

Dealing with difficult people

BUSINESS AND LIFE COACH, **JANET WRIGHT**, USES PERCEPTUAL POSITIONS TO TACKLE TRICKY SITUATIONS WITH YOUR MANAGER

Think of all the difficult people you have encountered in your lifetime. How much time, effort and money have you expended on dealing with them? Perhaps you're still wrestling with some of them today. If you would like to increase your chances of successfully avoiding such confrontations in the future then read on.

WHO ARE DIFFICULT PEOPLE?

Let's be honest – they are people who demand too much of your time. The trouble is that, in this fast paced, high-pressure world, we con ourselves into believing that we must save time to make time. We cut corners and, when we do this in unfamiliar situations, it often has opposite effect. So what can be done?

Think before you act. It sounds obvious but many a seasoned manager has embarked upon a course of action without adequately weighing up all the consequences.

When dealing with 'difficult' people it is important to start off by knowing what you want your ultimate goal to be. This is not the short-term euphoria of 'getting one up' on the individual concerned but the longer term effects of your actions.

PRESUPPOSITIONS WHEN DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

- Everyone has a positive intention behind his or her actions – it is important to understand (but not necessarily agree with) what that is.
- There is always a win-win solution – finding this is easier if you take the time to look for and understand the positive intention of the person you are dealing with.

THE OBSTRUCTIVE MANAGER

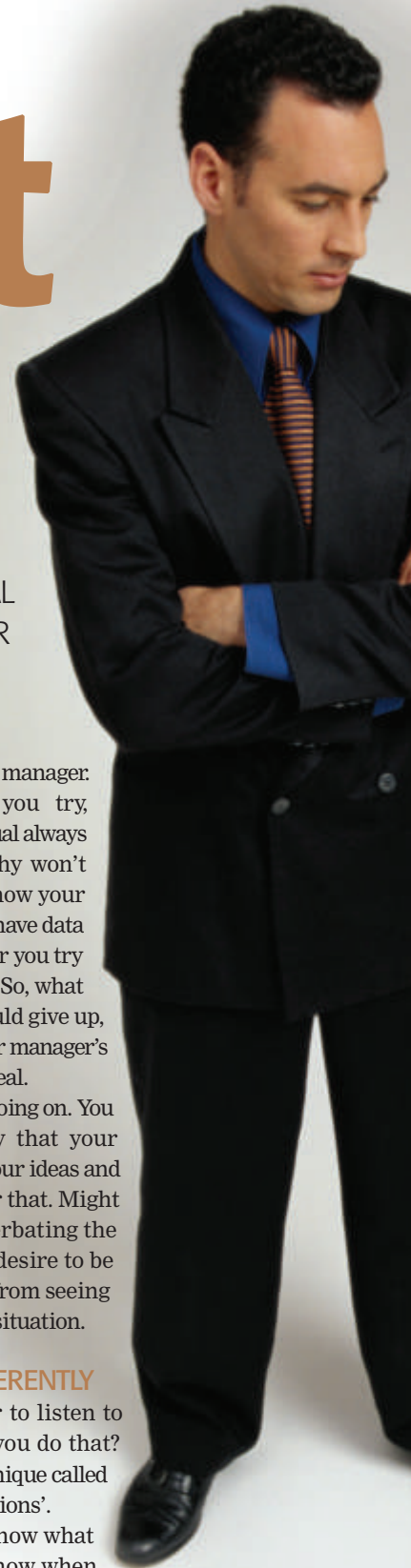
You don't get on with your manager. No matter how hard you try, meetings with this individual always end in confrontation. Why won't they listen to you? You know your ideas have merit and you have data to back this up. The harder you try the less success you have. So, what are your options? You could give up, keep trying, or go over your manager's head. None of these are ideal.

Stop. Consider what's going on. You know from past history that your manager won't listen to your ideas and so you should prepare for that. Might your behaviour be exacerbating the problem? Perhaps your desire to be heard is preventing you from seeing the true dynamics of the situation.

SEEING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

You want your manager to listen to your ideas. How might you do that? Let's look at a simple technique called 'different perceptual positions'.

We will assume you know what you want and you will know when you have it (see 'Designing your own future', Engineering Management, Dec/Jan 2004/05, pp38-39). Will this be okay with your manager? When you meet with your manager you create an interactive system – are you missing anything



important that can facilitate success? You can't know anything for certain but what you can do is imagine a realistic situation in the near future where you will be with your manager and try out your plan of action. You should do this from three different perceptual positions (see fig 1).

In the 1st position you are yourself, associated with your own feelings and reacting to what you can imagine your manager saying and doing. This is the situation you will be most comfortable with although you may not be happy with the outcome. "He's talking to me and typing on his keyboard at the same time. I find that really rude!"

In the 2nd position put yourself in your manager's shoes. You may find this easier to do than you think! You have a wealth of information about your manager that you can use to do this. What's his work space like? If he has an office what does it look like? What's he doing when you approach him? If he's always sitting at the computer then that's what you must 'try on'. Why might he be doing that? Does he look directly at you when you speak together? If not, where is he looking? What sorts of words does he use and how does he say them? Does he speak loudly or softly? What's his posture like? Is it relaxed or tensed up?

When you really feel that you are in your manager's shoes, notice how that feels. Again this is only your interpretation but you may gain some useful insights into your manager's behaviour towards you. For example, he may be thinking: "How come they always turn up first thing in the morning when I'm trying to catch up on my email? Why don't they make an appointment?"

Now from 2nd position take a look back over to 1st position where YOU are. Staying in your manager's shoes run the scenario again. How is that for your manager? Is there anything that that person over there in 1st position could do differently to improve things



“ Move toward a future you prefer rather than away from a present from which you wish to escape ”

for your manager here in this 2nd position? Run things as many times as is necessary to get the best result.

Now go to 3rd position. Here you are a 'fly on the wall', observing yourself in 1st position and your manager in 2nd position. It's important to be totally detached here. Observe with curiosity not judgement at how these two individuals interact. What do you see and hear? What advice could you give to that 'you' over there in 1st position that may help achieve the desired outcome in the most ecological way for the system you are observing?

Finally go back into 1st position and integrate all the conclusions you have made during this exercise and run your action plan again. You may notice things are different now, you feel more resourceful perhaps. If something doesn't feel quite right then take notice of this. Make incremental changes to your action plan and run through the exercise again until it is okay. You do not need to rerun the whole exercise from the start. With practice you will be able to rewind to the right place in your action plan, make the necessary adjustments and then spool to the end to check the result – just as if you were watching and editing a video.

Trust yourself. You will know when you have finished. Notice how you now feel about your next meeting with your manager.

INVEST TIME TO SAVE TIME

We often spend a great deal of time worrying about how to deal with difficult people. We either look for quick fixes or ways to avoid dealing with them entirely. It is better to channel that creative energy into finding a win-win solution. By taking different perceptual positions before you face that 'difficult' person you have a practical tool for making a difference, right now.

Of course you don't have to limit this technique to dealing with difficult people. You could equally use it to help deal with challenging situations; important meetings, interviews or public speaking (although in this case the 2nd position would be the audience). But don't forget, when dealing with difficult people you are part of the overall system – part of the problem, as well as the solution! ■

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Perceptual positions is a fundamental NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) process to help people shift their perspective in a given situation. Its purpose is to provide a fresh insight and understanding.

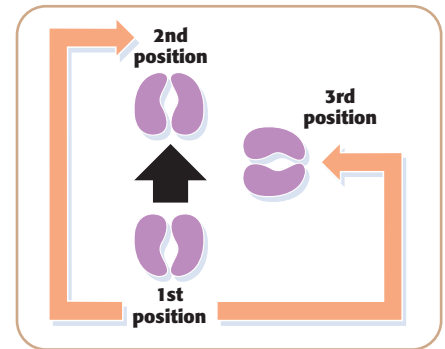


Fig 1: Having difficulties with someone? Try looking at the situation from three different 'perceptual positions'