

## DEALING WITH CHALLENGING PEOPLE

The first step, described by Rick Brinkman and Rick Kirschner in their book *Dealing With People You Can't Stand*, is to get to know your difficult person—to know what needs that person may be trying to fulfill that cause the problematic behavior. Successful leaders listen carefully to figure out the underlying motives.

Generally, people in any given situation are task oriented or people oriented. Their concerns center on one of four goals: getting the task done, getting the task done right, getting along with people, or being appreciated by people. When they perceive that their concern is threatened—the task is not getting done, it is being done incorrectly, people are becoming angry in the process, or they feel unappreciated for their contributions—difficult people resort to certain knee-jerk responses. Responses range from the passive, such as withdrawal, to aggressive, such as steamrolling or exploding. The difficult person often does not recognize that his behavior contributes to the very problems that he is attempting to address. Brinkman and Kirschner identify 10 different behavior patterns often exhibited by people under pressure.

- **The Steamroller (or Tank):** Aggressive and angry. Victims can feel paralyzed, as though they've been flattened.
- **The Sniper:** The Sniper's forte is sarcasm, rude remarks, and eye rolls. Victims look and feel foolish.
- **The Know-It-All:** Wielding great authority and knowledge, Know-It-Alls do have lots to offer, are generally competent, and can't stand to be contradicted or corrected. But they will go out of their way to correct you.
- **The Grenade:** Grenades tend to explode into uncontrolled ranting that has little, if anything, to do with what has actually happened.
- **The Think They Know It All:** A cocksure attitude often fools people into believing their phony "facts."
- **The Yes Person:** Someone who wants to please others so much that she never says no.
- **The Maybe Person:** Procrastinating, hoping to steer clear of choices that will hurt feelings, he avoids decisions, causing plenty of frustration along the way.
- **The Blank Wall (or Nothing Person):** This person offers only a blank stare, no verbal or nonverbal signals.
- **The No Person:** He spreads gloom, doom, and despair whenever any new ideas arise, or even when old ones are recycled. The No Person saps energy from a group in an amazingly short time.
- **The Whiner:** Whiners feel helpless most of the time and become overwhelmed by the unfairness of it all. They want things to be perfect, but nothing seems to go right. Whiners want to share their misery

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## The Heroes and Villains in Your Meetings

Have you ever recognized the theater in your group's meetings? Think about it for a moment – the boardroom is the stage, the participants are the characters and the meeting discussion is the script. Just like meetings, theater involves communication, interaction between characters, conflict, drama, double meanings, foreshadowing and, hopefully, problem resolution.



To be effective when working together, we need to identify our teammates' character types and learn how to work best with them. As you read about these common characters, you'll immediately identify the heroes and villains from your own meetings. But also ask yourself, "Which character am I?" If you discover you're more like Distracted Donna than Supportive Susan, don't fret. When it comes to meetings, there's a little bit of hero and villain in all of us.

### The Heroes

- **Ivan the Inventor**

He has initiative and imagination. He gets things started and offers ideas *and* solutions. He loves discovering the latest, greatest idea and being recognized as the creative genius. But he can have an extra-large ego and always requires recognition for what he contributes. Try to involve him as early as possible on any issue requiring a creative solution. Think of Ivan as the right side of your brain, the creative, intuitive side you or others in your group may be lacking.

- **Realistic Ralph**

Although he's not as creative as Ivan, he's certainly gifted at providing realistic direction for the group. He's very focused and doesn't easily get carried away with the excitement of a new idea. He understands what's feasible and what's unrealistic – perhaps to a fault since he only sees things in black and white. Although he's the healthy dose of reality every group needs, Ralph can be dangerous if he's feeling pessimistic. He'll find a reason why every idea won't work in the real world. Remind him that the group is simply throwing around ideas for now, and judgments and evaluations should be discussed later.

- **Fran the Facilitator**

She's great at clarifying an argument or idea without offending the speaker and very capable of interpreting and restating the group's position. She isn't afraid to ask questions and her inquiries make all points-of-view crystal clear. However, she can have trouble coming to a decision since she sees the good in both sides of every argument. While she's excellent at moving an argument forward with her neutral perspective, don't look to her too early in a debate because she may facilitate before any real conflict has materialized. Look to her when there's a deadlock in the discussion.

- **Mediating Matthew**

Matthew's often older, wiser and more experienced than other meeting participants. He has a natural talent for reducing tension with a joke or humorous perspective. Although this method doesn't necessarily get to the bottom of the issues, it certainly helps to lighten the mood during intense moments. Invite him to meetings you know might be stressful. His comments make everyone realize that the crisis being discussed isn't the end of the world – even though it may seem like it at the time.

- **Supportive Susan**

She's a supportive personality with a word of encouragement for all. Susan can easily find the positive in every statement, no matter how ridiculous. She encourages others to develop ideas and make suggestions, and she offers recognition for these ideas. She feels it's her responsibility to make sure no one is left out of the discussion – she'll even ask quiet members for their opinions. She may have trouble with hard choices, but unless she seeks responsibility, don't burden her. She's a supporter because that's what she's comfortable doing – and she's good at it.

- **Shy Sharon**

Sharon is painfully shy. She has a lot to offer the group, if you could only get her to speak up! Try to make her feel as comfortable as possible during your meeting. Start by asking her a simple question and make eye contact with her as she answers to let her know her input is valued. Recognize her contribution immediately and sincerely and encourage more. Shy people will open up, but only after some time. Once she starts contributing great ideas, you'll be happy you were patient.

## The Villains

- **Andy the Aggressor**

Andy questions everything, criticizes ideas and attacks people personally. He wants attention and can't get it through other means, so he always takes on the role of devil's advocate. Andy sees problems but seldom offers solutions. To discourage negative behavior, try early on to give him the attention he requires. Ask for his ideas instead of allowing him to judge and criticize everyone else's.



- **Distracted Donna**

This character likes to show her disinterest in the meeting. She engages in side discussions, reads other materials and generally attempts to remain uninvolved. She's usually harmless unless she also has tendencies of Andy the Aggressor, in which case treat her as you would Andy. Basically she craves attention so why not ask her to share her opinions of the discussion at hand? This way, at least she's focused on the meeting issues and not on social interaction.

- **Peter the Pompous**

He thinks he knows everything. Peter manipulates every conversation and seeks control. Sometimes he has great insights to share, but often he doesn't. If he's confronted directly in the meeting, he'll only seek more control and become overbearing. Because Peter loves to share his knowledge, try to seek his advice prior to the meeting. He'll love providing his expertise and perhaps won't need to dominate the meeting discussion later. Try, finally, to establish a meeting procedure that affords equal time to others so that you don't have to tell Peter to back off during the meeting.

- **Indifferent Irene**

Irene never speaks up in meetings because, simply put, she couldn't be bothered. She's easy-going to a fault and makes a point of always going with the flow. She doesn't get involved in meeting discussions or offer help or support to others. Frankly, meetings make her yawn and it requires too much effort to get involved – after all, it's easier just to sit and let everyone else do the talking. To get Irene more involved and interested, ask her to plan and lead the next meeting

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