

Dealing with Difficult People

From Pengelley, Heather. "Coping with Difficult People." *The ICB Exchange*. Montreal: The Institute of Canadian Bankers, December, 1989.

Heather Pengelley (1989) describes several types of "difficult people" and suggests ways they might be handled. She suggests the way to respond to them in ways they are not used to and do not expect.

Pengelley suggests that difficult people have learned some very destructive but effective behaviour to control others. Based on a classification system suggested by Jim Murray, an organizational trainer, 3 of the basic types of difficult people most difficult to deal with are: warriors, whiners, and wafflers.

- **Warriors** are aggressive, hostile, abrupt, intimidating and over-whelming. They can be classified into 3 sub-types:
 - *Bullies*, who want to intimidate.
 - *Know-it-alls*, who are aggressive and arrogant and look for ways to tell others they know more than anyone.
 - *Grenades*, whose explosive outbursts and temper tantrums announce their displeasure and demand attention.

To cope with warriors, Murray advises staying calm, but holding your ground. The key is not to be intimidated but to be firm. Murray suggests that it is wrong to be submissive and compliant or combative. Instead, you should be direct. For example, when a *warrior* client is putting on a display of how much he knows and how inadequate the advisor's knowledge is, the advisor would be advised to say something like the following: "It would appear that you know all you need to know and are capable of looking after your own affairs, what, then do you want from me?"

- **Whiners** fall into two categories:
 - *Pessimists* see themselves as imperfect and powerless. Their attitude is that life is one big problem.
 - *Blamers* are pessimists who blame problems on anything and anyone but themselves. They find it easy to identify problems but rarely have the solutions.

To cope with Whiners, Murray suggests that you should never argue with them or to try and convince them that things are not as bad as they perceive. Neither should you give advice. The Whiner will always find a reason to be negative and reasons why your advice will not work. Murray suggests that the best strategy is to get Whiners to take responsibility for their actions. For example, if a Whiner identifies a problem, you should ask, "Well, what do you think we can do about it?"

Whiners are difficult for the advisor to deal with because while they will blame their present misfortunes on someone else, perhaps a former advisor, they will tempt you to offer advice,

which they can easily dismiss or discount. The advisor may feel he is in a “no-win” situation with a whiner; he is trained to offer advice, but if he does, the Whiner will find reasons why it is inadequate. The Whiner is good at identifying problems - a strength in the planning process - it is just that his problem-solving ability is non-existent. After the problem has been identified, the advisor should be ready to suggest alternatives and ask for the Whiner’s choice. If the Whiner resists, the advisor should be direct: “Well, I guess there is nothing, then, that we can do.” This usually shocks the Whiner into action. This is a good example of Murray’s advice to treat troublesome clients in a way that they do not expect. Whiners are used to people trying desperately to suggest solutions that the Whiner can constantly reject.

- **Wafflers** procrastinate and put off making a decision. The Waffler may feel that once he makes a decision he will lose control. Until he makes a decision, all things are possible and good results can occur, but once he chooses a specific course of action he is exposed to the risk of a disappointing outcome. At the heart of the Waffler’s problem is commitment to a course of action because of the uncertainty of the outcome.

The Waffler is the client who, in theory, is willing to consider cutting back on either his entertainment expenses, or travel, so that he can build up a larger retirement fund, but who finds it hard to decide which expense he will actually reduce. The Waffler is also the client who knows he should invest in more than guaranteed return products if he is going to increase his future wealth, but can’t commit himself to purchasing stock funds.

In encouraging Wafflers to make a decision, Murray suggests that the advisor should always rank his recommendations and never supply the Waffler with too many options. It is also a good idea to pay attention to any risk reduction strategies such as suggesting that the client “try” a small investment at first in stock funds. Or, even better, based on investment principles, explain to him that by adding equities to his portfolio, he is actually improving his risk-return trade-off.

Murray says that those dealing with difficult people should remember that the only variable that you can control is yourself, therefore, you must learn to manage difficult people in new ways. "Once you understand how you react, the difficult person will perceive you in a slightly different way. You're more consciously controlling the interaction rather than just emotionally reacting to it (Pengelley, p.5)."