

How to Deal with Difficult Situations



Each day we learn...Each day we develop

By Michael Astrop

How to deal with difficult situations

We all have difficult situations, every day: difficult staff, difficult suppliers or indeed other colleagues and do you know what the really strange thing is? We know it is going to happen. How do we know? Because it happened yesterday or the day before or the day before that and what does that mean? It means that we can see the signs before it happens and plan how we are going to deal with it.

When we talk about difficult situations, we are talking about the behaviour of people in a range of circumstances. Those circumstances may only be difficult to some people and certainly no two situations are seen in the same way by everyone.

Analysis of a difficult situation

Most difficult situations develop through a specific series of events or stages and, whilst they will vary from incident to incident and some situations will not exhibit all of them or end before they are all complete, we can in general identify them as six clear stages.

The Stages of an Incident and the Responses

The range of possible responses to any potentially difficult incident is enormous and our immediate, knee-jerk response is not always the most helpful or professional. The table on the following pages looks at the different stages and outlines the helpful and unhelpful reactions.

STAGE		
<p>1 Provocation</p>	<p>The first signs that the behaviour of a person is moving away from being acceptable include: a lot of pacing about, clenched fists, angry muttering, persistent staring/minimal eye contact, lack of concentration, shuffling of papers, and so on. Your ability to detect behaviour changes will be improved by any knowledge of the particular person and your own experience.</p>	
	Helpfully You	Unhelpfully You
	<p>Use open questions Work to identify alternatives Sit down Ground yourself firmly Remain calm Summarise what the issue is for them Take a deep breath Use broken record technique Use appropriate eye contact Keep a reasonable distance between you Pace/match the other person</p>	<p>Stop listening Interrupt or talk over the other person Patronise them Become physically agitated yourself Blush Use 'why?' questions Sweat, breathe rapidly Stare or avoid eye contact Move in too close or back too far Can't think straight Give advice Have negative internal messages Square up to them in an aggressive way.</p>
<p>2 Escalation</p>	<p>Moving towards assaultive behaviour. It becomes more apparent that the behaviour is not 'normal'. The longer this phase goes on the less chance of -'diversionary' strategies working.</p>	

	<p>Helpfully You</p> <p>Do any or all of the things in the provocation phase, to a greater extent</p> <p>Warn of the consequences</p> <p>Give information — about options</p> <p>Ask simply for the behaviour to stop</p> <p>Change the subject</p> <p>Offer an alternative</p> <p>Take time out to calm down</p>	<p>Unhelpfully You</p> <p>Ask them to calm down</p> <p>Do any, or all the unhelpful things listed in the provocation phase, perhaps to a greater extent</p> <p>Use humour — it can be experienced as patronising.</p>
3 Crisis	<p>The person is increasingly aroused emotionally and psychologically and moves to assaultive behaviour.</p>	
	<p>Helpfully You</p> <p>Try to prevent assaultive behaviour by clearly and briefly stating the consequences or asking for it to stop.</p> <p>Try to prevent assaultive behaviour by giving clear, brief instructions: raising your voice can help, especially if you have not yet done so. Recognise that your safety/integrity (and that of other people) is paramount. Get other people away; an audience is generally not helpful. If needed put something solid between you</p> <p>Ensure that you are nearer the door</p> <p>Get away/keep safe if the situation continues to escalate.</p>	<p>Unhelpfully You</p> <p>Try to intervene physically; this is likely to be experienced as threatening and may be dangerous for you.</p>

4 Assaultive	Here the person 'blows'. This phase may include violent language and/or a physical attack on a person, property, or self.	
	Helpfully You	Unhelpfully You
	Keep clear and ensure your own safety/dignity/self respect and the safety and dignity of others as far as possible. If the assault is a tirade of verbal abuse this may be impossible. If you cannot get away keep clear, barricade yourself away.	Fight/scream back.
5 Recovery	This is the calming down phase - the person will need some sort of support or will return to the crisis phase. The adrenaline principle is a factor long after the actual assault. The aggressor will determine the pace.	
6 Depression	Typically, the aggressor is exhausted mentally and physically and may experience shame or guilt and may well become depressed, as the enormity of what has been done is realised.	

Triggers that May Provoke an Incident

Many one to one situations have the potential to escalate and the behaviour of either or both parties may provoke that escalation. It is therefore important to try and recognise the triggers that have the potential for stimulating the escalation and to try and avoid them.

Behaviour that we should avoid:

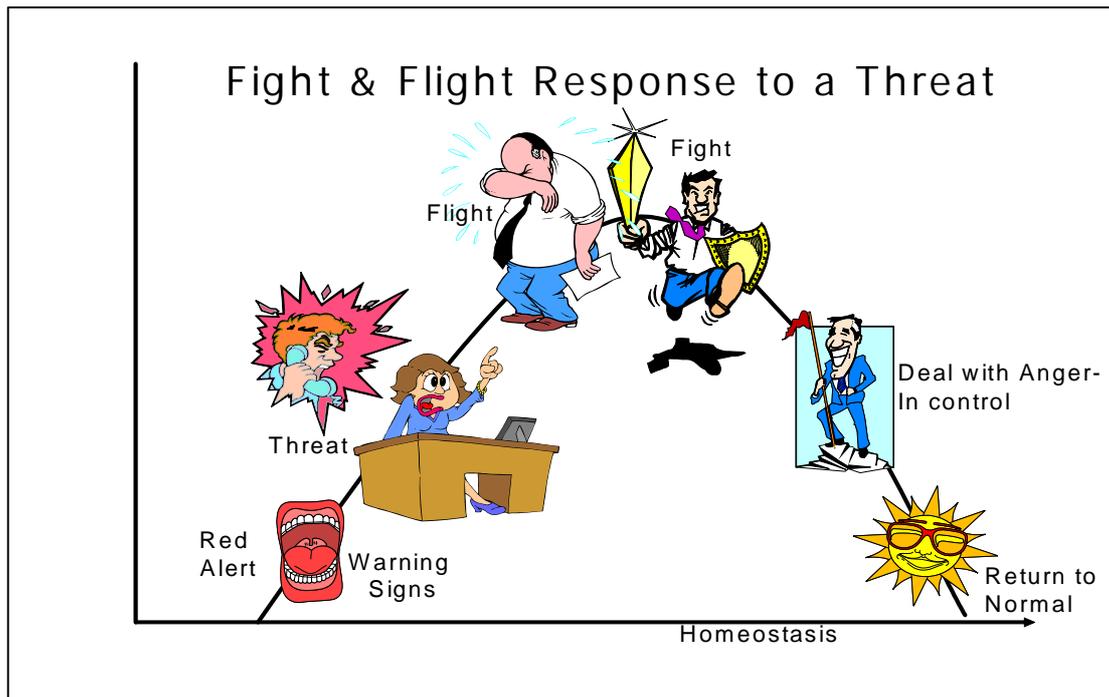
- Sudden movements
- Being distracted
- Counter aggression
- Invasion of space
- Heavy criticism
- Threats
- Advice giving/pontificating
- Giving contrary opinions
- Impatience
- Making assumptions
- Touch
- Shouting/talking loudly

The Bodies Response to a Difficult Situation

When we experience excessive stress, whether from internal worry or external circumstance, a bodily reaction is triggered called the "fight or flight" response. Originally discovered by the great Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon, this response is hard-wired into our brains and represents a genetic wisdom designed to protect us from bodily harm.

This response actually corresponds to an area of our brain called the hypothalamus, which, when stimulated, initiates a sequence of nerve cell firing and chemical release that prepares our body for running or fighting.

When our fight or flight response is activated, sequences of nerve cell firing occur and chemicals like adrenaline, noradrenalin and cortisol are released into our bloodstream.



These patterns of nerve cell firing and chemical release cause our body to undergo a series of very dramatic changes. Our respiratory rate increases. Blood is shunted away from our digestive tract and directed into our muscles and limbs, which require extra energy and fuel for running and fighting. Our pupils dilate. Our awareness intensifies. Our sight sharpens. Our impulses quicken. Our perception of pain diminishes. Our immune system mobilizes with increased activation. We become prepared, physically and psychologically, for fight or flight. We scan and search our environment, "looking for the enemy."

When our fight or flight system is activated, we tend to perceive everything in our environment as a possible threat to our survival. By its very nature, the fight or flight system bypasses our rational mind, where our more well thought out beliefs exist and moves us into "attack" mode. This state of alert causes us to perceive almost everything in our world as a possible threat to our survival. As such, we tend to see everyone and everything as a possible enemy. We may overreact to the slightest comment. Our fear is exaggerated. Our thinking is distorted. We see everything through the filter of possible danger. We narrow our focus to those things that can harm us. Fear becomes the lens through which we see the world.

We can begin to see how it is almost impossible to cultivate positive attitudes and beliefs when we are stuck in survival mode. Our heart is not open. Our rational mind is disengaged. Our consciousness is focused on fear, not love. Making clear choices and recognizing the consequences of those choices is unfeasible. We are focused on short-term survival, not the long-term consequences of our beliefs and choices.

Tactics for Defusing a Difficult Situation

Fortunately, difficult situations do not beset us every day but we can still check and refine some of our basic skills in daily non-threatening situations. For example, we can spend time reading others' body language and being aware of tone of voice. We should consider practicing assessing situations to improve our powers of anticipation and ability to sense when difficult situations might develop.

Dealing with difficult behaviour can be draining and it is useful to maintain our own self-esteem and remember there is no 'right way'; you have coped before, you will cope again.

So what can we do to facilitate the use of specific tactics?

1 Respond Early

This does not mean leap in; it means really listen and sense what is going on, to avoid escalation.

2 Be Realistic

You may not be able to prevent escalation. The other person may choose to continue to be difficult however appropriately you respond.

3 Provide Choices for the Aggressor

As far as possible, give them options and do not 'box them in'.

4 Address Both Immediate and Short-Term Goals

For example, your immediate goal may be to stop someone shouting, but your short-term goal may be to get them off the phone or out of reception.

Do not lose sight of the fact that the situation could last some minutes; so do not promise things you cannot provide, as this will have the effect of escalating the situation.

5 Work towards Shared Responsibility

If the situation is at the provocation stage, try to include the other person in the solution, to re-establish their self-esteem. If the situation has escalated to crisis point this may not be realistic.

6 Be Proactive

Do not let the other person dominate the situation. You have choices about how you will react, so remain positive, be assertive, and keep the situation under control.

There are several things we can do to give us more confidence and support our behaviour when confronted by a situation that is uncomfortable or difficult:

- **Control your breathing rate**
Inhale deeply and exhale slowly. This helps to increase a feeling of inner calmness and reduces panic and fear signals.
- **Reduce the tension in your muscles**
As you breathe out slowly it becomes easier to relax the muscles around the neck. Concentrate on reducing the tension in your shoulders, which may have become hunched and threatening.
- **Adopt a relaxed posture**
If standing, stand with your legs slightly apart, one foot slightly behind the other. Turn to a slight angle to help reduce the element of face-to-face confrontation and place your weight on your back foot. This helps increase the distance from the aggressor and gives you the opportunity to move away rather than towards them.

- **Use open-hand language**
Hold your hands down, either at your sides or gently clasped in front of you. Occasionally, stress what you say with a slow, open-hand gesture.
- **Remain calm and aware of your communication skills**
Fear can be disabling, but controlling the rate of your breathing helps to overcome this fear and increase personal security.
- **Listen actively**
Reinforce your listening with occasional verbal affirmation: “hmmm...”, “Yes, ah ha.” and head nods.
- **Keep your voice low and steady**
This is not always easy, particularly when your vocal cords are tight and your throat dry. Once again, slowing your rate of breathing helps to loosen the muscles around your neck and vocal cords, as well as giving you time to compose your reply, rather than blurting out the first thing that comes to mind.
- **Show you are interested and concerned**
This is the time to ask the ‘how’ questions, not the ‘why’ ones:’ “How can I help you?” not “Why are you like this?”.
- **Empathise with the aggressor**
“That sounds bad” or “I’d be angry, too, if it happened to me”. Do this only if you are being sincere; insincerity will be picked up and will escalate the situation.
- **Use eye movement**
Occasionally, meeting the aggressor’s eyes to stress or acknowledge a point will help, but always avert your eyes before a staring match develops.

Dealing with Difficult and Aggressive Behaviour from Colleagues and those in a Senior Position

At times, all of us are faced with difficult or aggressive behaviour from colleagues or from those senior to us. It can be particularly difficult to deal with because of the power relations in the workplace. It is made more difficult because:

- Their power: "They could make life very difficult/hell for me, sack me!"
- Humiliation in front of other colleagues
- You 'know' them, so it makes it more hurtful
- You get angry/upset: "I can't respond at all."
- You freeze up with anxiety/fear of reprisal
- You get so angry that: "I just explode and blow it..."
- There is a history of the professional relationship
- Their reputation - they always get away with it
- Their knowledge of you means they can be hurtful/powerful

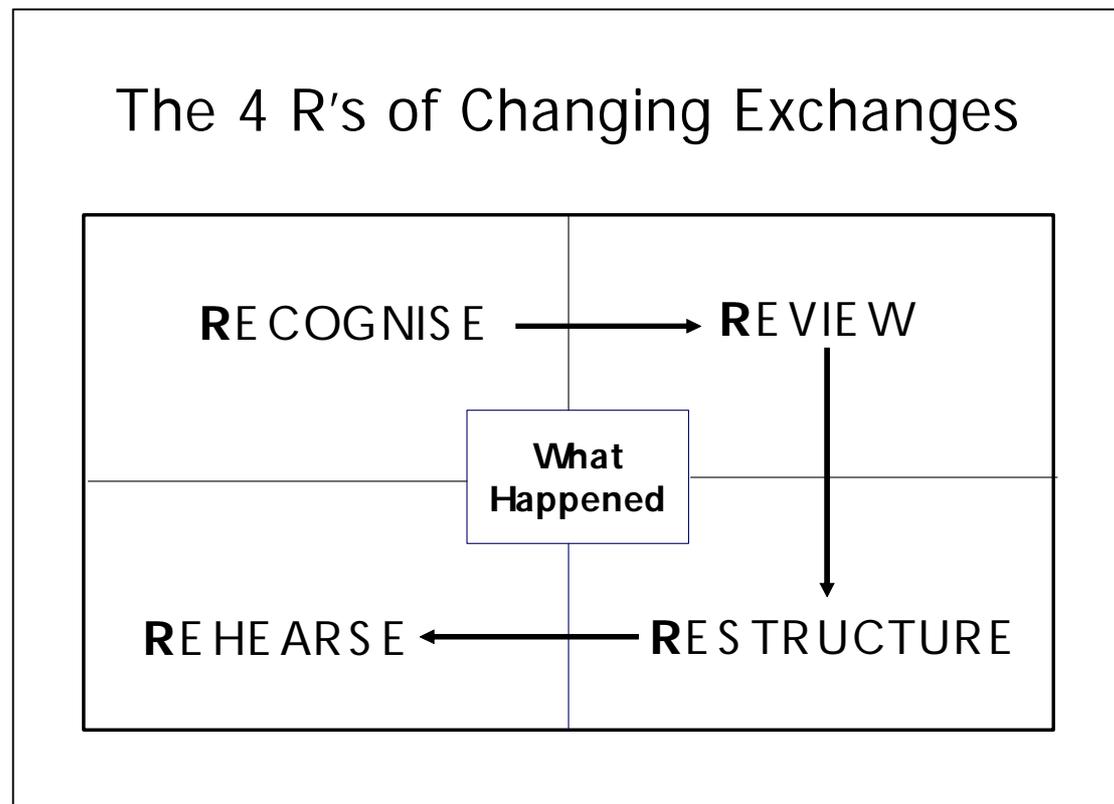
Most cases of difficult and aggressive behaviour in the workplace can be defused and dealt with so that they do not continue; however, in rare cases, if the staff member targeted is forced to contemplate leaving, they should seek legal advice about their position, ideally before they make any decisions.

In extreme cases this will not be possible, as the situation is so intolerable; seek legal advice as soon as possible. In all cases, keep detailed notes about the event(s) and what you have done to prevent them. There is protection for employees who are forced to resign as a result of harassment, particularly if it is sexual or racial.

Dealing Assertively with Colleagues and Senior Managers

How we deal with people initially is a product of our confidence and that is a reflection of your self-esteem. People who are confident and make a significant personal impact on other people and situations recognize their own self worth. People often believe that confidence is the product of external appearance and that does play a part but without feeling positive about yourself, your values and your self-esteem, appearance is not enough.

It is also in the workplace that we can usually anticipate the behaviour of others: because we get it regularly and because we know what can happen we can plan to deal with it. As changing has as much to do with how you think about yourself, as it does with what you do, the next step is to look at how we can change the way we interact with others and become assertive when we choose.



There are four steps to changing the way we respond to situations. These steps work together and if applied on a regular basis will start to change the way you see, interpret and respond to situations.

The first step is to consider any situation or exchange that you are unhappy with. What thoughts, beliefs and interpretations led you to respond as you did or why you expected a certain response from others? If possible understand their origin, what were your feelings, your physical response to the exchange and how realistic were they?

This first step is to **RECOGNISE** the behaviour that you want to change, this maybe due to reviewing an incident that did not work out as you hoped, or as part of the planning for a situation that will arise.

Second, you **REVIEW** what you would like to be different in verbal and non-verbal content.

Third, you **RESTRUCTURE** your language into an assertive form; language is a good driver of behavioural change and can set the tone for the assertive development process.

In this process of restructuring you are often fighting your beliefs, some of which you have had since early childhood and in that process a change in your brain chemistry takes place. By expending the effort it takes to restructure, you will actually be changing how your brain works in a healthy and wholesome way and creating new paths of thought.

Finally, the fourth step is the **REHEARSAL**, when the whole process comes together and by practicing it you become smooth and efficient at being assertive. You can do this by visualisation, by reviewing your behaviour in the mirror or working with a supportive partner or colleague.

As you build your confidence you are removing the desire to act on unwanted thoughts and urges. You will have learned to view those troublesome thoughts and urges as having little or no value and, therefore, your compulsions will have much less impact on you and you will have established new values that will guide you.

Assertive Behaviour when in a Situation with Colleagues

To give us more confidence and support our assertive behaviour when in front of a situation with a colleague or senior manager we should:

- Control our breathing rates
- Reduce the tension in our muscles
- Adopt a relaxed posture
- Avoid prevarication, hesitation or apology

- Use open-hand, direct unambiguous language
- Remain calm and aware of our communication skills
- Listen actively
- Repeat our assertions, if necessary – up to three times
- Sit down if possible
- Keep our voices low and steady
- Show we are interested and concerned
- Empathise with the aggressor if possible
- Withdraw if progress is not achieved

Challenging Difficult or Aggressive Behaviour

A challenge is, first of all, an attempt to enable the other person to recognise clearly for themselves the meaning and significance of what they say or do. It aims to give an opportunity for the other person to challenge themselves and to clarify their own values.

Challenging is not accusing or punishing or wounding, it is not aggressive or abusive. It is not a way of unloading your feelings of anger or outrage. Using 'I' language may make the challenge appropriate and non-judgemental.

Instead of: "You make me really angry!"

Say: "When you said... I felt angry and I would prefer it if you said... instead."

This may enable the other person to consider alternative behaviour.

So a challenge may be expressed by:

- Asking questions to seek further explanation:
 - "Could you tell me more about what you mean by this?"
 - "What has happened to make you say/think/do that?"
- Asking the other person to clarify things as they understand them:
 - "So, you are saying that ...?"

A challenge invites the other person to explore and assess what they are saying or doing and how they are behaving and the consequences of their behaviour.

It is offering an alternative perspective or view. It opens up alternative ways of understanding things and may enable people to see things in new and different ways:

“What do you think are the implications of...?”

“How do you think... would feel?”

“How would you feel if...?”

The strength lies in being gentle and in giving the challenged some room to move. The challenge may invite co-operation:

“I wonder if you would be prepared to consider...?”

Challenging tries to focus on the positive rather than the negative, it aims to help people see what positive behaviour can take place, or what resources they have but are not using.

Challenging should focus on:

- Being specific - vague challenges get lost and people do not know what to do with them.
- Areas where the probability for success is relatively high.
- If success is achieved then challenging can continue to help others to build on success.
- It means not expecting everything to change at once.

It is not surprising if others react strongly to being challenged. You may have to help them share their feelings with you and discuss them. But don't insist on prolonging a conversation that is getting nowhere; you can always meet again when feelings are less intense.

The Five R's — a Five Step Guide to Challenging Behaviour

Challenging in this way helps you to: analyse conflicts, determine your needs and rights, propose solutions and negotiate change.

The approach requires preparation and planning. If at all possible, write out your 'script' before meeting with the other person(s) involved. This will help you to clarify the situation and define your needs; you will gain confidence by knowing what you are going to say. Later, you can reflect on what you actually said and its effectiveness.

Step 1 Reflecting

Before talking to the person with whom you are in conflict, take some time to consider what your motives are, particularly if you intend to ask them to consider changing their behaviour. You are much more likely to succeed if you have a genuine desire to help the other person, to give them information they may not have or to enable them to recognise the effects of their behaviour.

Step 2 Reporting

Reporting means saying exactly what is happening. Be as specific and objective as possible. Avoid generalisations. Avoid guessing at the other's motives or accusing them of bad faith. Talk about specific actions or events, "You ask closed questions, for example...". You can introduce your script with easing-in phrases such as, "I would like to discuss something with you." or "I've noticed that..."

Step 3 Relating

Relate the effects of the behaviour, describing the emotional impact on you: "I feel ...", and any personal beliefs or values about it, "I believe that ..." or "I think that..."

Concentrate on the effects of the behaviour on you and 'own' your feelings: "I feel put on the spot when you use closed questions", or "I feel insignificant when you criticise me so often." rather than, "I hate it when you ..."

Step 4 Requesting

Invite the other person to discuss the issue in a way that is both tentative and specific. Put in concrete terms about what you would like to be different and make sure that the request is reasonable and within the power of the other person to meet.

Step 5 Results

Spell out the positive consequences of the changes being made to meet your request. Indicate the benefits for the other person, for you and for other people.

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