

LEADING OTHERS SERIES

PEEPLCOACH TIPSHEET NO: 12

Difficult people are everywhere, and at times, we're all someone else's difficult person. Many models and studies attempt to explain this behavior, including the one in *Dealing with People You Can't Stand* by Dr. Rick Brinkman and Dr. Rick Kirschner. Their approach identifies ten behavior patterns people adopt when feeling threatened or misunderstood.

Difficulty is subjective—what we see as difficult, others may view as inquisitive or professional. It takes two to create a difficult relationship. This model simplifies motives and offers tools for handling troublesome behaviour, but remember: people rarely fit neatly into boxes and can be unpredictable. Use the 'Most Unwanted List' as a guide, but stay flexible.

Here are some universal guidelines for dealing with difficult people and avoiding becoming one yourself:

- Acknowledge we are all difficult at times. It takes two to tango!
- People become less difficult when heard and understood.
- Stay calm. Conflict isn't resolved by two emotional people.
- Hold your ground and be prepared with facts.
- Reflect on your own behaviour and contribution to the conflict.
- Avoid public confrontations or belittling others.
- Take issues offline and discuss openly and honestly.
- Be curious to understand their point of view and listen to learn.
- Stay respectful, professional, and avoid taking things personally.
- Focus on the difficult relationship, not labelling the person.

Remember, you can't change others, only your response. Ultimately, it's not the people who are difficult but their behaviour. This approach aims to help you recognise the behaviours and intentions of both yourself and others to achieve more constructive, collaborative, and successful discussions.

THE BRINKMAN & KIRSCHNER MODEL OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE:

WHY ARE PEOPLE DIFFICULT?

1. TANK

Key attributes of a Tank

Tanks can appear as bullies – they will often steamroll you to get their own way. Tanks tend to be very task orientated and their intention is usually to "get the job done" as quickly and effectively as possible.

Difficult behaviours

Tanks get frustrated when they feel that people/you are getting in their way and stopping them achieving their goals. They might yell, become aggressive or get others to support them against you. They might cut you off during conversation, talk over you and take over.

Suggested approaches

- Gain their respect – Tanks do not steamroll people they respect.
- Be prepared and make sure you have all the facts.
- Make it clear, non-aggressively, that you will not be bullied or steamrolled. Hold your ground.
- As they get louder, you need to become quieter and calmer. Rational responses will eventually get a Tank's attention. You might also use the tool of silence.
- Do not become emotional.
- Be respectful and let them know that you hear their concerns, then rationally and respectfully share your own point of view.
- Respond with phrases such as, 'I understand what you are saying, but I was thinking', 'I read something that said' and 'Perhaps we can consider another view.'
- Hold them to account regarding their behaviour. For example, say, 'I think/feel that you might be a bit annoyed or frustrated about this issue at the moment. Perhaps we should reschedule at a better time.' Allow Tanks to have the last word and to be able to leave the conversation and situation with dignity.
- Give them a plan and deadline of when you will achieve the task.

2. SNIPER

Key attributes of a Sniper

Snipers like to be unseen and will attack you when you least expect it. They may snipe to get attention or to undermine you.

Difficult behaviours

Snipers might attack you with irrelevant or negative information or they might make a joke in 'fun'. The intent of the Sniper is not always malicious. But be careful as, although they can give it, they might also be able to take it.

Suggested approaches

- Snipers like the element of surprise, so the worst thing you can do is shine the spotlight on them.
- When you are attacked by a Sniper, reverse the situation by asking your own Sniper questions, such as, 'When you say that, what are you really trying to say?' (to clarify their intent) and 'What does that have to do with this?' (to understand the relevance of their input).
- Hold your ground.
- Listen to the attack. You might not like the way they have questioned you but they may have a valid point.
- Ask them to explain themselves. If it is a valid attack, they will be able to explain. They might also change their approach next time.

3. KNOW-IT-ALL

Key attributes of a Know-it-all

Know-it-alls are bold, opinionated, knowledgeable, forceful and used to being right. This often means that they don't listen to others as they feel they know everything. They don't like to waste their time listening to others not as smart as them.

Difficult behaviours

Snipers might attack you with irrelevant or negative information or they might make a joke in 'fun'. The intent of the Sniper is not always malicious. But be careful as, although they can give it, they might also be able to take it.

Suggested approaches

- Your goal with a Know-it-all is to get them to open up to new ideas and possibilities.
- Be prepared – Know-it-alls are experts and genuinely knowledgeable, so you need to know your facts.
- Don't threaten their concept of themselves as the expert. Instead, leverage this and ask them to see how they can teach you.
- Encourage them to have conversations about new possibilities and options that they can be part of.
- They demand and expect respect so ensure you acknowledge their expertise in discussions.

4. THINK THEY KNOW IT ALL

Key attributes of a Think-they-know-it-all

The only thing worse than dealing with a Know-it-all is dealing with someone who thinks they know it all. Think they- know-it-alls are the manifestation of the Dunning- Kruger effect, which is a term used in psychology to refer to a cognitive bias where individuals are unable to see or unaware of their own incompetence. Simply, the less competent someone is, the more competent they tend to think they are.

Difficult behaviours

Yes People are difficult to deal with because they are usually so nice and obliging, but because they are generally inconsistent in their delivery we cannot rely on them or trust them to do what they say. The irony is that Yes People often say yes to avoid conflict, yet their lack of reliability often leads to conflict.

Suggested approaches

- Be respectful and don't embarrass or belittle them.
- Ask questions and work through the specifics of their recommendations to develop more suitable and robust solutions.
- Take the time to listen and involve them in solutions.
- Ask them to clarify their thinking and respectfully provide alternatives whilst acknowledging their perspective

5. GRENADES

Key attributes of a Grenade

Grenades are volatile and explosive. You don't know when they will explode and their behaviour may not seem rational.

Difficult behaviours

Grenade behaviour will make you say, 'Where did that come from?'. It can come out when Grenades are looking for appreciation, recognition or acknowledgement. Grenade behaviour occurs when people do not feel heard.

Suggested approaches

- The best way to handle a Grenade is to stop them exploding in the first place.
- You will start to see the signs of a Grenade about to go off – fidgeting, short responses, frustration.
- Turn your attention to them. Say things like, 'Are you okay?' 'What have we missed?', 'Let us know what the issue is', 'What have I done to make you so angry?' and 'That is not my intention.'
- Calm them down by using their name to get them to focus on what you need to say.
- Listen and empathise – why might they be frustrated?
- Be calm. Bring the Grenade down, don't work yourself up.
- If they do go off, stop the conversation. Suggest meeting at a more suitable time.
- Do not react with anger or defensiveness.
- Make it clear that you will not accept this behaviour and stop the meeting.

6. YES PEOPLE

Key attributes of a Yes People

Yes People say yes to anything for any number of reasons – to avoid conflict, to be liked, to be helpful, because they really want to, because they are bad time managers, because they are scared of losing their job or because saying yes has become a habit.

Difficult behaviours

Yes People are difficult to deal with because they are usually so nice and obliging, but because they are generally inconsistent in their delivery we cannot rely on them or trust them to do what they say. The irony is that Yes People often say yes to avoid conflict, yet their lack of reliability often leads to conflict.

Suggested approaches

- Yes People need to feel safe, liked and respected, so it is important to build rapport and trust with them.
- Building a trusting relationship will take time, so be patient.
- When things are not completed, have a respectful, honest conversation with them, outlining the impact of their nonperformance and what needs to be done next time.
- When gaining commitment, spend the time to make sure they understand that it is better for them to say no than to say yes and then not deliver.
- Use the SMART model to determine goals.
- Watch that you are not forcing the commitment and making them say yes (ie. being the Tank).
- Accept when they say 'no' or 'later'. Give them a safe space
- Use the Strategy, Talent, Effort model when discussing goals and timelines.

7. MAYBE PEOPLE

Key attributes of a Maybe People

Maybe People are indecisive, usually with the excuse that they need more information. They may be indecisive because they are perfectionists and want to be 100% sure, they are insecure about their abilities to make decisions or perhaps they are a yes person in disguise who doesn't want to disappoint anyone.

Difficult behaviours

The most frustrating thing about Maybe people is that nothing is decided, nothing gets done and often you are "in the dark" until it is too late. You believe that a decision is on it's way but instead nothing is moving forward. This behaviour can often create Tank or Grenade behaviour in others.

Suggested approaches

- It is important that Maybe People don't feel pushed or bullied into a decision; however, they often need a nudge.
- Make sure you are prepared. Understand what information they need to say yes or no
- Decide and agree on a decision-making process.
- Ask certainty questions such as, 'What would we have to show you/prove to you/do to get you to say yes?'
- Highlight the costs and consequences of indecision and procrastination.

8. NOTHING PEOPLE

Key attributes of a Nothing People

These people give you nothing – no comment, no reply email, no feedback. They may feel hopeless or pessimistic so they don't say anything because they feel there's little point. They may also be trying to avoid conflict.

Difficult behaviours

The impact of their behaviour is that nothing gets done or that they become excluded because people start to work around or ignore them.

Suggested approaches

- Allocate time to spend with Nothing People.
- Be patient and persistent. Don't let them wear you out.
- Encourage communication with open-ended questions.
- Explain and show the consequences of them both working with you and not working with you. Tell the story of consequences.

9. NO PEOPLE

Key attributes of a No People

No People say no out of habit. They can be the blockers within the organisation. They may also say no if they want to get things perfect.

Difficult behaviours

They are fixated on a perspective, or perhaps just scared of change and may not always listen to alternatives. 'No' is their first response and you have to move upwards from there.

Suggested approaches

- No People should be dealt with offline. If you need their support, make sure you meet with them separately to explain your perspective.
- Give them the time and respect to absorb, understand, reflect and question.
- Do not rush them – this just makes No People more stubborn.
- Listen to them and question their negative reactions; ask them what would be needed to make a particular solution or recommendation work or to get their agreement. Ask, 'What have I missed?' and 'What do I need to do?'
- Bring possible objections up before they do and have solutions.

10. WHINERS

Key attributes of a Whiners

Whiners feel helpless and overwhelmed by an unfair world. They feel no-one is listening, which is why whinge. They have no sense of control.

Difficult behaviours

Nothing is ever good enough; everything is a worry. They may also be trying to get things perfect and feel that others are not listening or are unwilling to help them to achieve this.

Suggested approaches

- Listen to and acknowledge their concerns.
- Be specific, ask questions and work together to find solutions.
- Try to shift their focus from complaining about problems to problem-solving.
- Redirect conversations to solutions and the future, rather than the past.
- Share the locus of control model. Ask, 'What can we do to change this situation?' When we operate with an internal locus of control, we believe that our actions can have impact and we can change outcomes. When we operate with an external locus of control, we believe we have no control and things simply happen to us.
- Balance active listening with sympathising. While whiners need to feel heard, they shouldn't be further encouraged to wallow.
- Share the alternative view or alternative options.

READING LIST

- [Locus of Control and Your Life](#)
- [10 Types of Difficult People](#)
- [Dealing With Difficult People](#)



Follow us on LinkedIn!

Visit us online at peoplcoach.com, Call 1800 PEEPLC
or email us at hello@peoplcoach.com

TIPSHEET NO 20, 2024

© peoplcoach