

COPING

WITH

**DIFFICULT
PEOPLE**

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PREFACE

This book was written because I couldn't find another like it. How such ubiquitous phenomena as Difficult People had gone unnoticed and unexamined by any but acid wits and comic script writers is hard to fathom. Yet the gap existed and it needed to be, and could be, filled.

As a management consultant I have found that most of my clients spend more time talking about how to cope with problem employees, bosses, customers, and co-workers than about anything else. I have also found that there was much that I knew that could help these clients. Through observation and action research during a fourteen-year period, I and my associates had gathered practical information on techniques and methods for coping with Difficult People. It was the absence of any practical and integrated reference material, and repeated requests from the many people who attended our seminars, that set me on the long course of writing a book. I'm lucky that it also turned out to be fun.

The acknowledgments that need to be made are many. Fourteen years ago Stuart Atkins first piqued my curiosity about Difficult People with a presentation on six personality

types that give salesmen trouble. I wondered if his six were indeed the most difficult and I decided to find out—they were. Stuart, Allan Katcher, and Elias Porter, Jr., enriched my own thoughts on interpersonal incompatibilities. The material on defensive behavior in Chapter 11 contains many of their ideas.

My partners, Nick Parlette, Allen F. Harrison, and Susan Bramson, have added much from their own experiences with clients and with Difficult People. They have also refined my understanding of why some methods work, and why others that ought to work, don't. Chapter 10 was written with Allen's kind assistance.

Wilson Yandell, more than any other person, deepened my understanding of the profound degree to which our own behavior is affected by our perceptions of what others intend toward us. Even more important, he showed me that freedom to move beyond the interaction of the moment depends upon seeing clearly the degree to which we affect and are affected by the expectations of others.

The sections on understanding the behavior of Difficult People in Chapters 2 to 8 contain my own integration of the views of a variety of authors, George Kelly more than others, supplemented by many interviews with the Difficult People themselves. They are not presented as definitive analytic explanations of what is very complex behavior. Rather, their purpose is to aid the reader to that "understanding from the inside," to use George Kelly's term, that gives freedom for constructive action to anyone caught up in a troublesome relationship.

Jonathan Cobb taught me much about writing as well as proposing many useful changes in the structure and flow of the manuscript. Similarly, Carol Mann, my agent, and my editor Marie Dutton Brown made valuable suggestions and provided much support.

To the many people who contributed data about themselves and the Difficult People in their lives, many thanks. It is they,

not I, who have provided the substance of this book. Friends and neighbors may think that they see themselves in the examples used throughout the book—they are, however, mistaken.

My fond gratitude goes to Fred and Carolyn Batkin, who often allowed me to use their home as a hideaway.

Finally, my appreciation and love to Wendy, Don, Guinevere, Marni, Eric, Rob, Sean, Patrick, Jeremy, and Hillary for standing by me during the periods of cantankerous obsession or obliviousness that seem to be a necessary part of my writing a book.

CONTENTS

	Preface	ix
1	Introduction	1
2	A Hostile-Aggressive Trio: <u>Sherman Tanks</u> , Snipers, and Exploders	9
3	“And Another Thing . . .”— The Compleat Complainer	43
4	Clamming Up: The Silent and Unresponsive Person	69
> 5	Super-Agreeables and Other Wonderfully Nice People	85
> 6	Wet Blanket Power: The Negativist at Work	99
> 7	Bulldozers and Balloons: The Know-It-All Experts	113

8	Indecisive Stallers	137
9	Toward Effective Coping: The Basic Steps	159
10	Thinking Styles: An Added Dimension in Coping with Others	181
11	Applying the Methods: Getting a Fix on that Difficult Person; Coping with Your Boss and with <u>Your Own</u> <u>Defensive Behavior</u>	197
	References	215
	Index	217

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about impossible people and how to cope with them. If your life is free from hostile customers and co-workers, indecisive vacillating bosses, overagreeable (but doing nothing) subordinates or any of those others who deserve to be called Difficult People, read no further. Consider yourself extraordinarily lucky and move on to pleasanter fare. If, however, these constant headaches have intruded, read on, for the purpose of this book is to show you how to identify, understand, and cope with the Difficult People who come into your life. It is directed primarily at those who must work with others to accomplish common tasks, but the methods described here are applicable in many different settings. These methods have worked successfully for salespeople, customer-relations staff, engineers and scientists, bus drivers, teachers, psychiatry residents, probation, parole, and police officers, nurses, volunteers, high school students, and, of course, supervisors, managers and executives in both public and profit-making organizations.

Here are two of these Difficult People as seen by their victims. Frank, a dynamic assistant division chief in an aircraft manufacturing firm, was at his wits' end. This was the

third opportunity he had missed to start a new project because George, his boss, through his indecisiveness, let it slip away. George had a reputation in the division for not being able to make important decisions. Frank was finding out why the hard way.

Frank liked George and respected his engineering abilities; that was partly what made their working relationship so exasperating. George could listen well, and he seemed to accept all of Frank's arguments. Then Frank would leave the office feeling great, only to wait for the memo from George that never was written. Frank felt he had tried everything: pushing his boss to come to a decision, leaving him alone for several weeks, cajoling him, and arguing the selling points of the new project all over again. No matter what tactics he tried, he could not pry a response from George. Frank liked the firm and thought that he had a good chance for advancement, but the prospect of having to put up with George's indecisiveness indefinitely was depressing and frustrating.

"Art, I'll be honest with you. I've given up on Seth. I'm just going to cover my ass, lay low, and do my best to get rid of him." Nate was talking to Art, the vice-president of operations for Tetley Electronics, about his division head. Art was beginning to realize that no one in the design division of the company could stand Seth. Nate was the seventh employee in a month to complain about him. And it wasn't just the troublemakers and mediocre people who were complaining, either. Seth appeared to be making life in the division unpleasant for the competent and even the most easy-going. "He scolds the whole staff when one person is late for a meeting," Nate continued. "He bites your head off whenever you ask for help. He screams insults when he loses his temper, no matter who else is around. He won't listen when you try to explain anything. He's just impossible!"

George and Seth are what I call "Difficult People." We en-

counter people like them all the time. They are the hostile customers or co-workers, the indecisive, vacillating bosses, and the over-agreeable subordinates of the world who are constant headaches to work with. Although their numbers are small, their impact is large. They are responsible for absenteeism, significant losses in productivity, and lost customers or clients. They frustrate and demoralize those unlucky enough to have to work with them, and they are difficult to understand. Worst of all, they appear immune to all the usual methods of communication and persuasion designed to convince them or help them to change their ways.

Of course, we all can be hostile or over-agreeable or indecisive from time to time and be a drag on our associates, friends, and families. In this sense we are all, at times, "difficult." But there's an important difference between people like George and Seth and the rest of us. While each of us may occasionally thwart or annoy or confuse one or the other of our fellow creatures, a Difficult Person's troublesome behavior is habitual and affects most of the people with whom he comes in contact. Difficult People are seen as problems by most of the people around them, not just those who are incompetent, overly sensitive, or weak.

The techniques for coping with the Difficult People whose descriptions make up the greater part of this book have been tried out and tested by many people who have found that they benefited in a number of ways by learning some techniques to apply in situations that formerly had left them fuming, yelling, or speechless. As a result they felt less angry and helpless in their encounters with the Difficult People in their lives, and, perhaps most significantly, they found that they were able to accomplish more, whether their Difficult People were bosses, peers, subordinates, clients, or customers.

HOW THE TECHNIQUES WERE DEVELOPED

For thirty years, I have worked in or with a variety of pub-

lic and private organizations in positions ranging from blue-collar craftsman to manager. These experiences have left me with absolutely no doubt that there *are* Difficult People. When I then studied how people behave and learn at work, I searched for ways of understanding how they came to be that way. As a management consultant, I discovered that they could be coped with effectively.

For fourteen years now, my associates and I have observed, questioned, and listened as executives and staff members working in more than two hundred diverse organizations told us about the most troublesome people in their working lives. Our primary objective in this investigation was to increase our own ability to help our clients work more effectively with or minimize discord caused by their own problem people. In the early stages of this investigation, we verified that there were indeed similarities in difficult behavior. Over a four-year period we asked several hundred men and women to talk about the most Difficult People in their lives. We found that the same kinds of behavior patterns were identified over and over again, some considerably more than others. Later our attention turned to what could be done about the behavior. These findings, subsequently refined and elaborated upon, form the basis for a part of my present consulting program and the substance of this book.

Patterns of Difficult Behavior

The behavior patterns that seem to be the most disruptive or frustrating are characterized by the following types.

Hostile-Aggressives: These are the people who, like Seth, try to bully and overwhelm by bombarding others, making cutting remarks, or throwing tantrums when things don't go the way they are certain things should.

Complainers: Complainers are individuals who gripe incessantly but who never try to do anything about what they com-

plain about, either because they feel powerless to do so or because they refuse to bear the responsibility.

Silent and Unresponsives: These are the people who respond to every question you might have, every plea for help you make, with a yep, a no, or a grunt.

Super-Agreeables: Often very personable, funny, and outgoing individuals, Super-Agreeables are always very reasonable, sincere, and supportive in your presence but don't produce what they say they will, or act contrary to the way they have led you to expect.

Negativists: When a project is proposed, the Negativists are bound to object with "It won't work" or "It's impossible." All too often they effectively deflate any optimism you might have.

Know-It-All Experts: These are those "superior" people who believe, and want you to recognize, that they know everything there is to know about anything worth knowing. They're condescending, imposing (if they really do know what they're talking about), or pompous (if they don't), and they will likely make you feel like an idiot.

Indecisives: Those who stall major decisions until the decision is made for them (like George), those who can't let go of anything until it is perfect—which means never.

Although Complainers don't always complain, and Indecisives sometimes do make decisions, there are common patterns in the behavior of Difficult People that can be identified and described. As you will see, finding and labeling these patterns helps set the stage for taking effective action.

The Nature of Coping

While identifying Difficult People in work settings was useful, we came to an even more fascinating realization during our observations. In many of the work groups observed, there were one or two individuals who could deal reasonably well

with the same Seths and Georges who had stumped their colleagues. Those who coped well with each type of Difficult Person used similar methods that could be identified and learned. What did these "copers" do? What did they avoid doing? Most importantly, how might the methods they used be communicated to others? The answers to these questions make up the core of this book.

What, precisely, then, is "coping"? According to the standard definitions, *coping* means "to contend on equal terms," exactly what one needs to do with Difficult People. Individuals behave in a difficult manner because they have learned that doing so keeps others off balance and incapable of effective action. Whether brow-beating others into acquiescence or avoiding distress by sitting on a decision, Difficult People manage to gain control over others. That they are often not motivated to manipulate others and that they are largely unaware of the long-term costs of what they do is incidental to the fact that they put you at a disadvantage.

Effective coping, the term we will use in this book, is the sum of those actions that you can take to right the power balance, to minimize the impact of others' difficult behavior in the immediate situation in which you find yourself.

The refreshing thing about coping as an approach is that it provides an alternative to both "acceptance" ("She doesn't have much of a family life, so I try to overlook her lousy behavior") and to long, costly efforts to change that collection of attitudes, values, and learned strategies that we call personality ("Nothing's going to help him but three years on the couch"). Acceptance, while it avoids the unpleasantness of confrontation, is attained at a double cost to the individual copper—a feeling of martyrdom in the accepter and reinforcement of the behavior hated in the Difficult Person. Trying to change another person's personality, on the other hand, can be the world's greatest hard luck story. Not that it wouldn't be nice to change Difficult People; it surely would. Even when an indi-

vidual has chosen to change, however, the way is difficult and expensive in terms of time, effort, and money. When the motivation for change comes primarily from outside the person—from supervisors, for example—it is even more costly and much less likely to work.

Coping, by contrast, has a much more limited and practical goal. Coping enables you *and* the Difficult Person to get on with the business at hand. Coping methods work because they interfere with the “successful” functioning of difficult behavior. When the behavior strategies of the Difficult Person don’t work, when you respond in ways different from those expected, you are able to get about your business and the Difficult Person is provided with an incentive, and an opportunity, to develop other, more constructive behavior.

This approach to dealing with Difficult People does require that you act with purpose and with forethought in relating to them. In that sense, it is open to the charge of being manipulative. But I would contend that it nevertheless can be highly ethical. What makes purposive behavior ethical or evil is the *intention* of the doer. The coping methods described in this book are not designed to use people’s motives against them, or to be sneaky or underhanded. They do not require that your intentions, and the actions you take to implement those intentions, be designed to further your own interests at the other person’s expense. Their intended purpose, rather, is to balance the power Difficult People can have over you, and to further your mutual interests by producing a situation in which you both can function as productively as possible.

THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

In the pages that follow we will discuss methods for coping with difficult behavior and how to put them into practice. In Chapters 2 through 8, we will examine the seven difficult-behavior types who at least in work settings are the most ir-

ritating, frustrating, or overwhelming: Hostile-Aggressives, Complainers, Silent and Unresponsives, Super-Agreeables, Know-It-All Experts, Negativists, and Indecisives. In each of these chapters we will discuss how to recognize the behavior, how to understand why Difficult People persist in their discordant ways, and how to cope effectively with them.

Chapter 9 provides an overview of the coping process. It explains six basic steps to take in coping with just about anyone. It then takes you through a series of questions that help you analyze your relationship with potentially difficult others, leading to an action plan for coping with them. Use this chapter to help you distinguish between those whose difficult behavior is transitory and those with whom it has become a preferred way of dealing with life.

Chapter 10 provides some theory for those who are interested, outlining a framework for understanding the fascinating, if ironic, relationship between any person's positive and negative behavior. Not only does this understanding help to see Difficult People as they are, not as you wish them to be, but it provides a basis for preventing difficult behavior.

Building upon Chapter 10, Chapter 11 provides steps for keeping yourself in hand in the face of a Difficult Person's onslaught, with some special notes on dealing with your boss. It ends with a series of questions that will help you develop a plan for coping with a Difficult Person who might be currently intruding on your own life.

These chapters constitute a tactical manual of methods for coping with the Difficult People you are most likely to find troublesome.

The summaries that follow each section provide a quick reminder device to review just before you expect an encounter with a particular Difficult Person.

Coping with the Difficult People in your life will never be enjoyable. But this book provides the means for doing it with more ease and greater success.

Chapter 2

A HOSTILE-AGGRESSIVE TRIO: SHERMAN TANKS, SNIPERS, AND EXPLODERS

CASE #1: "I'm really sorry, Mr. Beales," said the assistant to the advertising director, "but Mr. Hart isn't here today. He left an hour ago for Chicago."

"What do you mean he isn't here?" said Beales, an important customer. "Goddamn it, I flew two hundred miles to see him and you tell me he isn't here? How could you make such a dumb mistake?"

"Well," said the assistant, "I've checked Mr. Hart's calendar and you're down for next week. I'm sure that . . ."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, stop lying and making excuses. What are you going to do about this? Damn it, answer me!"

"I don't really know what . . ." tried the assistant.

"What's your name?" Beales shouted. "The president of this company is a friend of mine, and I'm going to let him know what incompetents he has working for him."

The assistant stood staring blankly at Mr. Beales. Finally he pulled out his card, handed it over, and watched as Beales stamped out of the office.

"That loudmouth!" the assistant said to Mr. Hart's secre-