BOOK REVIEW
Dealing with Difficult People: 24 Lessons for Bringing Out the Best in Everyone

Reviewed   by

Dr. Rick Brinkman & Dr. Rick Kirschner

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Brinkman, R. & Kirschner, R. (2003) Dealing with Difficult people: 24 Lessons for Bringing Out the Best in Everyone, New York: McGraw-Hill.

It is undiniable that all of us have encountered people that have made our lives challenging in one way or another. For this book, "difficult people" refers to the people we can't stand, who do what we don't want them to do, and who we don't know what to do about them! We can find these people everywhere; at home, in the neighbourhood and, of course, at work. At times we feel that it is imposible to get them to listen, let alone to do something a rational person would do.   While we can't change "difficult people," this book provides us with guidelines on how we can "communicate with them in such a way that they change themselves" in the way we want.

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About the authors

The authors of this book, Dr. Rick Brinkman and Dr. Rick Kirschner, are physicians who study health from an attitudinal and behavioral point of view. Their lives were changed in 1982 when a mental health organization asked them to create a program on how to deal with "difficult people." Their extended ideas about helping people in the business world led to many bestselling audios, video tapes, and books, including How to Deal with Difficult People, Telecare, and Dealing with People you can't stand. They were honoured as the "world's most influential, and entertaining, communication and life management experts" and have appeared on hundreds of television and radio programs, seminars across America and around the world, and have been featured in more than 200 newspapers, including the Wall Street Journal.

About the Book

The book is organized into 24 step-by-step lessons, with two pages for each lesson. In a nutshell, these lessons can be summarized into three major content areas: the "What,", "Why," and "How" of "Dealing with Difficult People."

Starting with the "What," the authors provide an overview of the ten most unwanted behaviors: the Tank, the Sniper, the Know-It-All, the Think-They-Know-It-All, the Grenade, the Yes Person, the Maybe Person, the Nothing Person, the No Person, and the Whiner. The Tank is the pushy, loud, and aggressive type that will attack others to get what he/she wants. The Sniper, on the other hand, attacks others from a hinding place with, for example, gossip and putdowns. The Know-It-All "knows 98% of everything," feels superior, and refuses to listen to others' ideas. On the other end, the Think-They-Know-It-All doesn't know much, but would mislead and throw people off track because of the need for attention. The Grenade loses control of emotion and explodes with anger to gain attention. The Yes Person agrees with people quickly, but hardly fullfills promises and commitments. The Maybe

Person delays decision-making until it's too late. The Nothing Person shows no responses, verbal or nonverbal. With the intent to avoid mistakes, the No Person squeezes the energy out of others by using negativity. Finally, we have the Whiner, who complains consistantly without doing anything to solve the problems: the complaints are not of any benefit to the listener or the complainer.

When we encounter these behaviors, the approach we often take is to say and do nothing, vote with our feet (walk away), change our attitude, or change our behavior. Different approaches are called for in different situations.

In order to successfully deal with "difficult people," the authors suggest that we understand the reasons behind the difficult behvior. The "Why," then, is illustrated by focusing on the four intents of the behavior.   This idea is made easier to understand through a diagram consisting of two axes: one is a passive-aggressive axis, and the other is a task-people axis. This creates four quadrants with the types of "difficult people" placed within each axis. The Get It Done people (Sniper, Tank, and Know-It-All) are in the task-aggressive quadrant; the Get It Right people (Whiner, No Person, and Nothing Person) are in the task-passive quadrant; the Get Along (Yes Person, Maybe Person, and Nothing Person) people are in the people-passive quadrant; and the Get Appreciated people (Grenade, Sniper, and Think They Know-It-All-Person) are in the people-aggressive quadrant.   The difficult behavior often manifests when intents are threatened.

The book goes on to discuss the "How" by providing many important steps, starting with Reduce Differences, Listen to Understand, Reach a Deeper Understanding, Speak to be Understood, and Project and Expect the Best. Reducing Differences is simple, but makes great sense. When in a conflict situation, instead of focusing on the differences of positions, interests, or goals, the authors suggest that we reduce differences by emphasizing the things we have in common, such as similar interests or goals. People naturally like those that are simmilar to them or those that are on their side. Listen to Understand is also simple, but most people fail

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to practice it. Listening and trying to understand others sincerely sometimes solves the problem in itself. Showing the "difficult people" that they are heard and are understood requires communication techniques, such as "blending," repeating, clarifying, summarizing, and confirming. Reach a Deeper Understanding deals more with how to identify the intents and criteria that are important than ascertaining the reasons why people are for or against something. Speak to be Understood elaborates how we should express ourselves to create possitive effects, both verbally and nonverbally. Finally, Project and Expect the Best emphasizes the power of expectation or "Pygmalion Power." Basically, if we say or show that we expect the best of people, they will not fail us. On the contrary, negative expectations and behavior bring about the negative reactions we expect.

After providing gerneral strategies on how to deal with all types of "difficult people," deeper views on how to deal specifically with each type of "difficult people" and tactics to combat each type of difficult behavior are presented. For example, in dealing with the Tank, don't counterattack, don't defend or explain, and don't withdraw. Instead, command respect, hold on to the position, backtrack the main accusation, blend with common interests and make sure to let the Tank have peace with honour. The authors provide an explanation of why such tactics help and exactly what to say and how to interact in different situations in great detail.

The authors wrap up with the three action steps as a starting point toward long-term solutions for problems in human relationships. Their main intention is to emphasize that the book is not a "quick fix." Flexibility, positive thinking, and constant integration of the skills into everyday life will enhance success in dealing with people that bring about challenges in our lives.

The Critique

This small but powerful book attracted my attention initially because of its title. Flipping through it, I found it very useful, particularly, for my conflict management workshops. Participants often share with me how they find it very challenging, if not impossible, to apply concepts learned to certain types of people. No matter what they do to try to accomplish a win-win, or just to explain their thoughts, these people just never cooperate or even listen! Now, when faced with such questions, I often refer to this book. Most of the time, my participants agree that their conflit counterparts fall into one (or more) of the 10 types of "difficult people." This book provides a great explanation for why a lot of conflict management strategies alone cannot alleviate certain problems. The variety of communication skills provided in this book work well, especially regarding conflict phenomena, situations where the intents of people become challenged. Often, the very behavior of "difficult people" is the main cuase of conflict, which can escalate into many larger issues. In addition to my own stories, I have received many e-mails that share the success stories of how participants from my workshops have applied the conflict management strategies from the class along with the "Dealing with Difficult People" guidelines and have found much better results than they expected.

"Dealing with Difficult People" is an insightful psychology handbook recommended to scholars and prctitioners at all levels. It is an eye-opener, straight to the point, and very easy to read. It can be used as a suplimentary book in such classes as communication, human resource development, or psycholgy. It can certainly serve as a feel-good reading that enhances everyday communication skill sets and saves relationships at risk!

The background of the authors added to the credibility of this book. The authors did a great job in introducing themselves at the very beginning as physicians who had carried out extensive study on the subject.   Their experience with and beliefs about communication skills led to the publication of their books. The authors introduced themselves in a humble, yet powerful maner, thus making the readers feel that the book is based on facts and research, not a

self-help book that is based on experience alone.   However, if the authors added some citations and examples that were linked to research-based evidence, even in a narrative, informal manner, it would make the book more appealing to scholars. Nonetheless, since the book is in the self-help category and is written for the general public, it is understandable why such citations were not made.

The authors organized the book into 24 lessons, each with a heading and summaries of important ideas in bold. By reinforcing the main points, readers can easily follow the gist of each lesson. One drawback of the organzation is that, by putting one lesson after another, the big picture of how these ideas are linked is missing. Therefore, instead of organizing the ideas into 24 separate lessons, the authors could have grouped the ideas into headings and subheadings, such as the "What," "Why"and "How" of dealing with "difficult people" (of course, more fancy word choices are recommended!), with the "How" being organized for general reccomendations for all 10 types and specific reccomendations for each type of "difficult people." Shorter and more appealing titles of each lessons would make it easier to remember each step. In addition, more models and pictoral descriptions of the linkage between ideas would help the readers organize the key messages better in their minds.

The reading is made enjoyable with the use of conversational langauge, smart choice of words, humour, brilliant quotes, and experiences that anyone can relate to. The name of each type of "difficult people" (e.g. the Tank, The Sniper, etc.) is straightforward and appropriate. I can't help but nod along while reading.   For the most part, the book provides vivid examples of the behavior discussed and exactly how to interact with "difficult people." The examples ease the process of putting the concepts into practice—the readers can readily practice the skills with their "difficult ones."

"Dealing with Difficult People" starts off with the key idea reflected in the statement "While you can't change difficult people, you can communicate with them in such a way that they change themselves."(p. viii) I can't agree with this statement more. How often

do we work really hard to come up with words or strategies to change people? We often hope our touching statements or the lessons we give would create awareness and encourage our "difficult ones" to change. Countless times we fail; people do not change their habits that easily. This book, instead, takes us step-by-step into the journey of how we can communicate to get the best out of our "difficult people." Note that we can not change the person, but can deal with them so that they, hopefully, change their behavior on a case by case basis.

After introducing the types of the 10 most unwanted behaviors, the authors mentioned the natural choices we have in dealing with those types of people: say and do nothing, vote with our feet (walk away), change our attitude, or change our behavior. In Thai culture, saying and doing nothing and walking away are usually the response, as our collectivistic culture calls for a preservation of relationship and face (Komin, 1995). According to the book, saying and doing nothing is dangerous because frustration tends to get worse over time and walking away has a similar effect but is suitable for situations that are unresolvable. Changing our attitude about the person doesn't help us accomplish our goal either. Therefore, the rest of the book talks about how we can change our own behavior; in other words, communicate differently to help us get the responses we want. Most suggested behaviors are applicable to Thai culture (some I found a bit too direct, e.g, search light questions). Most strategies and tactics are very relationship-oriented and face-oriented as well. The reminders to let people have peace with honour, blending techniques, and the warning about certain nonverbal cues are good examples of the strategies that can enhance relationships as well as get to the behavior desired, whether it is our boss, co-workers, or our loved ones.

One of the guidelines I like is " Project and Expect the Best. We often put people in the catergory of being difficult and treat them that way. This can easily become a self-fullfilling prophacy or "Pigmalion Power," as the authors describe it. Who would treat us well when we start our conversation agressively just because we are expecting "the Tank" to be aggressive and mean. The author's explanation of the intents of difficult beavior provides

insights into the real reasons why people display certain behavior. Nonetheless, even before understanding the intent, opening the conversation with a positive overture does help; at least it will prevent an escaltion of conflict.

The focal idea of "Dealing with Difficult People" is to identify the four intents, which is simple but insightful. Understanding the four intents is key to helping us dig more deeply into the roots of the problem. Tackling the problem behavior from the root is a strong basis for remedying difficult behavior. Understanding the intent will not only help readers to develop understanding and the skills to better communicate with others to bring about benificial results for both parties, it will also help readers understand themselves even more. We cannot deny that we can be difficult at times as well when our intents are threatended. It is normal to point our finger and blame others for being difficult, especially in conflict situations. After reading the book, I became more understanding and careful in judging others. Most of all, I monitor my behavior to a much greater extent, at least to make sure I am not falling into the catergory of the ten most unwanted behaviors that most people can't stand!

I cannot thank the authors enough for writing such a wonderful book, one that has made my life more plesant. The book provides a great foundation for understanding others and ourselves. As the authors stated, the book is not a quick fix. With constant practice, we can master the skills that will help us take full advantage of the human resources around us, even at their worst; on the other hand, it is a good reminder that we should avoid the behaviors that put us in the category of "difficult people".