

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS

This is a checklist I first introduced publicly in my book, *Practical People Engagement: Leading Change through the Power of Relationships* (Elbereth, 2013).

INTRODUCTION

It seems we are bound to encounter people we come to regard as difficult, wherever we work. There can be any number of reasons why someone appears difficult to us. Difficult relationships are a fact of life. So how do we engage them?

Disclaimer: This is simply a checklist strategy, not some kind of “silver bullet.” It is not guaranteed to work every time with everybody. That is because we individuals are complex and unpredictable beings. Use this checklist with care and your best judgment. So I cannot accept any liability for the way you use this checklist. However, I have found that by using it as a framework, I have been better prepared, and got more successful outcomes over a number of such “difficult” relationships than I would have done otherwise.

This strategy is mostly a synthesis of one of Stephen Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*¹ along with elements from *Getting to Yes*², the best-selling work on negotiation by Roger Fisher et al. There are other strategies.

¹ The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Simon & Schuster: 1999).

² Getting to Yes: Negotiating an Agreement without Giving In (Random House: 1997).

A SUMMARY OF THIS CHECKLIST

Here are the steps. The following pages explain each of them:

- Think kindly and generously of them
- Be clear on your 'BATNA'
- Move towards them
- Seek first to understand
- Reflect back that you understand them
- ... Then be understood
- Seek 'win-win' or 'no deal'
- Make the 'ask'
- Reflect back the consequences
- Be brave!

It is important that you read through the rest of this document thoroughly and prepare before going into any negotiation with someone.

□ THINK KINDLY AND GENEROUSLY OF THEM

You are more likely to position yourself for successful influencing if you begin to think more kindly towards people who are presenting you with difficulties. Assume the best of them. Assume that they may have misunderstood or don't yet know all the fact. Or that they have good reasons you don't yet know of for behaving the way they do.

Going in with a closed view of them is more likely to get the responses you expect.

Not everyone is irredeemably evil. In fact, psychologists maintain that the number of psychopaths is quite low (less than 1%). The language of hate and prejudice rarely lead to successful influencing outcomes.

□ BE CLEAR ON YOUR 'BATNA'

BATNA means 'Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement'). Part of being understood by the other party is to have clarity in your own mind what are the non-negotiable aspects of your own position. You need to be clear in your own mind about what your fallback position will be if you can't get agreement - your BATNA.

Fisher et al. argue that going into tough negotiations without a BATNA immediately puts you into a position of weakness. You must have an alternative available, even if you never use it.

Your BATNA could be, among other things:

- Some strong escalation to more senior, more powerful people.
- Some radical re-scoping to exclude the need for cooperation from this stakeholder (usually risky).
- Even in the most extreme cases conceding that your initiative or project should be stopped altogether.

These are only generic options. In specific cases you may be able to identify others and you strengthen your position if you can identify more.

Remember that this is the *best* alternative, and not a spurious alternative: to offer a false BATNA would be a bluff, pretentious brinkmanship ... and you risk the other party calling your bluff!

Write your BATNA here:

☐ MOVE TOWARDS THEM

We want to avoid troublemakers. Yet if we move towards people, if we reduce the social distance, then we find we can influence them – and they us – much more effectively. We live in the age of email, but nothing beats face-to-face when influencing. Whenever you can, go and see that person or their tribe. It takes courage (the last point in this checklist) but it pays dividends.

Often I have had people say to me, “You are the first person from department to come and see us.” Often this can be the source of resistance. Nothing else, just social distance.

It’s hard to hate someone as much when they are being reasonable and reaching out to you in front of you.

□ SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND

Seek first to understand is the first principle of stakeholder engagement. Earn the right to be heard by others by listening to them first. Listen to their heart as well as their head, the emotional 'music'. In doing this you are giving them the dignity of being treated like a human being and not just a block or an obstacle, or someone who has to be humoured or pandered.

In hostile situations, where you consider going into some conflict, as humans it is natural for us to dehumanise the enemy. You need to be aware of this tendency in yourself and resist it. Difficult people are not always the enemy, and to make them so can worsen matters.

Consider how you might regard the other person as *positively* as possible.

So first, ask questions, and listen. Hesitate to jump in and correct them or put an objection. No, just listen. At first you will find this hard. With a little practice it comes easier and the rewards can be astonishing.

Prepare by writing your questions here:

□ REFLECT BACK THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THEM

Re-playing their position as accurately as you can, showing that you can empathize with their pain or sense of threat as well as their rational argument, is usually far more effective than the “Yes, but” sort of response we all usually fall into. This often takes the sting immediately out of the dialogue. It may not be vocalised, but the other party is thinking, “Ah! So you do understand where I’m coming from!” This relates to one of the steps in Active Listening.

Not that this is NOT agreeing with them. You are expressing a fuller understanding of what they have said.

Often this will gain their trust to reveal the **real** objection that they have. What they offer you at first may simply be a smokescreen or in talking things out with you they realise the deeper, often more emotional, less rational, reason they are being difficult.

□ THEN BE UNDERSTOOD

After the first two steps, you might say something like,

“Thank you for helping me to understand where you are coming from.”

“So allow me to make my position clear and I think we might find we are not so far apart.”

This flags that you are not about to be a doormat and be walked all over. You have a position and you need to be heard. Make that clear.

Notice also there was no “but” in that response. Your aim is to get alongside the other party and look at the difficulty together.

□ SEEK 'WIN-WIN' OR 'NO DEAL'

You should know their 'WIIFM' ('what's in it for me?'). What benefits could there be for this person. What are the 'wins' for them?

Often reviewing the scope of the change together with the stakeholder gives you both a chance to optimise the benefits and reduce the perceived negatives for them. However, remember that a benefit for you might well be a pain or a loss to the other party and vice versa.

One the keys to agile negotiation is to discover other unmet wants or needs of the other party that you might be able to help satisfy or provide if they are prepared to meet your needs.

Use the space below to draw up your and their wins and losses:

Your 'Wins'/Benefits	Their 'Wins'/Benefits
Your 'Losses'	Their 'Losses'

It is important that you give yourself only two possible outcomes:

1. 'Win-win'. This is the best option. You and they both come away with gains. That they gain makes the agreement much more likely to sustain, to hold good. That you win is what you aim for, and the only fall-back is:
2. No deal. If you can't get your minimum agreement, then you will lose by agreeing on any other terms. It would become, in effect, a lose-win agreement. You lose, they win. Instead, walk away and invoke your BATNA, because you have already prepared one, haven't you? (You have prepared your BATNA, haven't you?)

□ MAKE THE 'ASK'

This is a sales term, meaning to ask for the sale.

Often engagement fails because we don't summon up the courage to make that final request (the 'Ask') of the other party when we have the opportunity. I find sales people understand this; they call it 'closing.' Often we can 'make the Ask' of the other party in a way that acknowledges that it would be costly for them in some way, but thereby implying that they would be courageous or magnanimous to do it. Simply making the request in that way can seem very affirming to the other party.

□ REFLECT BACK THE CONSEQUENCES

Reflect back the consequences, if necessary, **of their action or inaction**. Explain what will happen if they do not work on this initiative with you, or if they delay making the decision. Spell out the increased costs, the reduced benefits, and how this will play out... all as a consequence of their (in)action or adopted position.

Obviously, you will need to prepare this argument in advance, in case you need it. It may call for you to secure approval in principle from their more senior managers first for their cooperation in achieving your objectives.

This can be particularly powerful and clarifying where the stakeholder does not yet appreciate the unintended consequences of their position. You may even need to go a step further by making it clear that their actions and the consequences will be visible to others, possibly to those to whom they are accountable. Ask, “How would they feel about that?”

This is can be an important issue with some decision-makers who are prone to hesitate or procrastinate in giving you approval to proceed. Rarely do decision-makers appreciate the full cost of *delaying* their decision. It’s your responsibility to make that clear to them as best you can to them. (“Well, if I can’t get your agreement today, we miss an opportunity to move and this will set back the whole schedule six weeks, incurring \$xxx additional cost.”)

It’s remarkable how frequently people reassess their position when confronted, albeit sensitively but assertively, with such potential consequences.

Before entering your meeting with this person, take a few moments to consider here the consequences (to them) of a non-agreement with you:

□ BE BRAVE

Not enough is discussed in business literature about the need for plain courage. To some extent it 'costs' you, and it 'costs' the stakeholder. Let the challenge of meeting with this stakeholder in this way and of wrestling with them become part of your mutual 'story' that can be shared with them and others at the right moments.

Moving towards a potentially unpleasant meeting with someone, making yourself somewhat vulnerable, will be something most of us would want to avoid, but this could be an opportunity for you to grow if it is handled in the right way. Cowards and bullies rarely grow as much.

For more information, see my book, ***Practical People Engagement: Leading Change through the Power of Relationships*** (Elbereth, 2013).

I wish you every success in dealing with difficult relationships.

Go well,

Patrick Mayfield