


Dealing with Difficult People

Difficult Person	Their Behavior	You Feel...	How to Cope
<p>Sherman Tanks</p>  <p>I NEVER SIT DOWN DURING SALES MEETINGS. I WANT TO APPEAR AGGRESSIVE AND IMPOSING.</p>	<p>As part of the Hostile Aggressive Trio, Sherman Tanks come out charging!</p> <p>Their whole demeanor expresses “attack” that is not directed at behaviors but toward you! They may be abusive, abrupt, intimidating and overwhelming.</p> <p>They can be crude or skillful. They have a strong need to be right and they are impatient with those that don’t see things their way. Their impatience can turn into irritation, righteous indignation or outright anger. They have a strong sense of what others <i>should</i> do. They seem to lack care and trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» You feel confused, frightened, can’t get a word in, and no time to think.» You may feel your heart racing and your veins pounding.» You can get so furious that you feel out of control.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Stand up for yourself; use assertive language.» Give them time to run down.» Don’t worry about being polite, just get in there.» Get their attention—use their name, stand up, push your chair backwards.» Get them to sit down.» Maintain eye contact.» Speak from your own point of view and state your opinions forcefully.» Don’t argue with what they are saying and avoid a head on fight.» Be ready to get friendly with them later.

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The Sniper



As part of the Hostile Aggressive Trio, **Snipers** do not come crashing down on you, they maintain cover.

Their weapon of choice is a rock hidden in a snowball: innuendos, sarcasm, not-so subtle digs, non-playful teasing, etc. They use these in conjunction with nonverbal cues that say “pretend that what I am doing is nice” and use rituals and social constraints to create a protected place to strike out at the objects of their anger or envy.


Like Tanks, they have a strong sense of how others should think and act. Their behavior is often due to an unresolved problem, which only gets worse with this behavior. They won’t stop until the victim decides to stop being a victim.

- » You feel pinned down and you wish the victim would make a deliberate and open response, yell or return the insult.
- » Your sense of politeness and self-expectation cause you to go along with the masquerade and not be disruptive.

- » Focus on getting on with the business at hand and coping rather than changing or punishing the Sniper.
- » Surface the attack by asking a direct question; “That sounded like a dig. Did you mean it that way?”
- » Provide a peaceful alternative to open warfare.
- » Seek group input regarding a Sniper’s criticism.
- » Deal with the underlying problem(s).
- » Prevent sniping by setting up regular, problem-solving meetings.
- » Refuse to participate/listen.

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<p>The Exploder</p> 	<p>As part of the Hostile Aggressive Trio, Exploders look and sound like they are having an adult tantrum. They exhibit frustration, hurt, and rage that escalate into a fury.</p> <p>Things may get thrown, blows may be struck, and unforgivable words may be said. They appear more out of control than Snipers or Sherman Tanks.</p> <p>Tantrums are not planned and are often accompanied by tears or speechless rage. Others often describe them as “over emotional,” “super-touchy,” or “irritable.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» You probably are unaware of having said anything wrong and feel surprised and bewildered at the abrupt and horrifying change in the situation.» You may get silent, passive, or have your own tantrum.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Give them time to vent and regain self-control on their own.» If they don't, break into the tantrum by saying or yelling “stop!”» Show them you are serious.» Deal with things sooner than later.

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The Complainer



Complainers plan to stay awhile, so they prefer to be seated.

The almost whining singsong quality righteously blames and accuses while using a lot of “ands” and “buts.”

They find fault with everything and the hidden message is “someone” (this usually means you!) should be doing something about it.

They usually view themselves as powerless, prescriptive and perfect.

The Triangular Complainer doesn’t complain to you they complain at you about other terrible people.

- » You feel tired, frustrated and unproductive.
- » You get sucked in and are afraid not to listen because you might miss something important.
- » In the beginning, you can feel useful and want to be helpful.
- » You may feel superior to the complainer and sometimes entertained by all that they know and want to share.

- » Break their self-confirming cycle of passivity, blaming others and powerlessness and insist that a problem solving process occur.
- » Listen attentively to their concerns.
- » Acknowledge what they are saying.
- » Don’t agree with or apologize for their accusations.
- » Avoid the accusation-defense-reaccusation sequence.
- » State just the facts.
- » Ask what they need to resolve the complaint.

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The Negativist



Negativists are often reasonably competent in their own right and respond to anyone else's productive suggestions with "it won't work" or "it's no use trying" or "we tried that" or "they'll never let us."

They are not intentional obstructionists, in fact they believe the blocking forces are out of their control.


They truly feel dispirited and defeated. Because they believe that others in power don't care or are self-serving. Their negative statements are made with conviction.

- » You can feel depressed, bogged down, disappointed, or helpless.
- » You may also get to a point of angry, resentful acceptance.
- » You start to believe that all your hopes for the future have been figments of silly over-optimism.

- » Be alert to the potential, in yourself and in others in your group, for being dragged down into despair.
- » Make optimistic but realistic statements about past successes in solving similar problems.
- » Don't try to argue them out of their pessimism.
- » Do not offer solutions until the problem has been thoroughly discussed.
- » When alternatives are offered, raise questions yourself.
- » View their "doom-sayings" as potential problems to be solved.

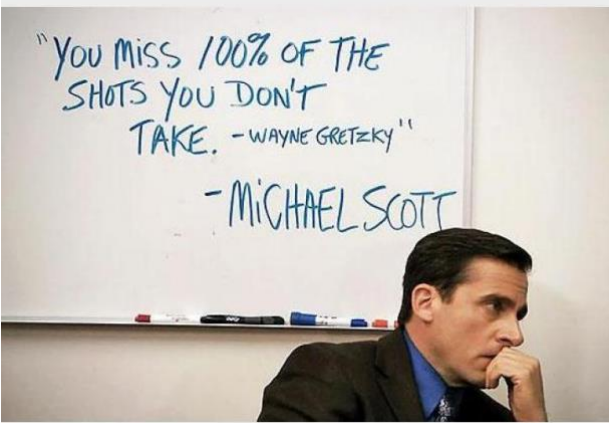
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<p>Bulldozers</p>  <p>WELL, BUY PROPERTY. THAT'S MY ADVICE.</p>	<p>Bulldozers are highly productive people, thorough and accurate thinkers who make competent, careful plans and then carry them through even when the obstacles are great.</p> <p>Unlike Balloons, these know-it-all experts actually know a great deal.</p> <p>So what makes them difficult?</p> <p>Their absolute certainty beyond mortal doubt leaves others feeling like objects of condescension. They are often right.</p> <p>They often elicit resistant, self-defeating behavior from others.</p> <p>When things go wrong they blame the “incompetents.”</p>	<p>» You feel humiliated, immobilized, helplessly angry, inept, confused, stupid, and resentful.</p>	<p>» Get them to consider alternative views while avoiding direct challenges to their expertise.</p> <p>» Do your homework.</p> <p>» Listen and acknowledge by paraphrasing (so they know that you get it).</p> <p>» Question firmly but don't confront.</p> <p>» Don't patronize them.</p> <p>» Acknowledge their competence.</p> <p>» Take a break from the interaction and make time for reflection.</p>

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<p>Balloons</p>  <p>The image shows Michael Scott from the TV show 'The Office' sitting at a table in a meeting room. Behind him is a whiteboard with the handwritten quote: "YOU MISS 100% OF THE SHOTS YOU DON'T TAKE. - WAYNE GRETZKY" and "- MICHAEL SCOTT".</p>	<p>Balloons want to be admired and respected by others and seen as knowledgeable, competent, and important.</p> <p>They act like experts even when they are not. They speak with great authority about subjects of which they have very little knowledge.</p> <p>They read newspapers, browse through books, pay attention to rumors and eavesdrop wherever they can. They are quite curious and like to feel "in the know."</p>	<p>» You may feel mild irritation, impatience or embarrassment when dealing with a Balloon. You've probably thought "should I stop this character from misleading everyone?"</p>	<p>» Present your data as an alternative set of facts and your own perceptions.</p> <p>» Talk with them in private so they can save face.</p> <p>» Be ready to fill in with some conversation as you give them a chance to recover.</p>

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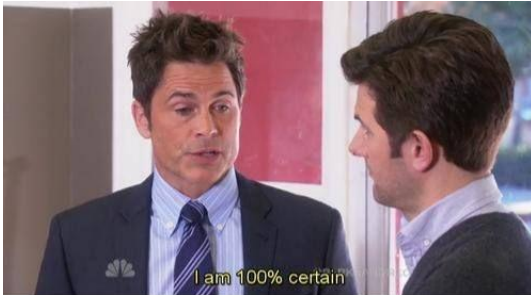
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Indecisive Stallers



Stallers become problems only when something in your own life depends on their taking action.

Stallers are super-helpful, indecisive people. They usually listen well, look interested and encourage you. When they don't follow through for you and you confront them, they apologize and point out the complications.

They want to be helpful, but when faced with decisions where someone will be hurt they can't hurt anyone (unlike the Super-Agreeables who can't lose your approval).


They value quality over speed. They hint and beat around the bush as a compromise between being honest and hurting someone.

» You feel anguish, confusion, anger, and anxiety. You may also lose enthusiasm and commitment for the work that involves a Staller.

- » Make it easy for Stallers to tell you about conflicts or reservations that prevent the decision.
- » Listen for indirect words, hesitations, and omissions that may provide clues to problem areas.
- » Once you have surfaced the issues, help them examine facts and put possible solutions in priority order.
- » If the Staller's reservation is about you, acknowledge any past problems; state relevant data non-defensively; propose a plan; and, ask for help.
- » If the Staller becomes angry or withdrawn remove them from the situation.
- » Once a decision is made, be supportive and keep action steps in your hands.

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<p>The Clam</p>  <p>Sir? Sir, are you listening to me?</p> <p>Sir, are you aware that there is waste in your water system?!</p>	<p>Clams are silent, unresponsive people who won't or can't talk when you need them to.</p> <p>For some, unresponsiveness is a noncommittal way of handling potentially painful interpersonal situations (if I answer you truthfully I will be in trouble, if I lie I will feel guilty, so it's easier not to respond).</p> <p>For others, silence is calculated aggression. And, for others, it is a way of evading themselves.</p>	<p>» You may feel confused, perplexed, frustrated, annoyed, angry, disappointed, or even hurt or embarrassed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» Ask open-ended questions.» Use a friendly, quizzical, expectant silent stare, with eyebrows raised and wide eyes [believe it or not this really works!].» Be comfortable with silence, wait for their response and don't fill the space.» Comment on what is happening.» Circle back and do these steps again.» Break the tension with a different question regarding their unresponsiveness.» Set time limits.

Notes:

About the Conflict Resolution Program

The Conflict Resolution Program (CRP), part of the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) is a resource dedicated to supporting transformational and organizational change in nonprofit, public, government, and educational settings. This is done primarily through teaching and promoting effective communication, collaborative problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

To learn more about our programs, visit <https://www.bidenschool.udel.edu/ipa/serving-delaware/crp>.

