



Unit 4 Working as a Team and Difficult People

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Increase your effectiveness in recognizing and managing conflict, and dealing with difficult people.

Unit 4

Working as a Team and with Difficult People

Working with Difficult People

Conflict occurs when emphasis is placed on the differences between people. The more differences there seem to be, the more divided you become. You get along better with people when the emphasis is on similarities. The difference between conflict with a friend and conflict with a difficult person is that with a friend, the conflict is tempered by things you have in common. Obviously, then, reducing differences is essential to your success in dealing with people you can't stand.

Here are some key tools for reducing conflict.

Blending

Blending is any behavior by which you reduce the differences between you and another person in order to meet them where they are and move to common ground. Blending increases your rapport with others. For example, have you ever been in conversation with someone when you unexpectedly discover that you both grew up in the same place? In that moment of discovery, differences were reduced and you felt closer.

Or you go to a restaurant with a friend, look at the menu, and ask, "What are you having?" Your question may have had little to do with menu choices and a lot to do with sending a signal of friendship.

You blend with people in many ways. You blend visibly with your facial expression, degree of animation, and body posture. You blend verbally with your voice, volume, and speed. And you blend conceptually with your words.

As natural as it is to blend with people you like, or people with whom you share similar objectives, it is equally natural not to blend with people whom you perceive as difficult. The failure to blend has serious consequences, because without blending, the differences between you can become the basis for conflict.

For example, imagine that you and another person are both waiting in line at a busy grocery counter during a holiday rush. You have the sense that both of you think you are next in line. You have two choices. You can choose to ignore the other person and push persistently forward, or you can engage that person in conversation in an attempt to find common ground. Perhaps you are both shopping on

your lunch hour, or you are both thinking about what you can cook for a quick dinner. If you can find common ground, you can then reduce the hostility that is building and break the negative cycle.

Saying, “It’s busy in here today, isn’t it?” lets the other person know that you see them. Saying, “I was distracted getting into line: were you here first, or was I?” lets them know that you are uncertain and focuses their response on action instead of both of you standing in line wondering.

Redirecting

Redirecting is any behavior by which you use rapport to change the outcome of your interactions and reach a more satisfactory outcome. Blending always precedes redirecting, whether you are listening to understand or speaking to be understood.

Identify Positive Intent

We can define positive intent as the good purpose meant to be served by a given communication or behavior. Our failure to recognize and appreciate positive intent can have lasting consequences.

A powerful key to bringing out the best in people at their worst is to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume a positive intent behind their problem behavior. Since your difficult person may be unaware of this, ask yourself what real purpose might be behind a person’s communication or behavior and acknowledge it. For example, someone may be upset because they have not received the service they required. They may be difficult toward you and make personal remarks, but the positive intent behind their words is that they don’t want special treatment, nor do they necessarily mean ill toward you. They just want to get what they asked for.

If you are not sure about that positive intent, be creative and make something up that could be true. Even if the intent you ascribe to the behavior isn’t true, it will allow you to blend and develop rapport.

Identify Highly Valued Criteria

Criteria are the standards by which we measure whether ideas are good or not, the means for determining what a thing should be, and the benchmark by which people gauge whether they are for or against an idea. Criteria become especially important when differing ideas or points of view are being discussed.

Money, bonding, teamwork, or increasing knowledge are some of the things that may be important to us.

Whenever a discussion starts to degenerate into conflict, try to ascertain the reasons why people are for or against something. Then look for an idea or solution to the problem that blends these criteria together. That is another way to turn conflict into cooperation.

When Discussions Degenerate Into Conflict

When your problem person is talking:

- Blending visibly and audibly
- Backtracking or echoing some of their own words
- Clarifying their meaning, intent, and criteria
- Summarizing what you've heard
- Confirming to find out if you got it right

While blending is an important skill to use when dealing with others, never blend with a hostile gesture directed at you. Don't meet aggression with aggression. If the other person raises their voice or shakes their fist, the key to blending is to underplay it assertively.

Your action plan for angry, aggressive people should include:

- Hold your ground and use deep breathing to stay calm.
- Interrupt the attack by repeating their name several times.
- Quickly backtrack or echo their main point to show them you have been respectfully listening.
- Aim for the bottom line by taking ownership and expressing the situation from your point of view.

Some more important points to keep in mind when you are dealing with difficult people:

- No one cooperates with anyone who seems to be against them. In human relations there is no middle ground. Unconsciously people want to know, "Are you with me or against me?" That's one of the things you have in common with your difficult people.
- Express your truth in a way that builds someone up rather than tears them down.
- Use "I" language, because "you" statements can be accusatory.
- Be specific about the problem behavior.
- Show them how their behavior is self-defeating.
- Suggest new behaviors or options.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to being honest with someone is concern about hurting their feelings. But you do no one a favor by withholding information and allowing them to continue behaviors that don't work for them either.

Learning to Say No

Expressing Your No

Ways to Say No

Once you understand the request and decide you want to say no, choose the kind of no that best suits the person and situation. Below are some general rules to follow.

Say no **firmly and calmly**, without saying, “I’m sorry,” which weakens your position.

Say no, followed by a **straightforward explanation** of what you are feeling or what you are willing to do.

- “I’m uncomfortable doing that.”
- “I’m not willing to do that.”
- “I don’t want to do that.”
- “I don’t like to do that.”

Say no, and then give a **choice or alternative**.

- “I can’t help you now, but I will when I get this done, which could be in an hour.”
- “I don’t have time today, but I could help out the first thing tomorrow morning.”

Say no and then **clarify your reasons**. This does not include long-winded statements filled with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations. It’s enough that you do not want to say yes. Your clarification is given to provide the receiver with more information so they better understand your position.

Use your **natural no**. You may have developed your own style of saying no based on your past experience and personality. If so, use it.

Make an **empathetic listening statement** and then say no. You may paraphrase the content and feeling of the request, and then state your no.

Example: “I can see that it is important to you that one of my assistants gets your report done. I’d like to have someone do it, but my staff is already overburdened with high priority tasks to be completed by the end of the day.”

Say yes, and then give your **reasons for not doing it or your alternative solution**. This approach is very interesting. You may want to use it in situations when you are willing to meet the request, but not at the time or in the way the other person wants it.

- “Yes, I would be willing to help you out, but I won’t have time until tomorrow afternoon.”

- “Yes, I could have part of your report typed, but not all forty pages.”
- “Yes, I’d be willing to go along with your second alternative, but not the third one you suggested.”

The Persistent Response

You can also use the persistent response. This method of saying no entails using a one-sentence refusal statement and persistently repeating it as often as necessary, no matter what the person says. This technique is useful when dealing with very aggressive or manipulative people who won’t take no for an answer. It is especially useful when you want to move from the passive mode to the assertive mode, as it gives you a specific format to follow. This is also useful for moving yourself away from the extreme aggressive end of the continuum if you are apt to lose control and become verbally abusive. The persistent response can be effective in maintaining your refusal while continuing to be in charge of your emotions.

Because this way of saying no is unusual and a bit complex, we will provide some detailed guidelines for applying it.

First, select a concise, one-sentence statement and repeat it no matter what the other person says or does. Examples:

- “I understand how you feel, but I’m not willing...”
- “I’m not interested...”
- “I don’t want to...”
- “I’m uncomfortable doing that, so I don’t want to...”
- “You might be right, but I’m not interested.”

After each statement by the other person, say your persistent response sentence. It’s important that you don’t get sidetracked by responding to any other issue the other person brings up.

Guidelines for Saying No

Say your statement **firmly, calmly, and as unemotionally** as possible.

Be aware of your **nonverbal behavior**, making sure you are coming across as neither passive nor aggressive. Use plenty of silence to your advantage. Your silence will project the message that the other’s statements and manipulation are futile.

Be **persistent**. Simply state your response one more time than the other person makes their request, question, or statement. If the other person makes six statements, you make seven. If the other person makes three statements, you make four. Most often, the other person will feel ill at ease and stop after

three or four statements. Other times, your response will move the other person to offer options you are willing to go along with.

Role Play

Sample Situations

- You tell a person who has called you that you are too busy to talk.
- Someone asks you for a ride home, but you're late and the drive will take you out of your way.
- You do not have the time to give a co-worker the personal advice she is seeking.
- A co-worker often borrows small amounts of money which they do not return. They now want \$5.00.
- You terminate a conversation with a wordy person.

Case Studies

Scenario One

Whenever you want to meet with your supervisor they say that are always "too busy" and will see you "later," but "later" never arrives. **How would you handle this?**

Scenario Two

Your desk is in a visible location. Colleagues who pass by often stop and chat, interrupting your work. **How can you politely, but firmly, discourage them?**

Scenario Seven

Clare frequently had to set up meetings for her supervisor with the assistants of the other supervisors. All her colleagues were helpful, except Rosa. Rosa put her off with comments like, “I have no idea whether my supervisor will be free on Friday at 10:00 a.m.” **How can Clare win Rosa’s co-operation?**

Scenario Eight

Two junior support staff were always coming to the senior assistant with gossip about the other people in the office. The senior assistant did not want to appear abrupt or superior to the two juniors nor did she/he want to get drawn into the conversations. **How should the senior assistant handle the two juniors?**

Scenario Nine

Peter was delighted when he was given a sophisticated computer. However, his delight turned to dismay when the three supervisors for whom he worked started to make excessive demands on his productivity.

Scenario Twelve

Your boss leaves everything until the last minute and then goes into a panic. **How can you organize this supervisor?**

Dealing with Stress

Stress can be positive and negative, but too much negative stress can take a toll on our mental and physical health. When we channel the energy from stress in positive ways, we can accomplish things that we never imagined. When a lot of negative stress builds up, we can have trouble getting our work done, feel unusually tired, and lose our usual motivation. If stress seems to be wearing you down and you are having trouble bouncing back, you may need to consult your doctor. For the usual day to day stressors that we encounter, here are some quick, easy ways you can lower your stress levels quickly.

Deep Breathing

Loosen your clothes, close your eyes, mentally relax your body, and take ten or more deep breaths. Your goal is to breathe into the bottom of your lungs (where the oxygen is readily absorbed), not the usual upper lung breathing we do. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it move as you breathe in in order to make sure you are getting the air in good and deep. We call this **diaphragmatic breathing** because you are using your diaphragm muscle to breathe. When people are experiencing anxiety they are most often breathing into the upper area of their lungs rather than the bottom.

Each time you exhale, count silently: “one,” after the first breath, “two,” after the second breath, etc., up to at least ten. If you lose count, or find yourself working on thoughts as they pass through your mind, start your count over again. When you are finished, you should feel more calm and relaxed. (Your blood pressure will go down temporarily, too.) If you’re in a meeting, on the phone, or dealing with a customer, count in your head.

Visualize

Use positive imagery to boost your mood and enhance your visible performance. In your mind, picture a place that you love. Feel the sunshine on your face, or the breeze on your skin. See the things that you enjoy in great detail. If you are getting ready for a presentation or an interview, visualize yourself performing it perfectly, so that when you get to the event your mind thinks you’ve done it before. (This is a technique used by athletes and peak performance coaches.)

Music

Music has the power to soothe or to give us energy. It actually has healing power, too. Find a type of music that relaxes you, and play it when you need to calm down. When you feel tired and listless, play some rousing music (rather than relying on caffeine or other stimulants) to give you a pick-up.

Acupressure and Massage

Holding a fingertip to the point of most pain or tension and pressing very hard into the offending muscle for up to a minute can avert a headache or relieve tension. Have a friend or spouse learn how to do massage therapy and/or acupressure on tense muscles, since daily treatment is better than once or twice a month.

Laughter

Laughter is the best medicine of all. A good belly laugh can lower blood pressure, slow your adrenaline, and reverse the stomach acid that comes with negative responses. Be on the lookout for jokes and cartoons you can share with family and friends. For a smaller dose, find a cartoon or picture that always makes you smile and post it near your desk. (Just make sure it’s appropriate for all audiences!)

Replace Worry with Problem Solving

Focus on what you can do, and then go ahead and do it. Chronic worriers tend to focus on what they cannot do, what should be happening, or how things are going wrong. Replace worry with problem solving so that you identify where you can step in. Then, stop waiting for the perfect time and just get on and do it.

Meditation

The purpose of meditation is to free your mind from its normal busy activities. There are several different techniques that can be used. Some people use a word as a focal point (a mantra), while others suggest you focus on a color, your breathing, an abstract concept, or an object.

Here is a good process for meditation. Sit quietly with your eyes closed and relax all your muscles from head to toe. Become aware of your breathing. Breathe through your nose easily and naturally, in and out... Begin to silently repeat the word you have chosen or focus on the color you have chosen. In and out... Let distracting thoughts pass through your mind. Continue doing this for 15 to 20 minutes.

Resilience

Each stressful experience that you have prepares you to deal with one in the future. The more resilient you become, the less of an impact each of these events has on your mind and body. Lots of us go to great lengths to avoid stress, and although avoidance initially feels like you are doing alright, the reality is that stressful things come up in our life all the time. The better we are at handling them, the more resilient we become, and the healthier we can be.

Each stressful experience can lead us into a cycle of confusion and even anguish. If we stay with those feelings, however, things actually get worse. But if we make a decision to deal with those circumstances by problem solving and adapting, we develop resilience. This means that we can enjoy life more and be more successful.

As you encounter more stressors in life (and we all do), we can rely on the experience we've had in dealing with negative circumstances in order to cope. We get more effective at managing that cycle of confusion and anguish, problem solving, adapting, and moving on.