

Understanding yourself

To start at the beginning, we should perhaps define what we mean by the term 'difficult people'. When you interact with someone, the process is essentially two-way. Just as you will respond to the words and actions of another person, so he will do the same to you. To really understand yourself takes courage because there are always things that we really do not like about ourselves and which we would prefer to hide from our appraisal of our strengths and weaknesses.

Over time from the day we are born, we all get to learn what is expected in our behavioural patterns to elicit the best responses from those with whom we are having a dialogue. At birth, a simple wowl is usually sufficient to get mum to come rushing forward to feed us, clean us and give us a cuddle. Effectively, then, we are taught from birth that when we demand noisily enough, we get what we want or need.

As we get older, however, we learn pretty rapidly that it is a question not just of getting the meaning of the words right, but also of the expressions that go with those words, the epithets that add politeness, respect, or whatever feelings we want to go with them, and the gestures that can also accompany such a dialogue.

The patterns of our personality are set very early on in childhood. Events and other people will have caused us to grow up the way we have, with all the self-doubts and prejudices that we all have. The way in which our mothers and fathers treated us, for example, will have had a



profound effect on our sense of self-worth. It is all too easy (and all too sad) for the most well-meaning adult to inflict all kinds of mental scars on his children. Being over-protective, for example, can lead a child to become over-reliant on others to fight his battles for him, leaving him with little sense of self-worth. Most parents do only what is best at the time in their opinion and it is a great shock to them that something they regarded as insignificant and perhaps have all but forgotten, was a monstrous milestone in the life of the child.

By holding back on displays of affection, an adult can lead a child into believing that he is unworthy of such love; by telling a child he is stupid, or that his brother or sister is 'better' than him, an adult can cause that child to do everything in so half-hearted a fashion that eventually it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Someone who has an unsettled childhood can also suffer in later life from being unable to form positive relationships with others. The effect of this is that he feels inadequate and inferior to his peers. And so we have a potential ever-decreasing spiral of self-image in the making, the behaviour pattern of which is very difficult to jettison in adulthood.

These feelings of inadequacy translate into everyday behaviour and actions. We are all a product of our upbringing. When you next encounter the bullying type, instead of reacting with the inner thoughts 'What have I done to deserve this?', ask yourself what kind of an upbringing he might have had. Does he feel inadequate as a person, and are his bullying tactics perhaps a cover for the way he feels about himself? Ask yourself also why you have reacted in that manner – what is it about your inner self and sense of self-worth that makes that your first reaction?

Why are people difficult?

When we talk about dealing with difficult people, what we really mean is dealing with difficult behaviour. By learning to understand what it is that makes someone else behave and talk in a difficult way, we are in a better position not only to take charge of the situation, but also to help the other person resolve the conflicts that made him or her 'difficult' in the first place.

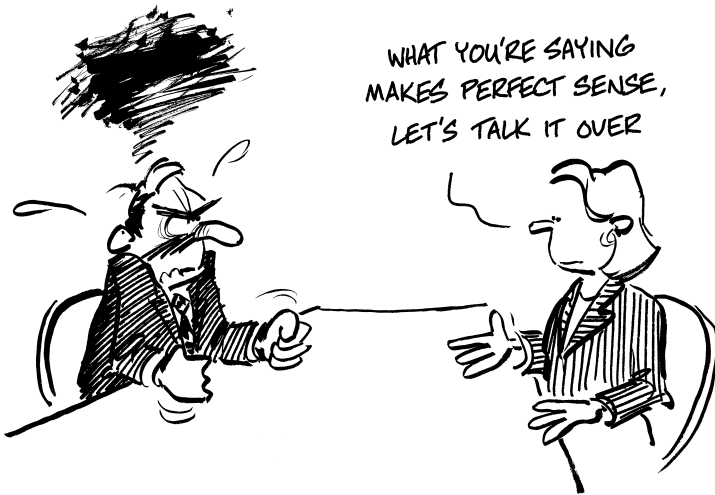
The crazy thing is that the natural way in which many of us react when we meet a difficult person is often more inclined to make that person's behaviour even more difficult. Ask yourself if you have ever reacted to someone by:

- sharply answering back
- becoming defensive rather than dealing with the problematical issue
- ignoring the meaning of what they are saying because you are so annoyed with the way they have spoken to you
- feeling confused and frightened
- becoming speechless with rage
- becoming unable to think of anything else at the time

The likelihood is that you will have experienced each of these reactions on numerous occasions. Many of us react in ways that make the problem worse, because we are reacting rather than thinking first. Yet, by stopping and thinking things through from the other person's perspective, by controlling the way we feel and attempting to act calmly and completely rationally, we can benefit in a number of ways:

- we will feel more in control of ourselves and our own destiny, as well as the situation as a whole
- by reducing our emotional reactions, we will be better able to think clearly and objectively
- we will feel less hampered by frustration or anger
- we will feel better about ourselves for not having responded like with like

So ask yourself – and be honest – do you let others dictate the way you feel about yourself? Turned round the other way, do you think your moods or actions could affect the behaviour and actions of another person? Depending on



your current state of mind this may or may not be easy to answer. If you feel considerably discomforted by the potential grasping of the truth, then it might be a good idea to leave this until you have reflected overnight. As honest an appraisal of this now is vital to getting to grips with other people and their difficult behaviour – and how you are going to be able to cope with it better.

Let's face it, turning round a difficult person to become good-natured and easy to deal with is not something that you can achieve instantly – if at all. It may be that in time you can make him appreciate how unreasonable his behaviour is, and get him to change his ways. Over the short term, if you cannot change him, then maybe the next best thing is to change the way you react to him. After all, it is invariably the recipient of his behaviour who gets hurt or demoralised, rather than the difficult person himself.

Communication is a two-way process

All communication is a series of reactions and counter-reactions, if you think about it. Your difficult person will react to what you say or write – and to your body language – in the same way as you will react to what he says. But if your reaction is different from what he is expecting, it is possible to break the cycle – to get him to counter-react in a different way from the way he was expecting to do – and very often this has the effect of defusing the unpleasant situation and improving communication between the two of you. It can happen very fast.

Everyone reacts to awkwardness in a different way. It's not surprising when you consider that some people might be shy and retiring whilst others are extrovert and apparently over-confident. By making others feel low and bad about themselves, insecure people can give themselves a boost by inwardly telling themselves that they are better than others. By giving in to a bully, for instance, all you are doing is letting him win. But by responding in a calm and collected way, you can influence the way he counter-reacts to you, and often it is possible to do this without him even knowing.

We talked earlier on about the way in which you react to a difficult person. Do you normally answer back sharply to someone who needles you? Although perfectly natural, this response is hardly likely to improve the situation, except that in the short term you might feel better for being able to get your feelings off your chest. But what have you achieved? Difficult people are so used to behaving in a particular way, and leading their victims to react to them in

such a way that they can then ‘move in for the kill’, that by denying them the wherewithal to play their trump card, you have effectively got the better of them. By not responding in a ‘natural’ way, you can break the cycle that your antagonist has set up for you to fall into. If you neither cower before a bullying manager, nor angrily explode at a subordinate, you effectively deny him the inner satisfaction of his own personal superiority factor; and when difficult behaviour no longer works, most such antagonists fall back into a more reasonable frame of mind – what else can they do?

Suppose that one of your clients shouts at you and creates a row for something that was clearly not your fault. (Many people manning telephone help desks get this kind of treatment on a regular basis.) You can respond in a number of ways. For instance, you could:

- defend both yourself and your company
- be calm and identify the real problem
- concentrate on his problem, rather than on your own feelings, recognising that the client is angry with the present situation – not at you. There is therefore no need to defend yourself.

The first response is likely to satisfy neither you nor your client. So why do it? You are simply allowing yourself to become the punch bag of your frustrated client. But if you concentrate on his problem, rather than your own feelings, as in the second alternative, the client is more likely to end up in a positive frame of mind and think better both of you and of your company.

Frankly, the customer is not interested in who made the mistake in the first place. All he wants is the problem to be resolved and he is frustrated as well as being anxious as to whether the company will take his problem seriously; and you will stay calmer if you don't become all defensive. In short, both sides win.

So by taking a moment to reflect before you react, especially if you know that this person is difficult to deal with anyway, you have a much better chance of coming out on top. Simply having a shouting match brings you down to his level and achieves nothing at all – and it potentially creates a stalemate situation, which is even more difficult to resolve.

Similarly, if one of your fellow workers shouts at you, for whatever reason, which of the following scenarios is most likely to be conducive to a healthy outcome?

- you fly into a rage and tell him what you think of him
- you pause and tell him in a calm and controlled manner that you feel angry about what he has just said

The first scenario is almost guaranteed to get him to scream back at you, and in the end neither of you will take the slightest notice of what the other is saying, regardless of whether there is any truth in what one or the other of you is saying. The second scenario, on the other hand, is far more assertive, and by controlling your emotions, you will also have much more likelihood of getting your point of view across.

If this person has a reputation for being difficult generally, it should also help that you know instinctively that it is not really you that is being attacked. Admittedly, it can still be pretty unpleasant being on the receiving end of such behaviour, but at least you can hold your head up knowing that if anyone is inadequate, it is he. You therefore also need to identify and then come to terms with the impact your behaviour has on others – good or bad.

The classic example ...

How often have you been driving along a road when some inconsiderate motorist overtakes a whole stream of cars on a bend and all but causes an accident to happen in the process? It is, unfortunately, all too common an experience these days. The natural reaction of many is one of fury: to swear at the careless driver and to fume at all inconsiderate motorists. But in the process, your concentration lapses and your driving may suffer as a consequence. And the corollary of this is that other people then sound their horns because they are suffering from the bad driving of someone else. Meanwhile, the original driver who caused all the problems in the first place is miles away, probably upsetting yet more people at this very moment.

In this case, the ones to suffer are the ‘victims’ of that first bad driver. Anger would have been the perfectly natural reaction, but it has achieved nothing except to allow the actions of someone else to affect their feelings and judgement.

In the same way, if you allow yourself to become stressed at the behaviour of others, don’t be surprised if the one to suffer most is you. Not only will you fail to get an adequate

response from your protagonists, but you will, more than likely, be the one who is left feeling exhausted and emotionally drained.

Feeling inadequate

But getting angry with difficult people is not the only harmful way of reacting to them. It is just as bad if you don't stand up to them or if you make excuses and become all defensive. Think what you are saying to them with these kinds of responses. 'You're probably right and I'm really the one in the wrong.' Is that what you want to convey?

And what about feelings of negativity? Suppose you are due to go for an interview next Tuesday and you spend the previous week thinking of all the reasons why you may *not* get the job or be put in charge of that project. Think about it: not only may your feelings of negativity cause you to see the worst in every situation, but it will also cause others to see the negative aspects in you. Rest assured, then, that if you go into the interview in this frame of mind, you will certainly not convey the best impression to the interviewer, thus confirming your worst fears to your inner self. And worse still, the entire week may have been ruined by your fear of the unknown.

Now think things through the opposite way round. Begin by making up a list of all the bad things that have happened to you this week. Study it well and ask yourself if any of these things would have happened without you there anyway. Now make a list of all the *good* things that have recently happened to you and of all the *good* characteristics that you can boast of. Doesn't it put it all into perspective?

We know of one married couple, who were going through a difficult patch, who every night wrote out a 'disaster diary' of everything that had gone wrong that day. It didn't matter how small or how annoying the 'disaster' was; everything got entered into that book. The wonderful thing was that when they read a given entry the following day or the next week or whenever, what had at the time appeared to be something dreadful became in time totally insignificant. The effect was that their marriage improved dramatically, and the feelings of negativity which had at one time appeared to hover over them like a black cloud, simply evaporated away.

So what do others think of you?

We have so far talked about the reactions we have to difficult people. But have you ever really stopped to think about how others see *you*? It's all too easy to think that the way we see ourselves is the *same* as the way others see us. In fact, the opposite is much closer to the truth. Perhaps you believe it is important to say what you are thinking, regardless of the consequences. But how would you feel if someone treated you in the same way? In causing others distress by the things that you say, you are then no different from the difficult person that you suffered from before. How will others, then, regard you? The likelihood is that they will turn away from you, and you will end up feeling isolated. And it will be your fault entirely. Don't be surprised, then, if this leads you into more negativity in the way you treat others, and your behaviour gives others cause for concern.

What, then, can we do about it?

Despite our upbringing and effects that parents and other mentors have had on us, the fact is that the way we think of ourselves is not some immovable concept cast in stone. The great thing to realise is that we can actually choose to change our self-image.

We all have mini-disasters in our lives. Perhaps none are so public as those of professional sportspeople competing in international competitions. Even the best champion ice-skaters fall over; Premier Division footballers miss easy goals; and many a great cricketer has chided himself for being bowled out. But all of them realise that nothing is served by punishing oneself after the event. The ice-skater picks himself up and carries on; the footballer concentrates on lining up another goal; and as for the cricketer – well there is always another day!

It is only worth looking back at one's failures if there is a lesson to be learnt from them. And if you do learn from a mistake, then it can be regarded as something positive – not something to be ashamed of. So leave your failures behind you where they belong: in the past.

In the same way, you should try to build on your successes. Make a mental list of everything that you like about yourself. Even if you feel you are in the depths of depression, there is always something that you can find to add to that list if you think hard enough. People who have a poor image of themselves, for instance, often think that they can think of nothing good to say. The truth is, however, that such people are often highly sensitive and tend to be kind and compassionate. If those characteristics

applied to a stranger that you met, you would react positively to them. So react positively about yourself and continue the list in that vein.

Now try listing the good things that have happened to you throughout your life. Everyone has successes, however small. Recall how good you felt when you had achieved those successes.

By learning to improve your self-image, you are more likely to be able to resist the damaging words and actions of difficult people; and by gaining a better insight into yourself you will automatically gain an insight into the way others act and speak; you may even begin to understand why they are acting the way they are; and once you can begin to feel pity for someone, however dreadful a person he is, you will find you no longer feel hurt by the things he says to you.

Later in this book you will learn the techniques of how to deal with all manner of difficult people in a variety of situations. By learning to deal with their moods and their own feelings of inadequacy, you will be more likely to succeed in coping with them and turn a potentially negative situation into one which will prove to be positive for both parties.

Summary

Today we have seen how the patterns of our personality are set very early on in childhood. In successfully dealing with difficult people, the key factor is to understand what makes them behave in the way they do. So the things we have to consider are:

- Perception of self-worth is often a main constituent of peoples' personalities
- Many of us react too quickly in ways that can make a problem worse
- Everyone reacts differently to awkward situations
- By becoming stressed in a difficult situation, you are likely to suffer more
- We can all choose to change our self-image and build on our successes

So, by learning to improve our self-image we are more likely to be able to resist the words and actions of difficult people.