Separate Relationship Issues From Substantive Issues

When people at work disagree, two outcomes are in doubt:

1. What decision will be reached
2. How the individuals will feel about working together in the future

The first question involves the *substantive* issue, how the *content* of the dispute will be resolved. The second involves the *relationship* issue, how the *individuals will deal with each other* as people.

You can win at one level and lose at the other—get what you want substantively, yet make an enemy. Or vice-versa—you may not obtain what you want substantively, yet strengthen a working relationship.

To disentangle the two issues, explicitly separate your working relationship with the other person from whether you agree with or approve of that person's viewpoint. That means thinking, "I will treat this person well whether or not I like what that person thinks or does."

The United States maintains embassies and communicates regularly with officials in many nations—despite disapproving of various policies some of these nations have. So, if someone at work seems difficult, you might say to yourself:

> *I can and will maintain a decent working relationship with that person, although I don't like what that person does. Our relationship doesn't imply that I agree or approve of that person's behavior. Like governments all over the world, I can keep open lines of communication with people I regard as difficult or even as enemies. That's the only way improvement can ever occur. It's possible and sensible to disentangle substantive and relationship*

Be Unconditionally Constructive

Many people deal with difficult people in the same way those people treat them: by reciprocating what they receive. This may be called an "eye-for-an-eye" policy. If the other person yells at them, they yell back. If the other person snubs them, they ignore the other person. If the other person insults them, they insult that person right back. If the other person cheats them, they cheat the other person.

The eye-for-an-eye policy is based on a traditional approach to justice. Unfortunately, in a modern organization, it is largely ineffectual, even dangerous. Why? The "victim" often is damaged as much as the perpetrator. Reciprocation sets off a negative spiral.

If A lies to B, and B deceives A, what is A likely to do next? Tell the truth? Unlikely. More than likely, A will lie again—but more cleverly this time.

If A threatens B and B counterthreatens, what is A likely to do? Capitulate? Hardly. Instead, A will probably present a more severe threat or carry out the original threat.

Reciprocation doesn't resolve anything. It doesn't cure A of being difficult. It just elicits *more* of the same difficult behavior, and it converts B to A's style of relating. A negative, escalating, mutually destructive cycle of difficult behavior is generated.

What's the alternative? Being *unconditionally constructive.* That is, being committed to forging a good working relationship whether or not the other person reciprocates.

You might think that this is a ridiculous solution. Why should you be considerate and constructive when someone else is simply being difficult?

- If the difficult person is being irrationally angry, are you better off responding angrily or responding reasonably? (If you respond angrily, all you produce is a heated battle. If you respond reasonably, you're less likely to do something rash or foolish.)
- If the difficult person won't listen to you, are you better off ignoring that person or trying to understand him or her? (The more you listen to and know about that person, the less you "shoot in the dark" for a solution and the more effectively you deal with the person.)
- If the difficult person breaks a promise to you, are you better off breaking your own promises or keeping your word? (If you keep your word, you remain trustworthy and your words will have more impact.)

A good friend of the black educator Booker T. Washington tells of a time when he and Dr. Washington were walking down a city street together. A passerby recognized Dr. Washington. The man's face turned mean, and he deliberately bumped into Washington, uttering a racial slur as he did.

The friend was livid. He asked Dr. Washington: "Aren't you going to retaliate? Give him a tongue lashing!"

Washington smiled patiently and replied: "No. I refuse to let any man cause me to hate."

Washington was determined not to let someone else's behavior, especially a bigot's, determine his own. He insisted on remaining in charge of his own thoughts and behavior, on not following the eye-for-an-eye policy. He chose to be unconditionally constructive.

Beware of Partisan Perceptions

Each of us sees the events of our lives and other peoples' behavior from our own vantage points. Thus, we see only "part" of the whole. (Recall the systems analysis approach in the section on "framing" behavior in Chapter 2.) We tend to think, nevertheless, that our perspective is accurate and representative of what's occurring.

Unfortunately, there are at least two sides to every story and many ways to view every incident. At the end of a hard week, for example, a boss and an employee reflect on life in their organization. Each sees things a little differently.

The employee laments, "There's too much paperwork in this organization." The boss complains, "People are always late with their monthly reports."

The employee thinks, "If I were boss, I'd have some control over my life." The boss thinks, "My employees have no idea how much pressure I'm under."

The employee believes, "My boss doesn't trust me—he's always looking over my shoulder." The boss believes, "I'm breaking my back to spend time with my people and train them."

The employee thinks, "My boss doesn't appreciate what I do." The boss thinks, "My employees don't appreciate what I do."

Where you stand on an issue depends, therefore, on where you sit. In other words, how you think about people depends on your position. When we judge difficult people, we often forget that our perceptions of them are only partial. Yet we defend, or become "partisans," of our perceptions.

There's much that people do that we don't see. There are interpretations of our own behavior that we don't consider. A company president once took a visitor on a tour of corporate headquarters. On the grounds was a fish pond. The president said he used it to screen job candidates.

The visitor asked, "How?"

"I ask them to look in the fish pond and tell me what they see," the president replied. "If they see fish, I hire them. If they see only their own reflection, I don't."

The company president knows that people who are entranced with themselves and their partisan perceptions become poor managers. Those who see other people and understand their viewpoints are more effective.

Balance Reason With Emotion

We all know that in some instances too much emotion can diminish performance. The person who is very agitated when taking a test or giving a speech performs poorly. A person who becomes furious at a child who commits a minor transgression hurts rather than helps the child. A person who fears going to the dentist feels the pain from a toothache escalate.

On the other hand, an organization with little or no emotion is dull and lifeless. Some experts say that the most effective leaders are extremely emotional—and even act as cheerleaders—about the goals they're trying to achieve. For example, an appropriate amount of emotion helps energize a speaker.

But responding impulsively and emotionally to a difficult person usually only worsens the relationship, especially if the person is making you angry. A good working relationship with a difficult person requires a reasonable approach. What can you do to balance emotional and rational reactions to behavior that upsets you? Fisher and Brown have several suggestions:

- *Take a break.* Ask for a short recess. Go for a walk, get a drink, or otherwise interrupt your buildup of emotion. You might even ask to adjourn your meeting and arrange to reconvene on another day.
- *Count to 10 if an official break isn't possible.* That disrupts your upward emotional spiral and gives you a chance to rethink the situation.
- *Consult a third party.* If you feel heated about your relationship with someone, ask for a reaction from a neutral party.

  Consider the following anecdote. A client once told his lawyer about some litigation he was considering. He asked the lawyer, "How would that case stand up in court?" The lawyer smiled and responded: "No problem. You're sure to win." The client thanked him and started to leave. The lawyer said, "Wait, don't you want me to pursue the case for you?" The client replied: "Nope. What I just told you was the other guy's side of the story."
- *Acknowledge and talk about your emotions.* Say, "Excuse me, but this is beginning to make me angry." Or explain precisely what is upsetting you:

  "This is frustrating me. When I tried to explain my plan for this account, I was interrupted in midsentence.

When I tried to be constructive and suggest that we bring in a consultant, your response—if I recall correctly—was 'Can't you handle this yourself?' What's going on?"

- *Accept responsibility and apologize if an argument erupts.* Say: "I regret that we're having this misunderstanding, and I'm sorry for my part in it. If I have misinterpreted what you were saying or done anything to upset you, I apologize." Such a statement makes it easy for the other person also to accept a portion of the responsibility and to agree to move on to a more reasonable approach. It is mature and constructive, not weak or passive, to accept responsibility for an argument you're involved in rather than to resort to blaming.

- *Prepare yourself when you know an emotional situation is likely.* When a lawyer knows a client will be cross-examined about a stressful event, the lawyer alerts the client beforehand so that the client is braced and ready, rather than surprised and upset, on the witness stand. Likewise, you might think about how you want to act in an upcoming encounter with a difficult person and actively elicit the appropriate emotions within yourself.

  Say you're worried that you might feel critical and angry with a difficult person. You'd prefer to be open-minded and optimistic. You can "recruit" the latter feelings by picturing in your mind how you'd like to act—that is, by mentally rehearsing the attitude you want to have. You also can dress, stand, and practice statements that are consistent with your preferred attitudes. With those rehearsed thoughts fresh in your mind, you're more likely to feel and come across as cool, calm, and reasonable in the stressful situation.

Inquire, Listen, and Understand

Every year in this country, thousands of companies merge with or are acquired by other companies. A shockingly high percentage of these mergers fall far short of their financial goals. The predominant reason is that people in the acquiring company don't really understand the people, the processes, or the culture of its new partner. The lesson? We can't deal effectively with difficult people unless we understand them. Unfortunately, however, people usually overestimate their understanding of others.

When you feel that someone is being difficult, it's always best to assume there's a good reason for the behavior—a reason that you don't yet understand. In an interview with *Psychology Today,* psychologist George Miller said, "In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true, and try to imagine what it's true of." Unfortunately, most people assume that what other people say is absurd or untrue and try to imagine what could be wrong with them to make them say anything so ridiculous.

The Japanese have an apt story that illustrates how important it is to be open to inquiry, to listening, and to trying to understand. An American tourist visited a Zen monastery and asked the abbot to explain Zen philosophy to him. The abbot could tell from the American's manner that he already thought Zen to be merely a quaint, archaic, bizarre way of life, so he asked the visitor to join him for a cup of tea. The American was annoyed at this delay, but agreed nonetheless. The abbot set out two cups. He poured tea into the American's cup until it was full, and then continued pouring. The American shouted, "Stop, you can't fit any more tea in there—it's just spilling over the side!" The abbot smiled and replied: "Ah, and that's what would happen if I tried to explain Zen to you. Your mind is already full of

preconceptions. You have no space to receive what I would say. My words would simply pour over the sides. Empty your mind. Become open to learning, and then we can speak meaningfully."

In the same way, we must first empty our minds of preconceptions about difficult people. We must not assume we understand them. We must ask ourselves, "What do they care about?" Studies by Harvard psychologist David McClelland, for example, indicate that people are primarily motivated by one of three things:

1. *Achievement*—the desire to do interesting work and do it well
2. *Affiliation*—the desire to form good relationships with people
3. *Power*—the desire to achieve status and influence

Many people who are motivated by achievement think that affiliation-oriented people are lazy socialites and that power-oriented people are do-nothing bureaucrats. People motivated by affiliation might think that achievement-oriented people are workaholics and that power-oriented people are heartless. People who want power may view the other two types of people as spinning their wheels and getting nowhere. People who jump to these types of conclusions forget that other people may have different interests and desires—"march to a different drummer," so to speak—than they do.

A student once asked a professor to teach him the secret to the art of conversation. The professor said she'd be glad to. The student waited. The professor remained silent. The student finally blurted out, "I'm listening." The professor replied, "Aha, now you know!"

Consult Before Deciding

When people work closely together, what one person does usually affects the others. (This interdependence certainly applies to members of a family as well.) Yet we often make decisions or take actions without consulting or even notifying the people who will be affected by these actions and decisions. Unfortunately, this usually upsets the people who are kept in the dark and destroys good working relationships.

Why do we sometimes neglect to consult those affected by our actions? Usually, it simply doesn't occur to us, or we assume there's no need for it. Perhaps we think we already know what the other person will say. Or we're sure we've made the right decision and feel we have the authority to make it. So we just "tell" the other person what we've done and expect that person to accept it.

But people don't like being controlled by others, even if what's decided is in their own best interests. People like to participate in decision-making, even if they would have made the same decision anyway. So it's best always to consult anyone who will be affected by any of your decisions.

This doesn't mean giving up your right to decide, however. Consulting merely involves letting someone know that you are considering and soliciting input about a particular matter and that you are taking that input seriously. When you consult others before making a decision, they feel as if you see them as important, as meaningful players in the decision-making process. When people don't feel coerced into accepting a decision, they are more understanding and accepting of the decision. Consulting others before deciding leads to being appreciated rather than to being viewed as a difficult person.

Be Trustworthy

Working relationships are better among trustworthy people. People who can be counted on to keep their word are trustworthy. Trustworthiness is not an objective measure of honesty and reliability. It is a qualitative measure. If I *believe* you will do what you say, then I perceive you as trustworthy. If I suspect you won't, your credibility with me is low.

Faith in people is fragile. Once broken, it's hard to restore. You may think: "I have good intentions. I usually come through with most things I promise. I'm not trying to hurt anyone. I should be trusted." But being trustworthy in three out of five instances doesn't earn trust. Every single breach of trust diminishes people's confidence in you. Even if you keep your word nine out of ten times, others will remember the one time you didn't and wonder when you will disappoint them next. (Many people's trust is as disproportional as the man who told the dictionary author, "You're disgusting. I've read your book and there are at least ten instances of profanity in it!")

Sometimes we make promises carelessly—when we say, for example, "I'll be home by 6:00" without checking our afternoon calendars. Or we treat promises lightly, saying "Don't worry, I'll take care of that" to reassure someone and then neglect to follow up in the press of other events. Sometimes we tell little white lies, such as "I never got the message" or "I tried to reach you" to someone we should have called back. These apparently insignificant breaches of trust gradually erode our credibility and encourage others to indulge in their "difficult" behavior.

Most people believe themselves to be more trustworthy than others think they are. We forgive ourselves more readily for minor transgressions that linger in other peoples' minds. *We* know why we neglected to do something.

We can improve our trustworthiness by taking our promises seriously and making an effort to fulfill them—by being on time for appointments, for example. Also, when we know ahead of time, we can warn people about obstacles that are likely to interfere with our ability to keep commitments. We also can honestly admit, explain, apologize, and offer to do whatever it takes to compensate for our broken commitments when they do occur.

We can help other people be more trustworthy as well. We shouldn't tempt people too much by "overloading" them with trust. If someone leaves money lying around and people take it, who is at fault? Not just the thief. The person negligent with the funds is guilty of "trust overloading." Most firms hire auditors to go over their books, not because the firms suspect their employees of stealing, but because that precaution keeps opportunities for violating trust to a minimum.

Society abounds with examples of "trust control." Banks seek collateral on loans, landlords collect security deposits when renting apartments, and customs inspectors examine the luggage of overseas travelers. All do so to keep trust within manageable bounds. Likewise, you can help unreliable employees be more trustworthy by incorporating more "auditing procedures" into their work—by more frequently checking their progress and performance.

Be wary, too, of "underloading" people with trust. Peering over peoples' shoulders in perpetual distrust damages their trustworthiness. Backseat drivers don't help youngsters develop their own driving judgment. If you frequently suspect someone of unreliable behavior, you eventually create a self-fulfilling prophecy—that person begins to think dishonesty is normal and expected. To avoid trust underloading, many

businesses have employees perform their own quality inspections rather than use quality inspectors. Separating production from quality control had created, in many cases, a division between the two functions. Producers thought "What can I get away with?" and inspectors thought "What can I catch?" If you assume people don't care about their work, soon they won't.

When untrustworthy behavior occurs, we must control our anger. Perhaps we're overreacting based on our own perceptions and biases. What you may view as intentional betrayal may be mere forgetfulness or a misinterpretation of expectations. Or you may be giving your own needs higher priority than the other person does. (A mother once was asked how her children's marriages were going. She replied: "My daughter married a wonderful man. He buys her expensive gifts, takes her on lavish vacations, and brings her breakfast in bed. My son married a terribly selfish woman. She expects expensive gifts, lavish vacations, and breakfast in bed!")

Treat disappointing or difficult behavior as a *joint problem*, not as a crime. When someone doesn't do what you expect, don't simply accuse or blame. Ask "What can *we* do to be sure this doesn't occur again?"

Use Persuasion, Not Coercion

When people are being difficult and you have more authority than they do, it's tempting to *force* or *coerce* them to do as you wish. But compliance through coercion—such as threatening harm—provides only short-term gains and long-term losses. People resent being coerced and eventually express that resentment in angry outbursts or acts of revenge. Coercion creates competition to see who will "win," and methods to create win/win solutions are overlooked. Rather than resolve difficulties, coercion usually just perpetuates or escalates them.

A difficulty should be seen as a problem that both parties wish to solve through cooperation. Both should be on the "same side of the line," attacking the *problem,* not *each other.* Managing difficult behavior is not a contest; it's a challenge to invent a solution both people support and feel committed to implementing.

To do this, neither party can afford to adhere to only one way of handling the problem. An either/or, "take it or leave it" approach usually creates a standoff or results in one party coercing the other or giving up in despair. Remember the story of the two frogs thrown into the center of a huge vat of milk. One looked around, couldn't see the rim, gave up on survival, sank to the bottom, and drowned. The other, thinking there had to be a way out of the predicament, kept swimming. By morning he was standing safely atop the pile of butter his churning had created.

If people continue thinking, talking, and attempting to persuade each other of what's best, the law of requisite variety will begin to apply. That law, paraphrased from the world of cybernetics, states that the person who has one more alternative than the number of obstacles he or she faces eventually will triumph. In other words, "where there's a will (and available alternatives), there'll be a way."

Accept and Deal Seriously With Difficult People

It's tempting to scorn and reject people who don't fulfill our expectations. When disappointed, we become critical and disdainful. We slam the door on communication and give up on problem solving.

But we have to remember that the action that upsets us is only a small part of the difficult person's constellation of behavior. Consider, for example, the advertising executive who mishandled an account and had to report it to his board of directors. He started his talk by posting in front of the room a large sheet of white paper with a small black dot on it. He asked the board members to tell him what they saw. They said, naturally, "A small black dot."

The executive said: "Yes, and there's also a large white sheet of paper. Notice that when something is blemished, we attend to that small blemish and overlook the broad background on which it is placed. I hope you'll keep that background in mind when I make my report this morning."

The difficult behavior of many people is simply a small dot on a large background. Be sure to keep that background in mind. Let the offending person know you are aware of his or her positive qualities. Even if the person is a support worker, he or she is equally a human being and worthy of basic respect. Treating people with acceptance and respect, even if their behavior is difficult at times, provides the groundwork for improvements.