Personality Clashes

Why do some people at work seem sensible one minute and irrational the next? Why does the boss always blow her top when she talks to Jim, and why does he “smart” back to her when he should just be quiet? Why do some subordinates fight you, directly or indirectly, at every turn? And how does that guy down the hall know the buttons to push that annoy people to death whenever they have to work with him?

Nearly every office has at least one difficult person—someone whose actions, manner, or tone of voice evokes an emotional reaction in us, as opposed to a rational, strictly-business one. And no office is spared the occasional sticky human-relations situation—whether it’s a crotchety customer, a supplier who’s always late and full of lame excuses, or a tight deadline that sends people into bouts of rage or depression. Handling difficult people may be as simple as coping with discomfort when you speak with them or avoiding them when possible. It may also be as serious as the loss of a job (yours or theirs), or a drop in corporate profits, productivity, or worse.

At one time or another, we all have to deal with defensive, incompetent, obnoxious, or uncommunicative people. At the same time, we too experience those horrible days when nothing goes right and we find ourselves snapping at co-workers, belittling subordinates, or griping to the boss. And when we work with difficult people, the difficulty may not be a personality clash but rather their ignorance of our needs. It may even be our ignorance of theirs. Our four sources agree that working with difficult people is a built-in business hazard, but that it’s also part of human nature, and we might as well learn how to deal with it.

“People are only difficult because they can cause emotional reactions in us. If they evoke no emotion in us, then they aren’t difficult. We have to recognize that we can deal with them either emotionally or rationally. We do have a choice”

Albert J. Bernstein is a clinical psychologist, a business consultant, and the co-author of Dinosaur Brains: Dealing With All Those Impossible People at Work (John Wiley & Sons), 200 East 22nd Street, Vancouver, WA 98663.

At times, all of us are difficult to work with. We may not know it, but our unconscious motivations take over to handle difficult situations. When we feel vulnerable because someone is attacking, criticizing, or causing us to experience illogical emotional responses, the instinctive, internally programmed part of our brains (what I call the dinosaur brain) kicks in and causes us to respond with one of four survival reactions:

- anger—protect yourself, fight back, or run away;
- danger—intruder in the territory; do something;
- sexuality—possible sex object; show off;
Bernstein's recommendations

1. Stop and think. Ask yourself what you want. Dictate your behavior by what you want to have happen, rather than how you feel about the situation. For example, if someone at work criticizes you ("That's the worst report I've ever seen"), your immediate response might be to fight back or run away. We are all programmed to respond to people who attack us or make us angry in a particular way. And even though that programming comes from the inside, it may not be the most appropriate response, especially at work—it may not get us what we want, in the short and the long run.

So, first you have to stop and think: Do I want to "get" this person—hurt him or her, make him or her go away forever? Or do I want to cooperate? Do I want to convince this person that my report is good? Do I want to find out what he or she thinks is wrong with my report? I'm probably going to have to work with the person again next week, so I might as well get as much information as I can.

2. The next step is to validate the other person. By that, I mean let the person know that his or her position is important to you. You can do that by paraphrasing—"So, as I understand it, you want this, this, and this." But before you tell the person what you want, let him or her know you're listening and trying to understand his or her point of view.

The most important tool you have in dealing with difficult people is empathy. If you can't see the situation from their points of view, you're probably going to make the situation worse.

To emphasize my point, let me tell you how I got into business consulting. About 15 years ago, my professional specialty was working with dangerous psychotics. One day, a bank in Chicago found itself in a situation where a crazy guy got into an argument with a loan officer because he couldn't get a loan. One of the vice-presidents came out and stood between the guy and the loan officer, saying, "You can't talk to her that way," and the guy shot him. After that, the bank needed someone who understood hard-to-handle behavior to talk to the employees. That was me, and that's how I got my start.

The bottom line is, if you treat your co-workers as you would dangerous psychotics, you'll be fine. And how would you handle dangerous psychotics? Like any other human beings—with respect and by letting them know you can see things from their perspectives. It also means being very clear about what you want and what your needs are.

3. Next you want to ask the difficult person, "What would you like me to do?" This is a subtility, because when you ask, you've got to be careful to put the emphasis on "like" or "you." If you put the emphasis on "me," you may insult the person and cause him or her to attack you.

There are two reasons to ask what you can do. The first is to get information on what the person wants from you. The other is that when you ask a question like that, the person has to stop and think. Anything you can do to get a difficult person to think rather than just react will be to your advantage.

For most people, the most difficult thing to react well to is criticism. When someone criticizes you, you automatically slip into your dinosaur brain—you want to fight back or run away. Usually, it's an aggressive response. In business, in order to get beyond a certain
place, you have to learn to take
criticism. There are several tech-
tiques that people can learn. In my
seminars, for example, I use an
exercise that's modeled after the
Marine Corps's interpersonal train-
ing course. I have people pair up
and insult each other until they
laugh. And then the next time
they feel insulted, they can remember
what they learned in the exercise
and not be so totally devastated.

Another technique: The next
time somebody criticizes you, put
your hand over your mouth. Don't
answer back. Instead, try on the
criticism for one day. Tell the
person, “What you're saying is
interesting. I want to think about it
for a day, and I'll talk to you about
it tomorrow.” It's human nature
to become defensive. If I tell you
anything negative about yourself,
your immediate, natural response is, “No
I'm not.” We're all programmed
to respond that way. To get around
that automatic programming, you need
to give yourself a day—maybe
there's some truth there that you
need to hear.

Say your boss comes in and tells
you you're a lousy writer. Your
immediate response will be emo-
tional—and therefore potentially
difficult. The logical part of your
brain won't quite know how to
handle the criticism, so your
dinosaur brain will kick in to handle
it. But instead of reacting, try saying,
“Gosh, hearing that really shocks
me. Could you be more specific?”
Get the information, but don't
answer right away, at least not until
a day has passed. How many times
have you answered someone right
back, and then gone home, thought
about it, and said to yourself, “Boy,
if I had only handled it this way.”

Don't try to explain. As far as
I'm concerned, explanations
are almost always in the service of
the person doing the explaining and
not the person you're explaining to.
If you start explaining something
without thinking about it, your
explanation may easily end up
being a disguised attack, especially
if you're feeling angry. Another way
to make the other person feel
attacked is to begin or end an
explanation with “you are” (“I'm
just trying to explain to you how
wrong you are.”). It won't get you
anywhere, except to make the other
person feel more defensive.

If you're my boss and have asked
me why I didn't get a cost/profit
analysis done, and I start explain-
ing to you, my explanation will usually
be: why I'm right and you're wrong.
I might say, “Well, I did do the
analysis; it's on page 10. If you'd
read the report, you'd have seen it.”
Or I might tell you that the people
in marketing were supposed to
come out with the figures, and they
never showed up. Both exanaions
could make the situation worse.
Your boss's own internal pro-
gramming may recognize that part
of a fight-back or run-away problem
and respond in kind. So many times
our internal programming masquer-
dades itself as a perfectly rational
explanation.

Most of the time, people want
to know what you can do for them,
not why you did what you did. So
initially, don't explain. Don't tell
them what they did. Ask what they
want, tell them what you want, and
negotiate from that basis. If you feel
an explanation is needed, then do it
later, once they've calmed down.

Every criticism has two parts—an
attack, and information. You don't
necessarily need to respond to the
attack, but you can always use the
information. My grandfather used
to say, “If three people call you a
horse, buy a saddle.”

“Co-workers and bosses and
employees very frequently are
difficult out of ignorance, not
maliciousness.”

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recently of Never Work for a Jerk!
(Franklin Watts, Inc.; a Dell paper-
back). She is also president of Patricia
King Associates, communications and
training consultants, 243 Waverly
Place, New York, NY 10014.

There are all types of difficult
people, but there are three main
categories—the people you work for,
the people you work with, and the people
who work for you. My expertise is
with the boss. All the research shows
that if the boss is a jerk, that's much
more troublesome than having diffi-
cult co-workers or employees. The
boss makes decisions that affect
people's lives, and the research shows
that if you don't get along with your boss,
you can make yourself sick. A lot of
research also shows that having a
warm and supporting family at home
does not relieve you of stress imposed
during the day—rather, if your boss
makes your life miserable, you will go
home and make your family miserable.
We're dealing with a serious problem.

When I say never work for a jerk,
I really mean it. If you have a bad situ-
ation at work, you can grin and bear it
or you can walk away from it—those
are options you take by default. People
don't make conscious choices in that
regard. They try to grin and bear it, but
they don't grin while they're bearing it—they moan and groan. Some people
turn themselves into martyrs or
complain to their friends, but they
don't say anything to the boss. When
they cannot stand it for another
second, they quit. Usually, because it
is an emotional decision, it is not a well
planned one—they make that decision
by default, also. The first decision is
"woe is me, I can't do anything about
this, I'm a victim." After that, it's "I
can't stand it anymore, I've had it.
“You want to know how to change your boss’s personality?” Everyone will say yeah, and I say that it’s a three-step process. Everyone picks up pencil and paper, and I say that step one is to get a Ph.D. in clinical psychology.

**King’s recommendations**

1. Don’t jump to conclusions about people’s personality from their behavior. Say that I don’t want to do this interview, but you want to see people do is to start with the third choice, which is to try to change the situation. First, you don’t try to change your boss’s or fellow workers’ personalities. When I give talks on this subject, every once in a while I’ll look at the group and say, and I suffer—we have to do things at the last minute. I think you’re being mean and rotten about not inviting me. It may be an oversight on your part, but I don’t think about that, because I feel like a victim. I moan and complain about it, and when I can’t stand it any more, I may quit.

   But if I’m really smart, I will come to you. And rather than saying, “You’re mean to me, you leave me out, you’re a sexist, you’re an elitist” — instead of telling you all the problems that you’re causing—I talk about the future and not the past. I say, “I’m thinking about the meeting that you have with the salespeople. I know that they’re the only ones at that meeting, and that’s the way it’s always been, but I would like an opportunity for the next couple of weeks to attend as well. And here’s why I think I should be at that meeting. At that meeting, you discuss future campaigns, and I know about them, I can prepare my people so that we can be supportive. You also discuss problems with orders and order processing. You usually tell me what those are after the meeting, but if I hear about them firsthand, I can address them appropriately.”

   Basically, I tell you what I want to happen in the future and the benefits to you of that happening—the benefits motivate you to make a behavior change. I made my behavior change by breaking down and talking to you about it. Maybe I’ve even made an important behavior change in myself by trying to deal with the matter constructively. But your behavior change is to invite me to the meeting and to treat me well when I get there, and I’ve got to motivate you to do that. As I speak with you, I assume that you have no idea that what you’re doing is counterproductive, so I’m just letting you know.

3. When it can’t be changed, learn to adapt to the situation. Let’s say that I have a boss who is a slave driver. I feel that way because the boss keeps loading work on me, and I can’t possibly get it all done. I try to get the boss to stop doing that by setting priorities and so forth, but the boss doesn’t really get it. I have to adapt to that. I can delegate the work that I have. I can discriminate between what is and isn’t important. I can stop trying to be perfect.

   Or say I’m working with a difficult person in the accounting department, who always gets the numbers to me late. No matter what I do, I can’t get him to be on time. Maybe I think he has it in for me and is trying to make me look bad. But maybe there’s another way I can get those figures—possibly get them directly from someone else.

   You adapt. Human beings are particularly good at that. They don’t always do it consciously, and they don’t always do it in a smart way. As you adapt, however, you give up something—you’re giving up some of the satisfactions of what you are as a person, and that can be quite a sacrifice.

4. If you can’t change another’s behavior, and adapting is difficult, try to grin and bear it. But realize that while you’re bearing it, you accept the situation—you say
Then they put their pencils down. Step two is to convince your boss to go into psychotherapy with you as the therapist. Then you take 15 years of therapy with the person—some people think you have a chance after that.

But a person can change his or her own behavior and in that way change another's behavior. One assumes that the person has some motivation to do that, because he or she is feeling a certain amount of pain. Behavior changes require some guts and tact, but they aren't outside the scope of what most people can do. The main thing is to do a little self-assessment and some talking about the problem—talking to the person who is the source of the problem. Not in an accusatory or whining or ridiculous way, but in a constructive way. Being constructive is easy, but most people don't know how to do it.

If you think the problem is the boss's—or co-worker's or subordinate's—personality, and you cannot imagine getting along any better unless that person has a massive personality change, then you might as well give it up, because it's not going to happen.

The test to find out whether or not the person can change his or her behavior is to try to change it. If you try to change it, and it changes, then good. For instance, if you're unconscious, lying on the floor, I can think, oh no, you're dead. Another thing to do is to begin CPR immediately, and then if I can't get you to breathe, then OK, it's over. The smart thing to do is try to revive you, rather than pronounce you dead without trying. We should always try to revive the situation.

Things work out if you can change another person's bad behavior. A friend of mine had an employee who was huffy with clients on the telephone. She was a splendid employee in other ways, but had alienated one of the clients to such an extent that the client called my friend to say that he didn't want to do business with her any more. So my friend decided that he would have to fire the employee—if she upset one of the clients, she might upset others. He couldn't have that. I told him to change her behavior instead. He told her that if she had to do business with other people, then she would have to learn how to behave, and perhaps they would be pleasantly surprised to find that she really wasn't that bad.

In any event, she doesn't do business with that client, but all the other clients love her. The situation has changed—because my friend sat down with her, talked with her in a supportive way, told her what the problem was, and what the consequences were, and let her know that she couldn't act that way. She stopped doing it.

Co-workers and bosses and employees very frequently are difficult out of ignorance, not maliciousness. They may do it out of stupidity. Unfortunately, there's a big difference between ignorance and stupidity—ignorance is temporary; stupidity is permanent. If you're not invited to a staff meeting, it's not because you are a victim of maliciousness. Rather, it's because it's a sales meeting, you're not a salesperson, and the boss never thought of inviting you—it didn't occur to him or her that it would be useful, helpful, encouraging, or motivating to you. There's a lot of ignorance out there.

"You don't find out about the difficult people until you've been on the job. But you're stuck with them—love your job. Hate your inlaws, love your spouse."

Mary Stuckart is president of her own consulting group, Mary J. Stuckart & Associates, in Greenwich, Connecticut.

There are billions of ways in which people can be difficult. But when you take a job, it's like taking a spouse—you're stuck with each other. It's not often that people look very closely at the relationship they're going to have with other people in the company. When they first get there, they may have a chance to talk with them, but it's
a honeymoon period, everybody's being nice to each other, and they don't find out about the difficult people until they've been on the job. But you're stuck with them—love your job. Hate your inlaws, love your spouse.

You have a few choices when dealing with people who are difficult:
- You can reach some kind of accommodation with them.
- You can learn to cope with them.
- You can do battle.
- You can leave.

The thing we have to remember—which we forget about when we're taking a job and when we're involved in it—is the only control we have is over our own behavior; we cannot control those other people.

The company that hires us expects that we will reach an accommodation with the people we work with (though it's not on every job description). They expect us to cooperate, to get our work done through other people.

What makes it hard for people to deal with difficult people is they allow what a person does to be eclipsed by what he or she is. Most people don't understand the aspects of another person's job—they don't look at that other person as an individual doing a job, period. Forget about the fact that she doesn't smile or he isn't nice or she is gauche or he is messy in appearance. They tend to take the aspects of what that person is and consider that the work he or she does is of the same caliber.

They rarely say, "She's a messy dresser, but she always gets the reports in on time." Or, "The reports are messy, but they are legible and I can get my own work done." Instead, they say, "She doesn't smile, therefore she is difficult to get along with," when indeed the extent to which you have to get along is based on getting information from them, which they give you on time.

And a lot of people waste time discussing that person's personality with other people, making themselves angry that the person doesn't like them, and getting themselves upset. Then they react to that person in a negative way. It becomes a battle over

### Stuckart's recommendations

1. Avoid judgments about what a person is. A person can be anything you want, but you must ask, "What do I actually need from this individual, and am I getting what I need?" If you're getting what you need, then you're fine—you don't have to invite the person to dinner; you don't have to like the person. Of course you should be civilized and be all the things that you are, but you don't have to stew and worry. When you are concerned with what that person is, you have a tendency to reflect that in your own behavior toward that person. Then he or she gets negative feelings about your behavior, and you end up in a situation where not much work is being done and not much productivity is coming out of the relationship. You end up saying, "She doesn't like me, so I'll show her—I won't answer her calls, or I won't be there when she comes in the room." Always take a look at your colleagues or co-workers in terms of the work they have to do and what the work looks like when it is accomplished.

2. Find out how the difficult person communicates. If you have determined that you are saddled with a truly obnoxious colleague, and you have satisfied yourself that you are not judging personality alone, but that the reports aren't getting to you on time, he or she is not returning your calls, or he or she does not help you to get your job done, then you have to be creative.

First, keep yourself from getting upset, anxious, and angry. Then figure out the way that person communicates. Let's say the person is highly emotional and defensive. Maybe he or she understands feelings instead of facts. Perhaps he or she gets upset when you present facts, but may respond well when you say, "I get very upset when I can't finish my report on Tuesday afternoons. Will you please help me out?"

If the person always has a great idea but never seems to get anything done, try to appeal to the vision in that person: "Don't you see how great everything could be if you could do this and that? If you can get this report to me, can't you see what it would do for our department?"

Look for clues as to the best way to get the information you need from that person. Does he or she react better to written information, the telephone, or a personal visit? You have to look at it scientifically rather than with anger. It's that person's job, his or her responsibility to give you information. But it's your responsibility to be cooperative; go out and find creative ways to do that.

Another way to deal with difficult people is to figure out what time of day is best to approach them. Are they better before lunch, or in the afternoon?

You might want to make an ally out of one of their subordinates, who will get you the information may or may not be so—we never really have all the information about what another person is doing. When you start to have those feelings and to express them, then the quality of your own work suffers. And if you are reacting to someone negatively, then you are perceived by your boss and other people as being a person who is uncooperative, a person who is hard to
you need. You might be able to get help from your own boss. In any event, don’t wash your hands of the situation before you actually try to redeem it. Management is looking for people who can handle difficult people—you’ll get kudos for it. You want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

3. For difficult subordinates, give practical feedback. With subordinates, we tend to assess their character traits rather than the difficulties they have with the job. The most important thing is feedback, feedback, feedback. You have to make it understandable and clear; you cannot pussyfoot around; you have to be practical. You have to tell them exactly what you expect. Telling a subordinate that he needs to develop his social style is just not a practical way to do it. Rather, you want to say that you will not accept screaming matches in the hallway, for example—you have to be specific.

There are managers and supervisors out there who are constitutionally unable to give direct feedback. And it is something that subordinates are looking for. Your silence or the oblique way you approach something signals to subordinates that you either approve of what they’re doing or that you don’t disapprove. Managers are often unwilling to give feedback because of the possible emotional consequences—the person is going to get angry. What if he or she walks out? In our economic climate, managers would rather have a body—they think they can live with someone who comes in late or who is obnoxious. They think that if the body is gone, they’ll have nobody to do the small amount of work currently being done. They’re unwilling to force the issue.

4. If your superior is the problem, take the responsibility to cope with his or her shortcomings. We don’t look at our bosses in a very realistic sense. We want a great guy or a great “gal,” who’s woeful and kind and warm and who makes us feel good. We normally don’t ask, “Does he give me appropriate feedback on my job? Is she challenging me? Is he appraising my work realistically? Am I learning something here?” Instead, we say things like “He never smiles at me, she’ll walk by in the hallway and just nod.” We talk about a person’s character faults and build them up to a point where we feel he or she is not being a good boss. But indeed, when we take a realistic look, he or she may be a very good boss, in terms of giving us what we want.

If you spend more than 20 percent of your time dealing with a tyrant, a liar, an egomaniac, an incompetent, or a con artist, find another job. But by and large, the boss has the same quirks of personality we all have—we just expand his or her character flaws into major problems. One of the things we have to do—as in dealing with our co-workers and subordinates—is to manage that relationship. We have to take a look at the whole picture. We have to try to assess whether the boss is cranky all the time because she’s a crank or because she’s fighting for resources for the department.

You have to take responsibility for the relationship—don’t dwell on the boss’s shortcomings or brood about them, because it makes us mentally ill-equipped to deal with the situation constructively. You’ll become very emotional. Again, with a superior as well as with a co-worker, you want to take a look at what is causing the difficulty. It may be that you communicate differently. Some managers want to know everything you’re doing in your job. Other managers only want to know highlights. If you want to give a litany of your day, and the boss only wants highlights, he or she might feel compelled to listen to you, but it’s really making him or her feel very angry about the waste of time. You become the difficult person.

Again, take a look at the way the boss communicates—get feedback from your co-workers: How does Joe like to hear about what we’re doing? And ask the boss what he or she likes and doesn’t like. You have to take the responsibility of coping with the boss’s shortcomings and shoring up those shortcomings if you possibly can.

get along with—all of those things you accuse other people of reflect negatively on you by your own behavior. If you perceive other people not to be working as hard as you are, then it’s your responsibility to take that up with your boss and say, “What can I do to make the quality of my own work better and to meet your expectations?” Don’t bother with other people’s performance—it’s none of your business.

After you’ve done the things that you can do yourself to try to get your share of the rewards, and to do the work that’s been assigned to you, if you still feel that you’re the only one in the department who’s doing any work, you should, before you become bitter and angry, quit your job. It’s not worth it to stay in a situation like that.

But before you get to that point, be sure that you’re assessing the situation correctly. Look at it in terms of what you’re getting out of the job and not what everyone else is getting. We tend to assess ourselves in terms of what others are doing rather than in terms of our own relationship with the boss, the company, and the agreements that we set forth with them.
“Often, difficult people are trying to make the whole situation as ambiguous as they can, so that they have many paths leading out of it. What you want to do is limit the paths.”

R. Glenn Ray is the director of training and development for The Scott Fetzer Company in Westlake, Ohio.

If your superior is a difficult person, one of the key things is to make sure you have defined his or her expectations of you: What type of things does he or she want you to do? And make sure that you have a shared understanding of that expectation.

I had a supervisor once who didn’t take much time in terms of giving me feedback. I tried to force the feedback with memos, and I also did it verbally, asking, “Am I successful? Where do I need to improve?” Some people are not in the habit of giving that kind of feedback regularly, but I think it’s every employee’s right to ask for it if they don’t get it. You won’t always get it even if you ask for it.

Ray’s recommendations

1. It’s not a common thing to do, but if I’m expecting some kind of problem or future ambiguity about the results of a superior’s expectations, I might write a memo: “In our meeting on such-and-such a date, here are the things that I understood as being your expectations of me.” What you’re really doing is documenting your understanding of that meeting, and if that’s not the case, then the boss will let you know. If he or she doesn’t give you feedback, then you can assume your memo reflects the truth.

Also, if you have a history with that person of problems of lack of shared understanding of expectations, you can copy that memo to the next level. That’s a rather delicate thing to do, sending the memo to the superior and then to his or her boss—I wouldn’t do that routinely. Sometimes, though, it’s within the organizational culture to copy other people on a memo, so if it’s part of the culture, you’re probably in the clear. When you have your expectations meeting, I would wrap it up by saying something like, “I’d like to put together some of my thoughts on this”—you don’t want it to be a surprise.

Another thing to do is a thorough cost analysis—that’s something that can help you with a difficult superior. That way he or she has all the figures to the best of your knowledge up front, and whether he or she agrees or doesn’t agree to it, you have a leg up. If you have it up front, that can reduce a lot of barriers in the future.

Another thing I have found useful is to submit progress reports on the achievement of the boss’s expectations. In six months or three months, or however long you think necessary, provide a list: Here’s what I did in accomplishing those objectives—these are my successes. Provide some kind of memo keeping those things on top of his or her mind.

2. The atmosphere and environment in an organization is everyone’s responsibility, and if someone is chronically in a bad mood, for example, then it would be part of my communication of expectations to that person. I would ask, “What type of things do we as an organization have to offer you to improve that particular behavior?” I’ve identified what is appropriate behavior. This is what I see in terms of ineffective behaviors, and this is what I want in terms of appropriate behavior. Tell me what you are willing to do to make that movement.”

What happens in a lot of organizations is that people don’t address the behaviors that are ineffective. They let them slide. They ambiguously say, “You need to improve this, you need to quit doing that,” but they’re not talking about specifics. If you’re not giving the person the opportunity to change by clearly defining what’s inappropriate, by clearly defining the alternatives or the consequences of continued behavior, then you’re not doing the individual or the organization a favor.

3. In terms of peers, I talk in terms of contract. If I have a peer who wants me to do something or to join with him or her on a project, then I verbally define a contract. After we define the problem and decide what is an appropriate plan, I will make a statement: “Here’s what I’m willing to do, I can do these things, here are things I need from you.” What we do is line out responsibilities. If you have a history with that person that the promises don’t pan out, or that he or she doesn’t hold up his or her end of the bargain, you may want to document that in a memo also. The key thing here again is timetables: if you’re expecting something from someone, you’ve got to say, “I think
Another thing that’s important in an ongoing subordinate relationship is to talk about some kind of developmental plans and timelines and then let that person assist in defining the need areas and the action plans. As the relationship goes on, it is important that those things are defined.

So many times I see relationships between superiors and subordinates that define the things the subordinate needs to do, but not the things he or she needs to improve; there are no specifics in terms of actions that will aid improvement. Actually, they tend to leave off important things like timelines.

As you deal with subordinates, it is not your responsibility to change personalities; it is your responsibility, though, to make sure they understand the appropriate behaviors. As you give them every opportunity to move toward the behaviors that are expected and required, then you give them every opportunity they need to change. If they don’t change, then your opportunity is to move them somewhere else where they can change, which may be out of the organization.

The coming to shared understanding is where it’s all linked. Often, difficult people are trying to make the whole situation as ambiguous as they can, so that they have many paths leading out of it. What you want to do is limit the paths leading out of that communication. You want to move toward shared understanding with that difficult person, so that he or she knows not only that you understand, but also that you will understand next month. A lot of times, they expect that you’re going to forget what was agreed upon at a meeting. That’s a game that’s played quite a bit. Even though you have an agreement as to what should be done, someone will act as if that communication never took place. At that point, especially if there’s no documentation of what was said, it’s really just your word against theirs.

I can do my part of this by such-and-such a time. By when do you think you can do yours?” You can either agree to the time they need or say, “What would it take to get that earlier?” You make sure that people understand when something should be completed. That nails everything down.

4. On a more immediate level, you can take some facilitators’ tips about dealing with difficult people. In one of my facilitations, during an organizational change, there was a lot of anger and frustration—anger from the perception that they were not being listened to. Usually, I would have one or two very vocal people in a group of 20 or so—18 wanted to go ahead and hear the message of the meeting, but one or two people wanted to vent. The rest of the people weren’t interested in that. One of the key things I would do is to give the vocal people a listen—you don’t cut them off. When the discussion appeared to be moving into something that was personal or counterproductive, then I would try to summarize what I heard the other person say. Sometimes I would even turn to another and say, “How do you feel about that? Is this an important issue to you?” You may even throw out an overhead question to the whole group; you may direct it at some other person. That takes away a little of the sting of rejection—you make sure that they know you are listening and that you care what they have to say, but you want to deflect the anger.

Some people would want to draw the conversation back to their point whenever they had the chance. Sometimes I would say that the point was something we could talk about after the meeting—“I want to hear what you have to say, but let’s get together, one-on-one, later.”

Proxemics can help. If you’ve got a group in a U-shaped arrangement, and one person in the corner of the U is very vocal, you can move toward that person and inhibit his or her desire to dominate the situation. I’ve even turned away from a person at times, so that I focus on the rest of the group.

If someone wants to take up a lot of your time—wants to ramble about something that’s unrelated to work—you can stand up, walk to the door, and effectively end the conversation. Of course, you want to give them enough time to respect them as a person.

Those are things that work during a session, but you can bring them into the workplace.