

Dealing with Difficult Students

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Introduction.

Basic Premise:

1. Instructors are responsible for creating an overall environment that promotes learning. We role model to our students. They note our reactions to difficult students and may become allies in supporting the learning environment or they may contribute additional challenges in dealing with difficult students.
2. First, dealing with 'difficult' students begins with self analysis. Next, we will identify some of their characteristics and suggest possible ways to deal with these challenges. Last, we will finish with an additional self analysis.

Self Analysis:

Leaders have different communication styles:

Task Oriented:

Get It Done

Characteristics: focused, direct, blunt, need to be in control, communicate directly, and to point, decisive, confident, goal oriented

Limitations: bully, alienate, intimidate, seek less cooperation

Get It Done Right

Characteristics: attentive to details, systematic thinking, need to be correct, communicate indirectly and detailed, accurate, fact-finders, precise, organized

Limitations: stubborn, boring, unimaginative, resistant to change

People Oriented:

Get Appreciated:

Characteristics: need to be appreciated, creative, warm, charismatic, energized, need to be recognized and applauded, communicate directly and elaborately, people oriented, good verbal skills, optimistic

Limitations: egocentric, disorganized, 'flaky', lack follow thru

Get Along:

Characteristics: agreeable, personable, friendly, caring and helpful, communicate indirectly, considerate, team-player, patient

Limitations: indecisive, waste time/ procrastinate, too emotional, poor problem solver

Questions to ask yourself:

- Do I consistently encounter 'difficult' students in and out of the classroom?
- How am I influenced by 'difficult' students?
- Do I get angry and upset with students at least once a day?
- Do I wake up dreading going to class? Is my energy level low? Do I feel drained?

Are students out to get me?
Am I irritated by the little things?
Is my school motto "TGIF"?

Identify the leadership description is most like you. Then, think of a specific situation with a 'difficult' student. Describe how this person affects you:

- _____ I am drained.
- _____ I have a bad mood.
- _____ My self-esteem lowers.
- _____ I find myself tense.
- _____ I am relieved when this person leaves.
- _____ I fantasize about 'hurting' this person.
- _____ I plan ways to avoid this person.
- _____ I act differently with this person than with others.
- _____ I am just waiting until the semester ends.
- _____ I hope this student doesn't take any more classes with me.

Idea: Keats: "Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder". Burson: 'Difficult' lies in the eyes of the beholder!

We think that the important 'battle' is out there... with the 'difficult' person rather than within ourselves. You are not 'difficult' unless I give you permission to be 'difficult'.

Basic or root causes of being 'difficult': anxiety, fear, jealousy, insecurity, low self esteem, inflated self esteem, immaturity, inexperience, _____, _____, _____.

ABCs of Difficult People

Angry:

Description:

Some individuals are consistently angry. They believe it is normal. This is a pattern when you see anger that is overly dramatic, irrational, or used repeatedly. Some use anger to intimidate others and to control others... ignore.

Loud, explosive and rude, don't consider other's need, disrespectful, controlling, confrontational, threatening, offensive, constantly provoke others, often very critical, fault finding

Underlying dynamics:

Angry people do not want to be questioned by the target of anger. They want to be heard. Usually 2 components: 1) root cause, 2) feeling of helplessness when no one listens.

Possible Solutions:

LISTEN. Stay neutral. Don't take it personally. Ask them to explain what it is that you have done wrong. Ask the student exactly what it is that they are upset about. Ask them to suggest a solution to the problem that is fair to everyone involved (including other students in the group/class).

Avoid: trying to calm them down or tell them they are not entitled to their anger.
Don't trivialize, but don't overvalidate it either. Be assertive...not aggressive.
Choose your words very carefully. Avoid pushing 'hot buttons'.

Deal with your own anger: physical activity, talk with a confidant or self-talk, have a good cry, seek spiritual guidance, learn to let go!

Physiological component:

Neutralize...breathing...change the thought "This isn't personal. It is not about me."

"I'm in control of me. I can handle this." Image yourself protected in a castle.

Change the rhythm of your talk...slower, calmly, and softly.

Change posture, sit down, lean forward toward individual, maintain an open stance to show interest, put your hand on your chin, point to your brain.

Make eye contact, but avoid staring.

Avoid their personal space.

Avoid pointing.

Cognitive component:

Listen...open mind, be present.

"You may be right; what you are saying is possible." "I'm sorry you feel that way; it wasn't my intention to hurt you."

Shift hemispheres. An angry person is talking emotionally, irrationally, and illogically and is operating in the right hemisphere of the brain. Ask questions that force logical responses.. activate the left hemisphere...specifically, technically, exactly...

ie. "You're a moron!" "Takes one to know one!" **NOT!**

"You're a moron!" "Okay, what specifically did I do to make you feel this way?"

Give me the details."

Find a solution. "There are lot of important things to talk about. Let's figure them out and do them one at a time." "Where do you suggest we start?" "How can I help?"

"What can I do?"

Behavioral component:

Action Agreement

Arrogant-know-it-all:

Description: know everything about everything, pretentious, socially inept, exhausting, boring, selfish, pushy, annoying, clueless, talkative, critical, offensive, stubborn, condescending, judgmental, talk at you not with you, overwhelm you with data and information, assertive, demonstrate minimal tolerance for correction and differences in their opinions.

Underlying dynamics: needs external approval, insecure (when challenged, you touch that part that feels so inadequate, the part he/she is working to cover up.

Defense mechanism to overcome insecurity and feel accepted, intelligent, and admired. Ravenous need to be appreciated. Need an audience for attention and appreciation which unfortunately turns people off and results in even less appreciation and attention.

Possible Solutions: avoid saying "I disagree with you." i.e. "That's an interesting idea, I never thought of that. Here's what I thought..." or "That's good. And how about this? Don't discount their opinion. Allow the possibility that he/she might be right. Use the Stop the Thought Technique and Give Them Love and Kindness Technique. Or the Direct-Confront Technique..." "Intelligent people such as yourself like to listen to what others say." (flatter their ego and reduce their insecurity and open the door to give and take communication)

Apathetic:

Description: Stay in background, minimally responsive, speak in monosyllables, reserved, quiet, weak, passive, fearful, tentative threatened, indecisive, lifeless, mousy, spineless, submissive, socially inept, 'yes' person, difficulty in making decisions, difficulty in handling confrontation, avoid making waves or causing any trouble, turned off to love, life, emotions, 'catatonic', powerless.

Underlying Dynamics: May have been deeply wounded, 'given up'.

Possible Solutions:

Ask open-ended questions. Give them time to think about answers. Align your voice tone with theirs. Mimic their body posture. Use facts, logic, and structure.

Bossy, Bully:

Description: abusive, adversarial, argumentative harsh, rejecting, rude, demanding, irrational, sadistic, defiant, arrogant, intimidating, pushy, offensive, socially inept, threatening, condescending, volatile, testy and stubborn, verbal terrorist, controlling, enjoy seeing others discomfort, emotional abusers, feared and avoided by others.

Underlying dynamics: Need to control, but have a cruel and sadistic streak.

"Get it done"...task oriented.

Possible Solutions: Mirror their behavior. Unplug. Use humor. Stand your ground. Focus on the bottom Line.

Chatterboxes:

Description: Annoying, lots of noise but say little that is valuable, uses words to get attention but usually has the opposite effect, give too much information, talkaholics, free-flowing stream of consciousness on everyone, conversation with themselves, talk about everything and everyone, no boundaries, diarrhea of the mouth, idle conversation, insignificant, endless stories are uninteresting, selfish, manipulative.

Underlying Dynamics: Need to feel loved, accepted, important.

Possible Solutions: Restrain the talkers and stalkers:

Set boundaries from the beginning and respect those boundaries.

Avoid divulging overly personal information to students.

Friendly without being their friend.

Be increasingly brief if they insist on trying to start a personal relationship.

Don't let students be rude to each other.

We are here to discuss everyone's ideas.

How to gracefully get students to STOP TALKING.

Try to compliment them

"You're ahead of me".

"Does anyone else have some thoughts on this?"

"Good point. That's very interesting...but to be sure that everyone has all the required information needed to pass the test, let's move on."

Avoid reinforcing their behavior. They take advantage of your good manners. Use the vicarious-fantasy technique. Direct Confront Technique...in private. Give them love and kindness. Help them to become more sensitive to other's body language to determine if others are interested in their conversation. Plan a 'cue' to let them know when they are talking too much.

Critic, Cut-You-Downer:

Description: sarcastic, directs attacks at others, arrogant, belittling, hateful condescending, insecure offensive, critical, disrespectful, fault-finding.

Underlying Dynamics: Low self-esteem, get a thrill out of belittling others particularly strangers, backhanded compliments (i.e. "you look so much better with all that weight loss"), never satisfied, insecure, full of self-loathing, feel threatened by others, may want something you have or you represent something they can't face.

Possible Solutions: Fail to reinforce comments. Direct confrontation in private. Let go of your emotional reaction. Detach from emotional entanglement. Don't encourage behavior...i.e. laughing, exchanging repartee. Calm questioning technique or give-them-love-and-kindness. Avoid using a whiny or argumentative tone...makes them defensive. Cross-examine type approach...pursue logical, nonaccusatory questioning or ask a simple question, "Now, why would you say something so rude?" or "Why would you make a comment like that?" Make individual accountable for their behavior. Unplug. Walk away and leave the critic without anyone to accuse and criticize.

Complainer:

Description: infect morale in a group, hang out in the background, or force other to waste time dealing with their gripes, poison atmosphere.

Underlying Dynamics: Every complaint is a hidden request. Complainer wants to be heard, wants listener to respect him enough to take some kind of action. They sense that something is not right and do not know how to fix it. Need an audience. They revel in the problem and may not be interested in a solution. Angry without taking responsibility for it.

Possible Solutions: Move them into a problem solving mode step by step. Provide factual information that answers "who, what, when, where". Avoid agreeing, don't nod head, apologize or sympathize...the complainer will go elsewhere. Use directed questions. "What would you like to see happen here?" "How can I help you handle this right now?" "What do you see yourself doing to settle this issue?" "What do you think we should do about it?" "I have a meeting right now. Why don't you think about this and then let me know where you want to go with it." Always bring it back

to the complainer and how she is going to arrive at a resolution. Ask questions that encourage elaboration.

Further Self Analysis

Become aware of what the difficult person does to upset you. Avoid subjective labels (i.e. fundamental attribution error). Identify specific behavior that disturbs you.

i.e. Subjective label.

He's a jerk.
She's rude.
She is abusive.
She is a liar.

What's really happening.

He rejected my ideas.
She never smiles or says good morning.
She screams, curses, and insults me.
She promised me a raise, but no raise.

Verbal aikido. Don't brace yourself against a difficult person. Let them flow past you. Then guide and redirect the oncoming energy rather than meet it with a solid block. "Here are your options..." "What I can give you is..." "Which would you rather have..." "You make the choice." "Let's talk about this for a minute." These phrases open and redirect the conversation where you want it to go. Avoid saying: "No comment." "I can't answer that." "Maybe, maybe not." "You have no choice." "It's not policy."

Mood Changers: Do Something for yourself!

Call or see someone who makes you feel good.
Be quiet and listen. Music.
Look outward. See an amusing or inspiring movie. Go to a café...do something nice for someone..volunteer
Eat a piece of chocolate...not the whole box
Exercise.
Get a massage.
Collect desk 'toys'.
Collect picture...family, nature scenes
Find a child, dog, or cat.
Target the root cause. Ask yourself, "Why am I really upset?"
Get what you need.
Be quiet and breathe. Fifteen minutes. Meditation. Yoga.

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Glass, Lillian. *Toxic People: Ten Ways of Dealing with People Who Make Your Life Miserable*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1995.

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