guidance. That's where the *Skills of Engagement Tutorial* at the end of the book comes in. It offers a deeper dive into the foundational interpersonal skills at the heart of

the SURE model, along with selected references and resources for further study, and suggested exercises and activities to strengthen your people skills.

Read, enjoy, and learn! Ask others to join you in your study. Develop support groups to sustain you in challenging times. Learning to work more effectively with difficult people is a set of skills that everyone needs for success. May this volume be a source of wisdom, skill building, and strength in all you do.

INTRODUCTION

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER[1] TELLS of a sailor who bears the curse of an albatross—a giant seabird—wrapped around his neck. He escapes this burden only when he becomes more open to the world and himself. When you find yourself at wit's end looking for some way to cope with a difficult person in your life, you've met your albatross. Like the mariner, cursing the bird or bending under its weight will only keep you adrift. The way out begins with *engagement:* finding ways to see more (and more clearly), identify new possibilities, and appreciate the benefits—even the beauty—in learning to navigate the rough waters. This deep engagement is sustained by a commitment to sort out all you face, and confidence that you've got what it takes to reach a safe harbor.

This book will help you develop the skills and strategies you need to cope with difficult relationships. Think about how you currently deal with the unusually prickly, taxing, or toxic folks who block progress, undermine your confidence, leave chaos in their wake, and cause a disproportionate share of headaches and sleepless nights. Like black holes, these difficult people suck up too much time and energy as you (and often others) struggle to live and work productively with them. They might come in the form of a problem employee, bully boss, chronically complaining coworker, mean-spirited associate, Machiavellian teammate, or troubled colleague. We all have stories to tell that end badly because we find ourselves at our worst in dealing with those who give us the hardest time. How

well did you handle the last person who drove you up a wall? Did you achieve what you hoped? Did the relationship get better or worse? Were you able to alter behaviors that were destructive to individuals and to the organizations or projects that you love? If the outcomes were disappointing, this book is for you. It will show you how to engage your albatross productively and confidently.

The book advocates that deeply engaging self, other, and the situation is the best route to transform difficult relationships. It draws from two basic premises:

1. People always have more options for handling difficult situations than they recognize.
2. The stress and frustration in difficult relationships limit the ability to see and appreciate better possibilities.

Engagement leads to choices beyond fight or flight! It is always challenging, but deep engagement gets easier when you have a workable framework to guide you.

The book is built around a simple parable that illustrates four basic *rules of engagement* for staying alert, grounded, and productive in the face of difficult relationships. The story is a universal tale about life in an organization for a new manager who has inherited a group of challenging coworkers and a situation in need of a turnaround. We'd all like to live and work with perfect people, but reality doesn't always deliver our work or life mates to order. We need to cope—and thrive—with the demands of the different relationships and interpersonal styles that come our way. Difficult people are costly to organizations and toxic to those around them, and undoing their negative impact can deliver more value than hiring a superstar performer.[2] Handling difficult people takes a combination of strategy, confidence, determination, and skill. This book offers ways to enhance competencies in each of these key areas.

It tells the story of a seasoned manager, Vicky, as she copes with the cast of difficult characters she finds in her new job, seeks ways to do the work she's been hired to do, and enlists the support of her mentor and former boss, Peter. Vicky's choices and Peter's suggestions illustrate best practices and the skills needed to implement them.

Interludes periodically punctuate the story to encourage reflection and underscore key lessons for putting the four *rules of engagement* into practice. We close the book with a *Skills of Engagement Tutorial* section for those who want more *how-to* instruction on challenging fundamentals like skilled candor, mobilizing healthy support, giving and receiving feedback, testing, high quality inquiry, generating options under duress, and enhancing resilience.

Our story is set in a workplace, but you can apply its teachings wherever you need them. At its core, solving difficult people problems involves an informed approach for knowing when and how to *fix or fold*—invest in making things better or recognize it is time for someone to move on. This book shows you how.

Our approach is different from many other *how-to* books on the topic that ask readers to become amateur psychologists in order to diagnose which syndrome or psychopathology they are encountering in a boss or coworker. Is s/he a paranoid or an obsessive-compulsive? A narcissist or a histrionic? An exploder or a staller? A sniper or a know-it-all? We see several problems with that way of framing the issue.

It can lead you to make superficial or wrong judgments about troublesome people, labeling them instead of doing real diagnostic work about the full situation. Second, that approach typically leads to a diagnosis that cannot be shared. If you believe that someone is, say, a paranoid, you will likely keep that diagnosis to yourself, so it becomes undiscussable and untestable. Finally, that way of framing the issue reinforces the comfortable assumption that problems lie in something wrong with someone else. That makes it easy to feel, "I'm OK and don't need to change; I just need to find a way to shape up the other." That path leads to frustration and disappointment more often than not.

Following Harry Stack Sullivan's argument that personality manifests itself only in interpersonal relationships,[3] we believe it is more fruitful to see people problems as embedded in social interactions. That changes the question from "how do I change the other person?" to "how can I change what I do or understand in hope of improving our relationship?" Our approach focuses on a compact set of guidelines designed to produce learning and improvement across a broad range of dysfunctional relationships.

SURE *RULES OF ENGAGEMENT*

We have built the book around four rules for fixing bad situations captured in the acronym SURE. The rules are laid out to be easy to remember—a requirement for useful knowledge. They are also deep and broad enough to provide helpful guidance for most of the difficult people problems you're likely to encounter. All are grounded in research and best practices so we know that, when applied skillfully, they work. We introduce the rules in this introduction. In later sections, we delve deeper into each and show how to use them skillfully to handle specific workplace challenges such as managing your boss, coping with bullies, learning with tenacity, or leading a diverse team. We return to probe and further explore basic building blocks of the rules in our *Skills of Engagement Tutorial* in the book's final section.

1. **Stop, Look, and Learn**

A first step in tackling difficult people problems is to stop and identify ways to harness your strongest problem-solving self. That means quieting the inner emotional turmoil and unproductive restlessness[4] that naturally arise in challenging or stressful situations. Neuroscience reminds us that the human mind naturally defaults to rehashing the past and worrying about the future, especially when things get tough: our inner dialogues reflect the special sticking power of negative thoughts. To be at your problem-solving best, quelling the feverish firing of neurons in some parts of the brain may be as important as deliberately activating others.[5]

Difficult people also trigger impulsive responses. They remind you of some past wrong, threat, or failure. Survival instincts kick in and cloud the deep and clear thinking you need. The result: you leap before you look, typically blaming your albatross and defaulting to either fight or flight. You can find better options when you take time to understand the situation at hand. A quiet mind gets you there.

People are difficult because they push your buttons and generate a toxic stew of emotions like anger, fear, shame, regret,
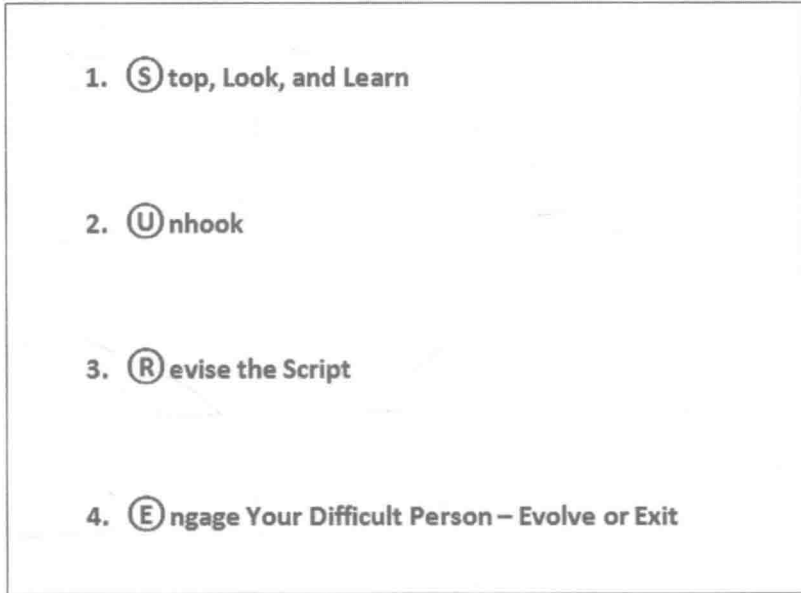
1. Ⓢtop, Look, and Learn

2. Ⓤnhook

3. Ⓡevise the Script

4. Ⓔngage Your Difficult Person – Evolve or Exit

Figure 1.1   SURE: Four Rules of Engagement

sadness, guilt, powerlessness, or anxiety. Acting to express or repress the feelings has a strong pull, and is also a route to bad results. It is much better to stop, acknowledge and accept the power of the impulses, and take time to see what you're up against. You'll want to look and learn about four things: (1) *individuals* (who is involved and what's happening for each person who may be contributing to this problem?); (2) *the group* (how are dynamics and interactions among members of a group creating or fueling the problem?); (3) *the system* (what's going on around you in the larger organizational environment to help create and sustain this problem?); and (4) *yourself* (what's your response, and how do you understand it?).

This four-part diagnosis is vital. You may otherwise try to solve either the wrong problem or the right problem at the wrong level. You might focus on surface disagreement, for example, when the real issues are well hidden beneath. You may point the finger of blame at an individual only to recognize too late that the problem lies in the situation rather than the person. You may see dysfunctional group dynamics as the culprit and fail to

appreciate the impact of a bully boss who has everyone scurrying to meet her "my way or the highway" demands.

Multilevel diagnosis may sound daunting. It's easier if you take it one level at a time. Start by looking at the key individuals. What do you need to understand about each of them, including their history, performance, skills, needs, styles, and interests? When you believe you have the picture there, move on to thinking about the group. Ask yourself: What interpersonal and group dynamics are sustaining the current situation? How well does everyone see and understand these dynamics? Then move to the systems level: What larger situational issues, organizational history, and environmental pressures need to be understood and addressed so as to make progress?

Looking outward and around you is essential in this process. So is looking in the mirror. A relationship is a dance in which both partners contribute. As children, we learned to assign blame for every broken toy, stained carpet, or crying sibling; and it's easy in the heat of solving difficult people problems to fall back on what we know. It's also a simple way to explain anything that goes wrong, and it tells us clearly what to do next—correct, punish, or exile the guilty. But if you are a part of the problem, tossing all the blame on someone else won't accomplish much. Diagnosis requires an honest assessment of yourself. What buttons does this person push in you? Are your responses making things better or worse? Is this individual bringing out some of the worst in you? How come? What can you do about that? Understanding where you stand prepares you to tackle the next *rule of engagement*: unhook!

2. Unhook

Difficult people hook you. That's what makes them difficult. They trigger a flood of toxic emotions that makes it more likely that you'll be at your worst rather than your best. It is hard to muster clarity of thought and hope when a relationship taxes your energy and feels like an endless bog. But feeling stuck in a painful situation doesn't mean you have to stay stuck.

You can get hooked by different people at different times for different reasons—and may not even recognize what's happening

to you. Difficult people may raise unresolved early life issues or dredge up a past situation that triggers automatic feelings and scripts from long ago. They may behave in ways that run counter to your core values or require responses that strain your current skill set. They may push emotional buttons you didn't know you had. Whatever the reason, if you stay hooked, you'll keep digging yourself deeper into an emotional hole. That's what makes strategies for unhooking vital. You need to know how to harness the rational part of your brain to calm your automatic physiological and emotional reactions. Regaining your sense of self-control supports the confidence and grit that help you see more clearly, strategize effectively, and make good choices.

At its simplest, unhooking is a four-step process. First, you need to recognize that you're getting hooked. Second, you need to understand the situational pattern and your triggers: what has the other person done (and in what circumstances) that has hooked you? Third, you need to identify the story you tell yourself about those kinds of situations and what that story leads you to do and feel. Fourth, you need to calm your body, mind, and heart; replace irrational and exaggerated assessments with more realistic thoughts; and change how you are reacting to the emotionally upsetting circumstances. Practices like deep breathing, exercise, relaxation techniques, practicing the virtues of gratitude and acceptance, and joyful attention training help.[6] They bolster mental strength[7] and enable better control over your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Once you've mastered that, you're ready to move on to the next step: revise the script.

3. Revise the Script

Clear, deep, and calm thinking supports your ability to write a new story that offers a different approach to your difficult person. With a new script, you can develop and rehearse alternative responses that help you try new behaviors, set boundaries, communicate more directly, and stay on task. You may be able to identify management tools (like job descriptions, contracts, or company policies) that can depersonalize challenges in the situation.[8] In the same way that professional musicians practice for hours so that muscle memory carries them through

moments of forgetfulness or stage fright—and builds their confidence so that they won't be shaken if either happens—rehearsing and preparing alternative responses to difficult people increase your chances of staying grounded. Neuroscience confirms that repetition reorganizes the brain—a key for transforming new learning into expertise. In a later chapter, we'll say more about how this process works.

If you can change your script and approach, your difficult person may change as well. If you find a road closed on your way to work, you will look for another route. You may get annoyed and harbor dark thoughts about the highway department, but you'll find a new road. In the same way, if you change your actions, your difficult people may find that their old route doesn't seem to work as well anymore. They will usually try to adjust. They will learn. If not, you have learned something important about them. They may lack the ability or motivation to change. Or they may have psychological or other issues that can't be solved short of professional intervention.

The SURE model begins with finding ways to increase your agency, understanding, and capabilities. It does not set out to fix someone else. Trying to force others to change is a recipe for frustration, fights, and failure. But if you are clear and grounded, do your diagnostic diligence, and ask something different of them in return, they may adapt. You may help difficult others see better options so that their approaches to work and life bring them—and you—more success and satisfaction. The goal is win-win. They break out of unproductive ruts while you expand your leadership skills, personal resilience, and impact.

When we say people are difficult, we tend to think of them as annoying and unpleasant to be around—the kind of people Robert Sutton describes in *The No Asshole Rule*.[9] You can recognize one of those folks, Sutton says, using two clues: (1) you feel worse after spending time with the person, and (2) the individual sucks up to bosses while abusing subordinates. It's natural to want to avoid people like that, and Sutton's basic advice is, "Don't hire them in the first place." But if they're already next door or down the hall, or, even worse, you're working for one, you need to know what to do. This book teaches you that.

4. **Engage Your Difficult Person—Evolve or Exit**

Difficult people always present a tough choice. One option is to invest and engage with them: work deeply and earnestly to understand, repair, and strengthen the broken situation, enhancing everyone's ability to learn new ways to work better together. Another is to give up. Fix or fold? Engage or exit?

How do you decide whether it's worth the time and energy? How do you know if repair is even possible? Not every relationship works—and not everyone can succeed in every situation. It's merciful for all not to prolong shared misery. You are ahead of the game when you have clear rules for determining when it makes sense to continue to engage, how to assess if things are evolving in productive and positive ways, and when it's time for separation. *Rules of engagement* 1, 2, and 3 get you started on the right track. We'll probe other factors that can inform your decision and what to do in the face of uneven power dynamics as the book's leadership story unfolds.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We have chosen to present our SURE *rules of engagement* through a leadership fable with interludes and an epilogue that underscore lessons and key points in the story. Storytelling has long been a vehicle for reflecting on human nature and the choices people make in responding to life's challenges. Storytellers paint a world of action with words. As you savor their descriptions, you slow life down: study it, think about your reactions, compare your solutions with others, and view events through multiple perspectives—your own, the writer's, and the characters in the story.

We recommend a thoughtful and deliberate read. As is always the case in human affairs, much is happening in each short exchange. As you read, compare your thinking and actions to the characters in the story. You may sometimes see the characters making mistakes that seem all too familiar. At other times, their successes may suggest new possibilities for expanding your options and becoming a better leader or collaborator. The book's power and impact depend on your ability