

## Workplace Relationships

### **Coping With Difficult People**

"It was 4:50 p.m. on Tuesday. Cheryl was anxiously waiting for a 5:00 p.m. meeting with Mary. The meeting was set so that Cheryl could discuss the need for Mary to take over responsibility for the annual general meeting; a move that would not please Mary. But Cheryl cringed because Mary had a tendency to explode, yell, and scream when she did not get her way. Cheryl knew this behaviour very well, since she had been the receiving end of Mary's wrath on more than one occasion. The clock ticked closer to 5:00 p.m. Cheryl slowly got up from the chair and made her way to the meeting with Mary. She said to herself: "What am I going to do this time if Mary explodes?"

In work life and personal life, we are constantly confronted with individuals such as Mary, and this sometimes poses a difficult situation for us. These difficult people, with this type of communication style, can also be negative, will complain, withdraw, be incapable of making decisions, and so on. As a result of dealing with these people, those at the receiving end can experience feelings such as anger, frustration, hurt, and anxiety. They often wish that they could walk away from these unpleasant conversations, but in most cases they cannot, especially if they are dealing with family members or co-workers. One way they might decrease their sense of discomfort is to react to these communication styles. In particular, they can learn to cope with these people by changing their reactions to these challenging behaviours. Those who engage in difficult behaviour, continue to do so because it gives rise to positive outcomes. Specifically, these people direct unpleasant behaviour toward those who will, in turn, react in a way that supports or reinforces the behaviour. For example, Mary most likely responded to Cheryl's request in a hostile manner by yelling and screaming. Cheryl in turn might have withdrawn the request in order to avoid the unpleasant situation and to establish a more harmonious environment. However, Cheryl's behaviour not only ensured that her own needs would not be met, but in the process also reinforced Mary's explosive behaviour.

The key point to remember is that in many cases, people will not change their unpleasant styles of relating, but rather the person who deals with them must learn to change the way in which they respond to these types of people. This goal can be achieved by attempting to understand the reason why people behave the way they do and then identifying the coping strategies that will change the nature of the conversation.

## **Attempt to Understand the Difficult Behaviour**

The first step in coping with difficult communication styles involves an attempt to understand the motivation that underlies the behaviour. Perhaps these people behave the way they do because they feel insecure, out of control, anxious, powerless, and so on. In Mary's case, she might explode when dealing with people because she feels threatened, frustrated or fearful. This is simply the way in which she has learned to deal with unpleasant feelings or situations. In order to develop an understanding of this difficult communication and relating style, the following question needs to be answered: "What might be motivating this person's behaviour?" Understanding this is helpful to the receiver because it becomes clear that people who engage in this type of behaviour have specific needs and vulnerabilities. Although these people can be a challenge to deal with, they generally have many redeeming qualities.

## **You Can Cope With Difficult Styles!**

The next step in dealing with difficult people is to identify strategies for coping that will change the nature of the interaction between the sender and the receiver of the behaviour. Coping strategies are simply alternative responses that receivers can use when dealing with these people. Some general strategies that might be used are to listen and acknowledge what the person is saying, let the person vent their frustration, state an opinion, and focus on problem solving. In the case with Mary, Cheryl might have previously responded by giving into her demands, and in turn, failing to assert her own needs. However, in order to break this style of communicating, Cheryl's coping strategy for dealing with Mary might be as follows:

- Let Mary vent her frustrations.
- State in a firm manner that the issue is important and must be discussed.
- End the conversation if the yelling continues, and explain that when Mary calms down, the meeting will continue, so that the issue can be resolved.

These types of responses change the nature of the communication between Mary and Cheryl. They send a clear message to Mary, indicating which specific behaviour is not acceptable, and that Cheryl will no longer react in the typical manner that supports the inappropriate behaviour. As a result, Mary might ALTER her behaviour. But more importantly, some of Cheryl's needs could be met. For instance, by acting in an assertive manner with Mary, Cheryl may be able to decrease her heavy workload by passing on to Mary, the annual meeting responsibility.

One way to learn about coping techniques is to observe others who have successful interactions with the individual. In Cheryl's case, she is aware that Bob successfully communicates with Mary. He is able to present his opinions and have his needs met when interacting with Mary. In turn, she reacts to Bob in an accepting and compromising manner. By observing Bob, Cheryl can identify and use the positive coping strategies that he uses when communicating with Mary.

### **Practice! Practice! Practice!**

Once the coping strategy has been identified, the next step is to implement the strategy. This step requires both practicing the coping skill and choosing the right time to implement the new behaviour. The person should practice the new coping skill before trying it out so that the behaviour can become more ingrained and automatic, and subsequently will most likely lead to a successful outcome. The person will also feel more confident when he or she encounters the challenging communication style. Next, the time that is chosen to try out the skill is also important. The person should choose a time that will allow privacy and sufficient time to discuss the issue.

### **"How Will I Benefit?"**

The process of understanding Mary the exploder, and identifying the best coping strategies to deal with her behaviour, is a process that can be applied to all types of difficult styles: complainers, know-it-alls, and the like. By taking a few minutes to assess the situation, coping strategies can be identified that will change the outcome of the conversation between the sender and the receiver.

Just think for a moment of all the advantages that people will experience when they use successful coping strategies. First, their feelings of frustration will decrease.

Next, balance will be restored in their relationships with other people. Finally, they will feel better about themselves and experience a strong sense of accomplishment.

You may be in this type of situation, where you have your own "Mary" to contend with. We know that the dynamics of each circumstance is different and a personalized approach may be needed. You will need courage and commitment to follow through with changing your reaction and behaviour when dealing with a "Mary," but remember that you are the one who has decided to make this change, unbeknownst to "Mary."

An EAP counsellor will support and guide through this "modification" period. This time could be very frustrating and discouraging, especially if you do not see desired results immediately ("Mary" didn't agree to change her reactions, but you want to change your approach). Your counsellor is there to listen and work out strategy when needed. With luck, "Mary" could realize your new approach and respond responsibly.

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