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## 10 – Handling Difficult People on Projects

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### Difficult People

Before we go any further, it is very important to understand the difference between people that exhibit problem (difficult) behavior and those who engage in healthy conflict. If you are concerned with keeping everything calm in projects and negotiations, and not causing any waves, you may view all team members who create conflict as being difficult or possessing problem behavior patterns.

There is a difference. Conflict, which you can and should expect on every project, is a healthy action when it is not an attack or perceived as such. As a comparison of what is and is not healthy, let's look at the following table that compares problem behavior of people just being difficult versus healthy conflict that we should all seek and encourage to improve our execution of projects and get better results.

<b>Problem Behavior (Difficult)</b>	<b>Healthy Conflict</b>
Takes the energy and focus away from the important issues.	Opens ideas for discussion even if they are controversial.
Decreases productivity.	Increases productivity and results.
Lowers group attitude and hurts self-esteem.	Supports self-esteem.
Creates an atmosphere of "I win and you lose."	Creates an atmosphere of "I win and you win."
Causes fear and distrust between people.	Ultimately lowers stress and anxiety.

It is very important to check on your own attitude. A negative attitude of "don't bother me" can cause conflict. Much of the time we receive what we reflect.

After dealing with thousands of people, please consider that communication techniques fall into four general categories. You probably communicate in more than one style and the same is true for your difficult people. The goal is to be a little of all four. The more you can communicate in all four styles, the more balanced you are and the more people you will be able to deal with.

## 1. *The Bumper Sticker Communicator (“BSC”)*

Visualize the bumper sticker. Bumper stickers say something in five words or less and are meant to have an immediate impact! The “BSC” is the same. He or she gives and wants information in short sentences. If you go on and on, this person will become rude, withdraw his or her attention, and become hostile. He or she works quickly with only the goal in mind. He or she is not sensitive to personal feelings and is known to cause subordinates to cry. The BSC is usually in a leadership position (the boss). The BSC is very good at demonstrating power... and being the boss is definitely a power position.

The BSC is an achiever usually. He or she can, and usually does, make a lot of money. The down side is that he or she also can lose large amounts of money because they are risk takers. His or her risk-taking personality has little patience for those who do not carry the same philosophy.

The way to deal with this person is to concise and to the point (succinct!), speaking in a clear and confident voice. Do you remember the “General’s Brief” and the “20-second elevator Speech” from earlier the earlier session on Intensive Communication. If you feel as if you are leaving out important information by giving a BSC the short version, let him or her ask questions, or else outline the specifics on paper and leave it with them to read.

Be prepared before approaching a BSC with ideas or suggestions (in “short” form). This will give you the appearance of self-confidence even if you really feel nervous. Do not expect the BSC to compliment or validate you or your ideas. This expectation can cause you to feel disappointed. Be confident in your own work and yourself. If you want validation or support, go to the Care-taking Communicator (“CC”) or the Cellular Phone Communicator (“CPC”).

Typical behavior of a BSC, and ways to improve communication with one:

- Self-sufficient
- Authoritarian
- Goal-directed
- Dominate
- Assertive or aggressive
- Likes control
- Fast worker
- Impatient
- Dislikes indecision
- Be brief
- Be assertive
- Speak clearly
- Move fast
- Have self-confidence
- Have goals established

Do you know anyone that exhibits this behavior pattern normally? Remember, we all should have some of this, but the key is being balanced... so let’s examine the others.

## 2. *The Care-taking Communicator (“CC”)*

The Care-taking Communicator (“CC”) is very nice and wants to help everyone. He or she likes to tell very long stories and you could find yourself cornered. If you ask him or her a question, such as “What time is it?” they may tell you everything about it from time immortal, including where raw materials come from for making watches, how watches are made, the invention of time, etc. (you get the point). The CC will be the one who brings goodies onto the project office for everyone to share. They may even arrange special events when others just don’t have the time. Another sign is family and friend photos and candy dishes sitting out prominently inviting anyone to come and be nurtured.

The CC does not like to carry the responsibility for the success or failure of projects. They are great at support, but prefer to avoid being in a leadership role, which could bring a more serious accountability aspect to their job. They normally work as hard as you need them to work as long as they feel appreciated and supported.

You need to be sensitive to their needs. If they are rambling on about something that seems totally unimportant to you, don’t be rude. Be very polite and concerned, but ask for the “short version” and mention time is limited. If it’s your boss, then avoid eye contact and keep working...just give slight sounds of acknowledgment but keep working. It will make you uncomfortable, but the person usually gets the message. There are other ways of dealing with this, from standing up when they approach (indicating you are leaving), actually leaving for the copier or restroom, etc. Break the person’s feeling that you are available for them to talk too (about other than project specific knowledge). Do set a specific time to spend with this individual on a regular basis, though. Remember, the CC gives nurturing because he or she wants it!

Typical behavior of a CC, and ways to improve communications with one:

- |                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Accepting, slow and steady       | • Be patient                       |
| • Tells personal feelings          | • Be sensitive                     |
| • Slow to take risk                | • Plan time to listen              |
| • Friendly                         | • Show personal feelings           |
| • Helpful                          | • Ask for the short story (gently) |
| • Supportive                       | • Give him or her recognition      |
| • Non-confrontive                  | • Do not embarrass him or her      |
| • Personal relationships important |                                    |

Do you know anyone that exhibits this behavior pattern normally? Remember, we all should have some of this, but the key is being balanced...so let’s examine the others.

### 3. *The Cellular Phone Communicator (“CPC”)*

Can you guess? This person loves to talk to people. A picture of this person might portray him or walking around with a cellular phone connected to their ear because they do not want to miss any opportunity to talk. Totally different from the CC, he or she is more an entertainer. They tend to be (or want to be) the center of attention, work on more than one project at a time, and are fast-moving and fun. He or she is often disorganized, and their office can seem to be chaotic. However, they know exactly where everything is and you had better not move a thing! They get bored if there is too much structure. They are risk takers, similar to the BSC, but the difference is their risk-taking tendency can come from dreams rather than research.

One of the downfalls for CPCs is that many times they skip steps when working on a project because they want the results the fastest way possible. They can be “done,” but sometimes skipped steps can backfire, causing inconveniences or time lost because they must redo their work.

When you communicate with a CPC, speak in a very positive way, and faster than usual. Bring up ideas and goals but don’t get stuck in all the research information, as this can bore them. They love talking about themselves, their project work, their personal life, or just about anything. So ask them questions about themselves, remembering one of their favorite subjects. Do not point out all the reasons why something will not work unless you want to aggravate them because they will look at you as a loser and pessimist. Personal feelings are important to the CPC, therefore, be willing to share yours.

Typical behavior of a CPC, and ways to improve communications with one:

- Extrovert
- Fast-moving
- Talkative
- Entertaining
- Works on many projects at one time.
- Friendly
- Optimistic
- Exaggerates
- Risk-taker
- Talk faster than normal
- Be upbeat
- Share ideas and the big picture
- Don’t get stuck in details
- Move quickly
- Be friendly
- Share personal stories that might interest them
- Be willing to risk

Do you know anyone that exhibits this behavior pattern normally? Remember, we all should have some of this, but the key is being balanced...so let’s examine the others.

#### 4. *The Technocratic Communicator ("TC")*

Unlike the CPC (Cellular Phone), the Technocratic Communicator ("TC") tends to be quiet. The TC must be sure that they carry out each step perfectly before they can go on to the next. They get their information from research and data rather than from verbal communication. Organization could be their middle name. Everything must be in a specific place and order even at the cost of deadlines. Their desk, if an extreme TC, will be clear of any paper or work material. In fact, you might ask if anyone works there?

They, like the CC (Caretaker), are usually in a support position. The difference is they do not want or need attention. They just want to do their job and be left alone. The TC hates to divulge personal details about themselves and thinks that other people talk too much. They prefer to spend their time with people who can teach them something new or increase their knowledge. Sometimes their analytical mind cannot see the easiest way to accomplish a project which causes them to move slower than their co-workers may like.

When talking with a TC, be very specific. Tell them exactly where you got the information, research, data, etc. Do not ask personal questions. Talk more slowly and allow them time to respond. Don't fill in the silences for the TC, just sit back and be patient. Do not look over their shoulder to check on accuracy because it will just slow them down, and, besides, if they are a TC their work is correct. You will want to give specific deadlines and let them know how urgent those schedules actually are. Help them to understand that sometimes you are looking for "good enough," not perfect.

Typical behavior of a CPC, and ways to improve communications with one:

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| • Precise        | • Have facts and figures                |
| • Organized      | • Don't share personal feelings         |
| • Quiet          | • Proceed one step at a time            |
| • Works alone    | • Have backup material                  |
| • Slow to change | • Be organized                          |
| • Problem solver | • Recognize their desire for perfection |
| • Caution        | • Don't discuss big picture dreams      |
| • Judgment       | • Move slow, be patient                 |
| • Slow-moving    |   |

Remember, we all should have some of this, but the key is being balanced...and staying balanced!! One way to stay balanced is to take counsel from the following: "Seek first to understand and then to be understood." And ... "If you aren't part of the solution, maybe you're part of the problem."

## Could the Problem Be You?

There is a common thread that runs through all projects. Many times people that are part of the problem do not realize that they are. They believe that others are responsible. Many of us have a blind spot about how we may be part of the problem. Exercise yourself in a self-assessment - answer the following questions to determine whether you are part of the problem or part of the solution.

1. Are you objective, willing to look at the issue from a point of view other than your own?
2. Do you listen without interrupting?
3. Do you speak in an ordering, directing, or commanding manner?
4. Do you interrogate (pounding, continuous, aggressive questioning) instead of questioning with interest?
5. Do you threaten?
6. Do you express your views assertively?
7. Do you bring up problems without offering solutions?
8. Do you take everything personally?
9. Is your speaking tone sincere and clear?
10. Is your voice loud enough for others to hear and respect your view but not too loud?
11. Do you fail to plan for the inevitable?
12. Do you react instead of respond?
13. Do you transfer personal problems to the workplace?
14. Do you judge others?
15. Are you willing to change?

If you answered "yes" to questions 1,2,6,9,10, and 15, and "no" to questions 3,4, 5,7,8, 11,12,13, and 14, you are clearly part of the solution.

It is likely there are some areas in which you can see room for improvement (by the way, I am still working on my areas!!). Don't get depressed. Instead start watching how you communicate, respond (not react), and think under pressure. As my mother said, "A diamond is a lump of coal that did will under pressure." Make small adjustments in order to make yourself a more positive and productive communicator on projects and in your life.

When you find yourself in a difficult situation, ask yourself these questions in order to analyze where the problem is.

- How often does this difficult situation arise? Rarely, often, or most of the time? If it happens rarely, it is probably just a bad day. If it occurs often or most of the time, the problem should be dealt with immediately. (There is information later in this section on how to deal with difficult situations.)
- Do you have a personal prejudice about the person or situation? Be sure that you are evaluating the situation based on actual information, not on personal feelings.
- How does this person view you? Does he or she think that you are the problem? Put yourself in their place before reacting. The golden rule of communication is: "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them."
- Can you be specific about what you want changed? The more specific and realistic you are, the more likely is that you will be able to accomplish the change.

### **Achieving a Freedom State in Difficult Situations**

What is your "freedom state?" It is a state of mind, a specific way of thinking, behaving, and communicating that can help you significantly in any difficult situation. One way of helping you understand where this state is as compared to where you may be today is to look at the following three states of behavior.

#### **Immature State**

This does NOT mean you are immature if you react in this way, it simply means that you respond to difficult situations emotionally.

- The positive side of communicating in the Immature State would be acting spontaneous, open or just having fun. In the work environment, you would be the person who makes people laugh or you may come up with great, or at least unique, ideas.
- The destructive side of the Immature State is demonstrated by withdrawing either emotionally or physically. When reacting in the Immature State, you may find yourself feeling scared or victimized. You may avoid conflict at all cost because even the thought gives you an upset stomach. You may feel you have no control, tears may well up in your eyes, you might feel small. You may want to run away or, alternatively, you just don't know what to do, a total blank. You have trouble holding eye contact and may clasp or wring your hands. The tendency to get into the destructive Immature State happens when the difficult person is being aggressive, hostile, reprimanding, or controlling. Communication is off-balance at this point with the aggressive person pounding down the person who has responded in the Immature State.

## Controlling State

This is the opposite of the Immature State. Your responses are automatic (not emotional).

- The useful side of the Controlling State allows you to respond to a wide variety of repetitive situations without thinking them through over and over (again, not emotional). This saves time and money in business and is seen as a strong trait among leaders.
- The destructive side of the Controlling State is characterized by aggression, speaking in a loud voice, pointing and shaking your finger, ultimatums, scowls, and folded arms. This state is developed from a young age when the child either got his/her way by behaving in the Controlling State or observed a parent who behaved this way. The tendency to get into the Controlling State comes with a need to have things your own way and to control others. If a Controlling State person is dealing with an Immature State person, they are in their glory achieving what they want by intimidation and control. If two Controlling State people are communicating together, you would hear a lot of shouting and arguing, possibly with no solution achieved.

An extreme example of the destructive side of the Controlling State was demonstrated in a "How to Give Feedback" seminar. As Bill walked into the room, it was evident that he was in the Controlling State and "on automatic control." Hostile body language, booming voice, accusing, extreme questioning, causing others to feel uncomfortable with his confrontational style, and becoming defensive when approached: these were the unmistakable signs.

You may be thinking, *I have run into this before...is there any hope for Bill or someone like him?* Yes. It will take time and effort. This behavior can be turned down like the knob on your stove and replaced with a more appropriate behavior, like the Freedom State. It is difficult to change behavior unless the person has a desire to do so or understands that this communication state is self-destructive in the work environment. It does, however, serve a purpose when the person perceives that they are being put into a negotiation not of their liking or choosing, if it is part of their negotiation make-up style.

Whenever possible, your goal should be to stay out of the destructive Immature State and the Controlling State except on rare occasions, for example, the Immature State should be used in a situation where any other behavior may put you in physical danger. It is difficult to find a really good time to use the Controlling State, but sometimes it can be used as a shock tactic, especially if you are not known for behaving this way (works great if applied correctly during a negotiation).

## The Freedom State

This is the perfect communication state. It is a state that does not react to any type of difficult behavior, whether aggressive, passive, or argumentative. The characteristics are good eye contact at all times and self-confident body language – standing tall, holding your head straight, speaking in a clear voice, and unfolded arms. A strong feeling of confidence is the hallmark. This state is learned through constant practice. No matter what difficulty comes to you, your response in the Freedom State is not reactive. In the Freedom State your communication is based on fact; you do not judge. The Freedom State is the process by which you arrive at decisions, not the decisions themselves. The person who is the best at processing thoughts by using the Freedom State will have the best potential for success in all situations, especially business.

By staying in the Freedom State, some interesting things start to take place. First of all, if you are being abused by person in a Controlling State, and the abuse continued, the Freedom State person would leave, stating that the Controlling State person should return when he or she was ready to communicate in a reasonable manner. The Freedom State does not give rise to the occasion by escalating one's own behavior to that of the Controlling State or back away by going into the Immature State. You must stay strong and steadfast. Asking questions but not taking abuse. **You can be offended but not take offence.**

The person communicating in the Freedom State may initially cause a person in the Controlling State to become angry. He or she may raise their voice even more than before. When you stay in the Freedom State, it will eventually bring the Controlling State person to your level of calmness and sanity. He or she must change when they cannot affect you as he or she has in the past.

What if you have to deal with someone who is whining, passive, or crying? Again, in the Freedom State, dealing with only the facts, not emotional, you stay centered with good eye contact, a look of concern on your face, but not overly sympathetic.

In the Freedom State, you do not become responsible for the problems of others. You listen with empathy, not sympathy, and direct them toward their own solution.

Next time you are in a difficult situation, watch your response.

### Was Your Response to the Situation Valid?

Did you go to the top of the scale, the destructive Controlling State, by raising your voice, accusing, or losing your composure? Or did you go to the lower end of the scale, the destructive Immature State, by withdrawing and feeling like a victim? If your response was either, begin to practice responding to the facts, staying calm and focused, using your best option, the Freedom State.

<b>IMMATURE STATE</b>	<b>FREEDOM STATE</b>	<b>CONTROLLING STATE</b>
<i>Destructive Traits Emotional Response</i>	<i>Factual Response</i>	<i>Destructive Traits Reactive Response</i>
• passive	• open	• aggressive
• fearful	• eye contact	• glaring or staring
• tearful	• calm	• agitated
• withdrawn	• strong voice	• loud
• wringing hands	• confident	• pointing finger
• poor eye contact	• good listener	• crossed arms
• looking away	• concern	• poor listener
• low voice	• asks questions	• demands
• non-confrontational	• non-judgmental	• confrontational

Most project managers are not trained in the area of managing behavior. They are told what they should do but not how to do it. They are promoted to a job (or assigned to a particular project) because their past record has been excellent, and it is assumed that the “people managing skills” are just a natural step in their progress that they can achieve through experience. Many managers-in-training (pre-manager positions) have experienced role models who used the stick method – “You do it my way, or else” – or their role model did not have any significant management style that was effective in changing behavior. Therefore, as new managers, or not-so-new managers, they just keep perpetuating the same problem.

Changing to a new method of management is not comfortable for anyone, but if the outcome is an improvement in performance, then the price is well worth the pain. Remember, if you keep doing what you have always done, you will keep getting what you have always gotten.

It is fairly easy to manage a project team member that you like or has a style similar to your own. The team members who are stressful to manage are the ones you do not like or who are different from you. These are a small percentage, using Pareto (80//20), i.e. 80% of your time is spent on 20% of these people.

## Model for Changing Unacceptable Behavior

The following is a model that will work in all situations whether it is a casual meeting in the hall, a sit-down counselling session, or a union warning session.

### 1. *Describe the specific behavior you want changed.*

*Example:* "Don, I am talking with you this morning to discuss your daily project team meeting attendance. You were 20 minutes late on Monday, 45 minutes late on Tuesday, and 15 minutes late today."

Begin your conversation with the behavior you want changed. Do NOT begin with a compliment or positive reinforcement. Many would encourage you to build the person up at the beginning of a corrective feedback session. DON'T. Why? First, because the person will come to expect that when something good is said, the next word out of your mouth will cause the other shoe to drop. Second, because the positive reinforcement is lost in the conversation. Save the positive statement for the end of the conversation or keep it totally separate. Help the other person to feel OK when he or she leaves the feedback session so the needed change can occur. Remember, any statement preceding the word "but" is erased. If you want to change behavior, plan and prepare to give very specific information regarding the behavior, stating time, date, or a description of exactly what has occurred. Do not generalize. Later in this section, we will discuss difficult conversations and a methodology.

### 2. *Tell why the behavior is ineffective in the work environment.*

*Example:* "Donna, this is ineffective because it is disruptive to our morning meetings. I need to repeat the information you missed, and arriving late sends a message to the other project team members that promptness is not important."

Telling why the behavior is ineffective helps to stop the excuses, or denials. It is another step in making the employee take responsibility for the outcome of his or her behavior. Accountability extends to this area too.

### 3. *Pause and wait for the other's response.*

*Example:* Silence...Don's response: "You know I drive a long distance and that traffic is unpredictable. Plus I always get my work done...It feels like you are just picking on me."

A pause, or a silence, is used instead of a question asking for the excuses or reasons. When you pause, it allows the employee to take the information that you have stated, think about it, and then respond. If you ask a question, the employee only needs to answer the question and can disregard all previous information. Silence can feel uncomfortable. Stay silent anyway. Do not feel the need to fill the empty space with more explanations. Put the responsibility where it belongs, on the employee.

What if he or she just sits there and does not say anything? Rarely will this happen. The person will usually feel the need to break the silence. If it does continue past a normal pause (approximately 45 seconds), then your response should be, "Your silence tells me you understand and agree with my observations." Then go directly and immediately to Step 5.

**4. Acknowledge the other's response without getting off track (down any of those rabbit trails).**

*Example:* "I am sorry you feel picked on and I understand the traffic situation, however..." (Go to Step 5).

This acknowledgement step tends to be the moment of truth. Can you stay focused or will you begin to solve all of the other person's problems? DON'T go there. It is time for what I refer to as a "Come to Jesus" meeting, where the person needs to admit their sins and promise to change and not repeat them."

**5. State what needs to be changed or stopped.**

*Example:* "Donna, you must be here every morning at 8 A.M."

Be clear, concise, and confident. Know exactly what you need changed.

**6. Ask the person how he or she will make this change.**

*Example:* "How, will you get here every morning at 8 considering the traffic?"

Asking how, puts the responsibility back on the respondent. The person must come up with a way in his or her mind to achieve the changes needed. "I'll try" does not imply a change. He or she is probably trying already and not achieving the goals. Once you get the how, you still only manage the final behavior expected. It is the other person's responsibility to take care of the how.

**7. Receive a commitment from the other person and repeat it back to them.**

*Example:* Don: "Well, I guess I could leave 15 minutes earlier."

You: "Good, do I hear you correct? You are making a commitment to leave home 15 minutes earlier every morning so you will be here on time?"

Don: "Yes"... Go to Step 9

Make sure you document this commitment as well as the natural consequences of failure to meet the commitment. Send a copy to the person and put one into the file with the intention of removing this note if the commitment is met during an ensuing reasonable time (I usually remove such letters after one year of good performance. Don't fail to indicate that to the receiver so they have a goal and can re-establish themselves through meeting the commitment to the changes.

**8. Give natural consequences if the commitment cannot be or is not met.**

*Example:* After you have asked approximately three times for the “how,” Don still will not commit and he replies; “I can’t guarantee that the traffic will not make me late, I have no control over the traffic.”

You: “Don, since you do not have a way you see to change this situation, I will have to put you on suspension the next time you are late. Do you understand?”

Natural consequences only are given when the person will not come up with a way to change. There should always be consequences too for the person willing to change so that their expectations are appropriately managed regarding action.

**9. Set a time to review the situation and evaluate if the commitment is being met.**

*Example:* “Don, I’ll check with you in a week to see how you are doing.”

An evaluation time with a follow-up must occur. Whatever you say you will do, write it to your calendar and then do it!

**10. Affirm the person’s ability to make the change and end up on a positive note.**

*Example:* “I know you can do this, Don. Your contribution to the project and the project team for this last quarter has been in the upper 25% or better, and I really feel good about having you on the team. Thank you.”

Leave the person with confidence and a desire to improve. The only exception to ending on a positive note is when the natural consequences (Step 8) must be given due to their failure to respond.

As a project manager, finishing and getting out of the uncomfortable situation is the main desire and focus of most of us. However, you should slow down, think, and remember that if the team member feels good about his or herself in one area, he or she will be much more likely to change his or her behavior in another area.

But now, another area where guidance and understanding may be extremely useful to you in performing the above. That area is when you must endure what most people refer to as “difficult conversations.”

## Difficult Conversations

We all have conversations that we dread and find unpleasant, that we avoid or face up to like bad medicine:

Examples:

- One of the senior engineers of your company, an old friend, has become a liability. Management has picked you to fire him.
- The project you are working on took twice as long as you told the Client it would. You can't afford not to bill for the extra time, but you dread informing the Client.
- You recently learned that several black colleagues on the project task force refer to you as an Uncle Tom. You're infuriated, but you aren't sure whether talking about it would accomplish anything.

And of course, there is the stuff of ordinary, everyday life, conversations that feel more ordinary but cause anxiety nonetheless: returning merchandise without a receipt, asking your secretary to do some photocopying, telling the painters not to smoke in the house. These are the interactions we put off when we can and stumble through when we must. The ones we practice over and over in our head, trying to figure out in advance what to say and wondering afterward what we should have said.

What makes these situations of difficult conversations so hard to face? It's our fear of the consequences – whether we raise the issue or try to avoid it.

### The Dilemma: Avoid or Confront

Why is it so difficult to decide whether to avoid or confront? Because at some level we know the truth: If we try to avoid the problem, we'll feel taken advantage of, our feelings will fester, we'll wonder why we don't stich up for ourselves, and we'll rob the other person of the opportunity to improve things. But if we confront the problem, things might get even worse. We may be rejected or attacked; we might hurt the other person in ways we didn't intend; and the relationship might suffer.

### No Such Thing as a Diplomatic Hand Grenade

Desperate for a way out of the dilemma, we wonder if it is possible to be so tactful, so overwhelmingly pleasant that everything ends up fine.

Tact is good, but it's not the answer to difficult conversations. Tact won't make conversations with your father more intimate or take away your Client's anger

over the increased bill. Nor is there a simple diplomatic way to fire your friend, to let you mother-in-law know that she drives you crazy, or to confront your colleagues' hurtful prejudices.

Delivering a difficult message is like throwing a hand grenade. Coated with sugar, thrown hard or soft, a hand grenade is still going to do damage. Try as you may, there's no way to throw a hand grenade with tact or to outrun the consequences. And, keeping it to yourself is no better. Choosing not to deliver a difficult message is like hanging on to a hand grenade once you've pulled the pin.

### **Difficult Conversations Are Part of Your Job**

As project managers, no matter how good you get, difficult conversations will always challenge you. So it is best to keep your goals realistic. Eliminating fear and anxiety is an unrealistic goal. Reducing fear and anxiety and learning how to manage that which remains are more obtainable. Achieving perfect results with no risk will not happen. Getting better results in the face of tolerable odds might.

And then, for most of us as project management professionals, is good enough. For if we are fragile, we are also remarkably resilient.

### **The Structure of Difficult Conversations**

Surprisingly, despite what appear to be infinite variations, all difficult conversations share a common structure. When you're caught up in the details and anxiety of a particularly difficult conversation, this structure is hard to see. But understanding that structure is essential to improving how you handle your most challenging conversations.

### **Each Difficult Conversation is Really Three Conversations**

#### ***1. The "What Happened?" Conversation.***

Most difficult conversations involve disagreement about what has happened or what should happen. Who said what and who did what? Who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame?

#### ***2. The Feelings Conversation.***

Every difficult conversation also asks and answers questions about feelings. Are my feelings valid? Appropriate? Should I acknowledge or

deny them, put them on the table or check them at the door? What do I do about the other person's feelings? What if they are angry or hurt? Feelings may not be leaked nor addressed in the conversation, but they leak out anyway. Remember, one thought I want you to always keep in mind, "Feelings are not right or wrong, they are what they are...feelings...and people are entitled to have them... and will."

### ***3. The Identity Conversation***

This is the conversation we each have with ourselves about what this situation means to us. We conduct an internal debate over whether this means we are competent or incompetent, a good person or bad, worthy of love or unlovable. What impact might it have on our self-image and self-esteem, our future and our well-being? Our answers to these questions determine in large part whether we feel "balanced" during the conversation, or whether we feel "off-center" and anxious.

Every difficult conversation; therefore, involves grappling with these. Three Conversations, so engaging successfully requires learning to operate effectively in each of the three realms. Managing all three simultaneously may seem hard, but it's easier than facing the consequences of engaging in difficult conversations blindly.

#### **What We Cannot Change, and What We Can**

No matter how skilled we become, there are certain challenges in each of the Three Conversations that we can't change. We will still run into situations where untangling "what happened?" is more complicated than we initially suspect. We will each have information the other person is unaware of, and raising each other's awareness is not easy. And we will still face emotionally charged situations that feel threatening because they put important aspects of our identity at risk.

What we can change is the way we respond to each of these challenges. Typically, instead of exploring what information the other person might have that we don't, we assume we know all we need to know to understand and explain things. Instead of working to manage our feelings constructively, we either try to hide them or let loose in ways that we later regret. Instead of exploring the

identity issues that may be deeply at stake for us (or them), we proceed with the conversation as if it says nothing about us – and never come to grips with what is at the heart of our anxiety.

But understanding these errors and the havoc they wreak, we can begin to craft better approaches. Let's explore each conversation in more depth.

### **What's The Story?**

The "What Happened?" Conversation is where we spend much of our time in difficult conversations as we struggle with our different stories about who's right, who meant what, and who's to blame. On each of these three fronts – truth, intentions, and blame – we make a common but crippling assumption. Straightening out each of these assumptions is essential to improving our ability to handle difficult conversations well.

#### ***The Truth Assumption***

As we argue vociferously for our view, we often fail to question one crucial assumption upon which our whole stance in the conversation is built: I am right, you are wrong. This simple assumption causes endless grief.

What am I right about? I am right that you drive too fast. I am right that you are unable to mentor younger colleagues. I am right that your comments at Thanksgiving were inappropriate. I am right.... The number of things I am right about would fill a book.

There is only one hitch. I am not right.

How could this be? It seems impossible. Surely I must be right sometimes!

Well, no. The point is this: difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what a contract states, they are about what a contract means. They are not about which child-rearing book is most popular; they are about which child-rearing book we should follow.

They are not what is true, they are about what is important.

In the “What Happened?” Conversation, moving away from the truth assumption frees us to shift our purpose from proving we are right to understanding the perceptions, interpretations, and values of both sides. It allows us to move away from delivering messages and toward asking questions, exploring how each person is making sense of the world. And to offer our views as perceptions, interpretations, and values – not as “the truth.”

### ***The Intention Invention***

The second argument in the “What Happened?” Conversation is over intentions – yours and mine. Did you yell at me to hurt my feelings or merely to emphasize your point? Did you throw my cigarettes out because you’re trying to control my behavior or because you want to help me live up to my commitment to quit? What I think about your intentions will affect how I think about you and, ultimately, how our conversation goes.

The error we make in the realm of intentions is simple but profound: we assume we know the intentions of others when we don’t. Worse still, when we are unsure about someone’s intentions, we too often decide they are bad.

The truth is, intentions are invisible. We assume them from other people’s behavior. In other words, we make them up, we invent them. But our invented stories about other people’s intentions are accurate much less often than we think. Why? Because people’s intentions, like so much else in difficult conversations, are complex. Sometimes people act with mixed intentions. Sometimes they act with no intention, or at least none related to us. And sometimes they act on good intentions that nonetheless hurt us.

Because our view of other’s intentions (and their views of ours) are so important in difficult conversations, leaping to unfounded assumptions can be a disaster.

### **The Blame Frame**

The third error we make in the “What Happened?” Conversation has to do with blame. Most difficult conversations focus significant attention on who’s to blame for the mess we’re in. When the company loses its biggest client, for example, we know that there will shortly ensue a ruthless game of blame roulette. We don’t care where the ball lands, as long as it doesn’t land on us. Personal relationships are no different.