DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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As learning lab directors, one of our primary concerns is to provide the best possible service to our clients. At the same time, we hope to do so cheerfully and effectively. Unfortunately, we sometimes have to first get past certain barriers such as aging facilities, inadequate budgets, or inappropriate learning materials. Difficult clients and even difficult employees can also be a barrier. Nevertheless, learning how to deal with difficult people can help us meet our objectives and also reduce much of the stress that comes from encounters with such individuals.

The purpose of this paper[1] is to explore some of the problems and solutions related to dealing with difficult people, specifically with those people we encounter in the learning lab: clients and employees.

COMMUNICATION

Difficult people often seem to be so because they don't immediately accept our point of view. In reality, difficult situations are often the result of two people who are not communicating effectively. Ask yourself just how often difficulties are caused by simple misunderstandings.

We all labor under certain misconceptions about effective communication. We often assume that because what we have to say is important, others automatically listen and understand us. Experience shows us, however, that this is often not the case. Some common *misconceptions* about communication in a lab setting include:

1. People pay attention when you are speaking to them. (An especially important corollary is: People pay attention to signs and other posted information.)

2. When people say they're paying attention, they really are.

3. When someone says "I know," s/he really does.

4. Saying something over and over again ensures that your listener understands.

5. Saying something over and over loudly (especially to non-native speakers) will be even more effective than just saying it over and over.

Closed lines of communication may or may not be your fault. Nevertheless, a failure to communicate very often can result in the perception that the other person is being difficult.

Understanding Both Sides of the Issue

Your Side

As strange as it may seem, the first thing you should do when encountering a difficult person is to examine yourself. Before you can adequately assess how to deal with the situation, you have to understand the points of view for both sides. Only then can you establish a common ground.

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Many personality and self-analysis charts exist that may or may not help you understand yourself. In general, however, it seems clear that at least two basic personality traits combine in different degrees to make us act as we do.[2]

1. Directive: Some people feel a need to be in charge, to direct the outcome of situations in which they are involved. For others, being directive not only is not important, but they actively avoid being placed in a situation that would cause them to take charge.

2. Affiliative: Although most people have the basic human need for love and acceptance, some people feel this need more strongly than others. Some will do just about anything to be accepted by those they encounter, including acceding to nearly any demand on their time or energy. Others simply don't care what other people think, and operate under the assumption that their time is their own and no one is going to stand in the way of their doing what they want.

Both traits combine in a multitude of ways to make up each individual's personality. For example, one person might feel a great need to be accepted by others, and also the need to be in charge. On the other hand, others might shun both opportunities to direct or to be involved with others.

Consider the grid in the figure.[3] Your own personality probably fits somewhere more toward the center, but often with a definite leaning more toward one end of each spectrum than toward the other. To complicate matters, your own personality probably varies depending on the situation. For example, sometimes you relish the opportunity to be in charge, while other times you wish you would just be left alone.

The following table[4] is intended to describe, in a general sort of way, some of the positive and negative personality traits that result from the combination of high or low directive and affiliative tendencies. It should not be interpreted too literally, since other factors also come to bear. Nevertheless, you might discover certain qualities about yourself and about others to help you better understand why you or others view some encounters as difficult.

Once you have taken stock of your own likes and dislikes, you then can begin to examine how you deal with, or prefer to deal with difficult situations. Ask yourself:

1. What do I expect in my relations with others?

Do you like to always take charge, or do you prefer that others make decisions for you? Do you like dealing with people, or do you prefer to be left alone? As a director, do you reward people for the wrong reasons (they have good looks, put in long hours but are not necessarily productive, etc.)?

2. What am I like in confrontational situations?

Do you always want to come out the winner? Do you want to "make peace," sometimes at any cost? Do you seek to avoid conflict, again at any cost?

3. What options are available to improve a difficult situation?

Nearly always there are options, from doing nothing, to taking on a difficult battle, and several points between.

When all is said and done, you might make one very important discovery: In some cases, it could be that *you* are the difficult person. Some changes in your own
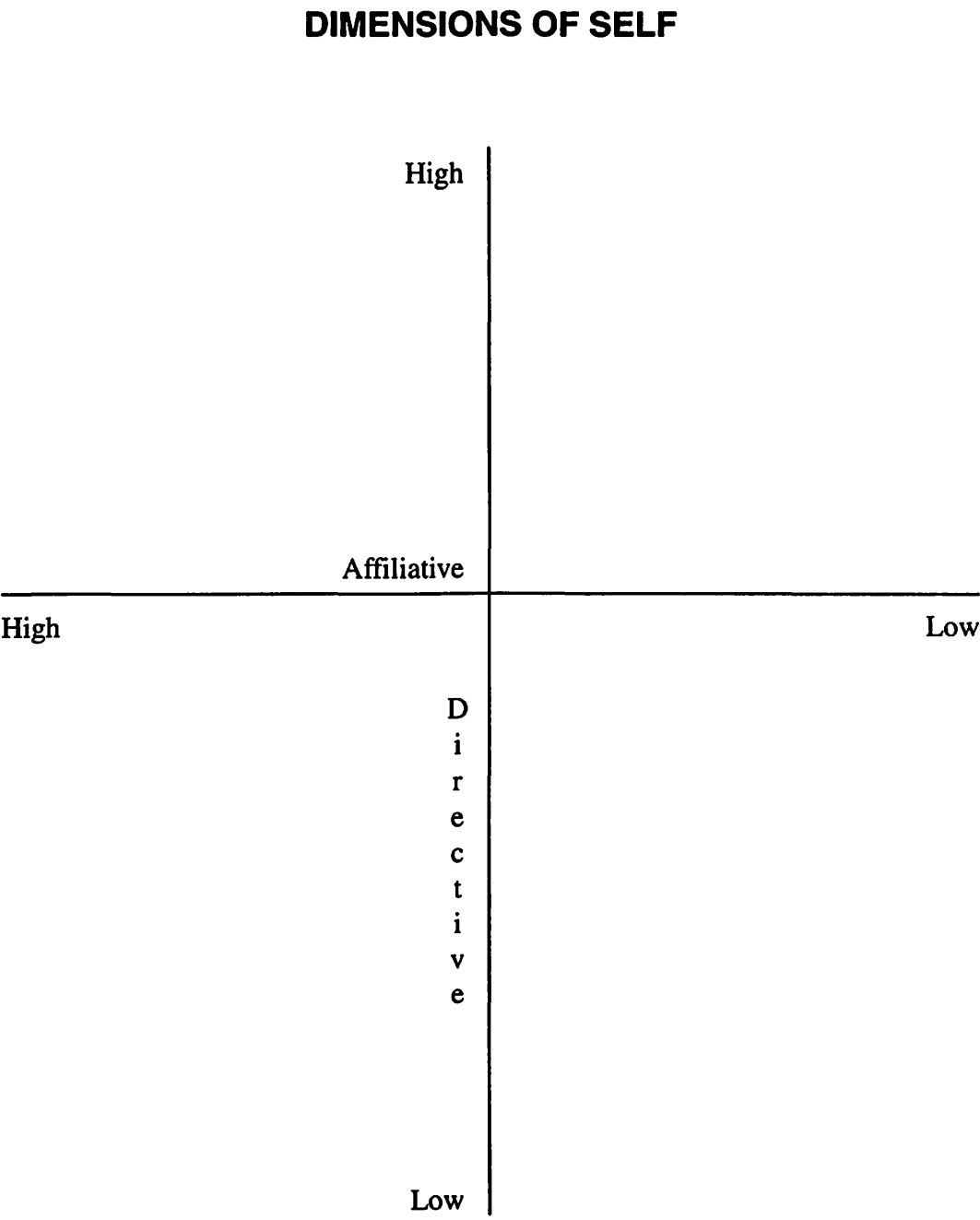
Figure 1

DIMENSIONS OF SELF

High

Affiliative

High   Low

D
i
r
e
c
t
i
v
e

Low

Table 1

Directive/ Affiliative	High Directive High Affiliative	High Directive Low Affiliative	Low Directive/ High Affiliative	Low Directive/ Low Affiliative
Strengths	Persuasive Risk-taker Competitive Pursues change Confident Socially skilled Inspiring Open Direct Outgoing	Practical Orderly Very direct Self-determined Organized Traditional Goal-oriented Dependable Economical Ambitious	Team-oriented Caring Devoted Enthusiastic Helpful Accessible Trusting Sensitive Good listener Good friend Likes variety Gregarious Peacemaker	Exacting Thorough Factual Reserved Meticulous Practical Calm Has high standards Risk-avoider
Limitations	Pushy Intimidating Overbearing Restless Impatient Manipulative Abrasive Reactive Dominating	Dogmatic Stubborn Rigid Unapproachable Distant Critical Insensitive	Too other-oriented Indecisive Impractical Vulnerable Hesitant Subjective	Slow to get things done Perfectionist Withdrawn Dull Sullen Shy Passive
Like in others	Attention Achievement Recognition Adventure Excitement Spontaneity	Ambiguity Irreverence Laziness Showing emotions	Popularity Closeness Affirmation Kindness Caring	Perfection Autonomy Consistency Practical Information
Dislike in others	Lack of enthusiasm Waiting Indecision Convention	Control Responsibility Mastery Loyalty Fast pace	Insensitivity Dissension Insincerity Egotism	Over-assertiveness Carelessness Arrogance Fakes

approach to difficult situations could minimize potential conflicts.

The Other Side

The easiest person to control is you. Learning about and controlling yourself is key to dealing with others. Nevertheless, difficult people do exist. Learning to understand where they are coming from also can help reduce conflicts.

Again, refer to the personality charts. Recognize that there are indeed many different types of personalities, and that there is no "correct" one. It may come as a surprise, especially to those of us who not only are lab directors, but also are quite directive, that only about 25% of all people are extroverts.

Become a student of other people. Learning what they are like gives you a leg up in dealing with them. In terms of employees, be willing to hire and work with people who are *not* just like you. Diversity can lead to a stronger organization. Try to discover just what people around you react to positively, and what they react to negatively.

There may be a fine line between judging and evaluating, but you first must evaluate (or learn about) others. In fact, learning more about others is a never ending process. Judging is easier, but it also raises barriers between you and the person you are judging.

CLASSIC TYPES OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE

As you study other people, you will begin to form your own opinions as to personality types and how to deal with them. The following are ten of the more common (classic) types of difficult people,[5] along with some suggestions for dealing with them.

The first three are hostile types. When thinking about difficult people in terms of lab clients, these are the first ones that come to mind. Remember, however, that there are seven additional personality types that you also have to deal with, primarily in your employees and co-workers. In some ways, dealing with these other types can be more difficult than dealing with the overtly hostile.

The Bull

The Bull is used to getting his/her way and in a hostile manner tries to steamroll over anyone who gets in the way. Often they try to devalue you in order to get what they want (for example, "*I'm* a professor and you're *only* a staff member. Don't try to tell *me* what's good for me.") Because few people ever stand up to them, these people sometimes don't even know they are being difficult. They suffer from "behavioral blindness."

Several strategies can help you cope with such persons. First, react differently than they do (i.e., be calm). Stand up for yourself (or your organization) rather than running away from the confrontation, but avoid being drawn into a battle (usually verbal). If you maintain your cool while they're losing theirs, your value increases in their eyes. Try to get them to sit down while you talk, since this is a less aggressive position for them. Listen patiently while you let them blow off steam. Most such persons, given the above strategies, usually get to the point where you can discuss the matter in a civil way.

The Fox

This person, too, is hostile, but takes a "behind-your-back" approach, and therefore is more dangerous than the bull. The fox uses his/her cunning to distract you into

side issues, or to fight battles among other staff or clients.

To cope with such a person, you have to first "flush them out." Although they may at first deny there is a problem, if you continue to ask the right questions, eventually they will admit there is something wrong. The next series of questions, however, must continue to try to focus on the real problems, not on side issues that really don't relate. The fox is also good at getting people on his/her side (remember, they've been talking behind your back already), so deal with such people privately, but never in a group.

The Time Bomb

This also is a hostile person. However, rather than deal with problems, they tend to hold everything inside until one day they explode into the equivalent of an adult temper tantrum. This is different from slowly becoming upset at something; this person knows what he/she is doing and the explosion is "calculated" to get attention or to divert you from the main agenda.

Once the bomb explodes, patiently give them time to wind down and to regain control. Show your sincerity and your desire to talk. If you know that a person tends toward this type of behavior, you can often defuse such situations by forcing them to talk periodically before things build to the boiling point.

The Whiner

These people are negative, and usually are disappointed in advance. They expect things to turn out poorly, and as a result, often they do. Rather than search for creative ways of dealing with a difficult situation, they would rather focus on what's wrong and even look for reasons why it can't be improved.

Whiners are used to being passive, so you have to be patient as you try to help them deal positively with the situation. Listen to them, and make them feel that what they have to say is important. You don't, however, have to agree with them. Once you get them to state the facts, you then can help them come to some conclusions about how to resolve the situation.

The Stone Wall

You more likely will encounter this type person among your employees than among your clients, since this person rarely speaks out about anything. Often they are very shy, while often they do have the ability to deal with the problem.

To help them understand and confront a problem, you have to ask them questions that require more than a simple "yes" or "no." You also have to avoid the tendency to fill in the gaps of silence with your own answers. Be persistent and supportive, although you may have to set time limits for their silence.

The Ultra Agreeable

Some people are so afraid of being criticized, or of being considered incapable that they over compensate by being *too* agreeable. In an attempt to please, they make unrealistic goals. Sometimes they really don't understand what you're asking them to do, but rather than admit that, they agree and then fail because they don't know how to proceed.

With this type of person you have to establish an atmosphere where being honest is non-threatening. Attempt to get the person to give you feedback so you know he/she really does understand the requirements. Then try to assess if the person really does have the time, ability, and commitment to carry out the assignment. Offer the

person ways to back off without penalty if the project turns out to be unrealistic. Finally, set deadlines for progress reports and completion of the task so you can make course corrections midstream if necessary.

The Bump-On-The-Log

This person is very much like the whiner, except that he/she doesn't verbalize his/her complaints. It's easy to leave this person alone since silence often can be construed as agreement.

Getting such a person to do more than passively go through the motions is not easy. As you talk with this type person, don't accept the silence, and don't accept their negativism. In a non-argumentative way, state as clearly as possible your perception of the problem. Then try to get them to verbalize: "What's the worst thing that could happen?" Once they verbalize, they often see how untenable their position really is.

The Know-It-All

Unlike those in the next category, this person often really *does* know an awful lot about what needs to be done and even how to do it. However, knowledge alone is not enough. Instead, the person has to be able to realistically set goals and standards that match his/her ability to *do*. You often can expect too much from such persons.

When working with this type person, do your own homework—make sure you know what you're talking about. Listen attentively to their point of view, ask questions without being antagonistic, and when appropriate help them to see other points of view or alternate solutions. Finally, help them set realistic goals based on what they actually can do.

The Fake Know-It-All

Such persons have learned to compensate for real or imagined performance deficiencies by "talking a good game." They're phonies and really know how to "throw the bull" but in many ways they are simply insecure about their abilities.

When working on assignments or goals, you need to state the facts (the real ones) as an alternate point of view. You also need to provide them with a means of "saving face" as they accept your point of view. Try to establish an atmosphere of acceptance and praise for what they actually *do*, not for what they *say* they can do.

The Procrastinator

Most of us have moments of procrastination, whether we consider it "measured response" or "foot dragging." Hard core procrastinators usually do so because they are afraid to make a mistake, or because they're so overcommitted that they really don't have time to work in a timely manner.

You can build the confidence of such persons, and thus reduce their tendency to procrastinate, by teaching them how to see clearly the task at hand, and how to list and evaluate the alternate approaches. This, of course, makes it easier to make a decision, which for most procrastinators is the major barrier to their completing an assignment on time. Give them deadlines (verbally and in writing), and then praise them when those deadlines are met. Such persons often give excellent service when they finally do make a decision, so praise the quality of their work.

DEALING WITH CUSTOMERS/CLIENTS

Client relations are of paramount importance in any service organization, and academic learning labs are no exception. The provision of various services, to a variety of clients including students, faculty, administration, and others, is our *raison d'être*. Moreover, it is not enough merely to be ready and able to provide those services. We cannot do so efficiently without communicating a friendly, competent, forthcoming, professional attitude toward our patrons. It's vital to make our services easy and pleasant to use. When it comes to client relations, the best way to do so is to take a proactive stance: most problems with difficult people can be prevented simply by never giving them a chance—or reason—to *be* difficult.

Maintaining a Professional Attitude

Perhaps the most important thing that learning lab staff can do (and sometimes the most difficult) is also one of the simplest: maintain an open, friendly, professional attitude. Such an attitude, projected by every member of the learning lab staff from the most junior to the most senior is extremely important, not only because it makes the lab's services more likely to be used, but also because "a soft answer turneth away wrath." The vast majority of patrons simply will not become difficult to deal with if they are treated with respect. Staff need to be trained (and trained, and trained) to always project such an attitude. There must be a clear chain of referral whereby difficult patrons who cannot be satisfied at the point of contact are referred to more senior staff, always with an attitude of service and respect. We need to be sure that we (including our staff) are neither part of the problem nor exacerbating the problem.

Defusing Problems with Clearly Communicated Rules and Procedures

One way that we can avoid being part of the problem is by making constant efforts at communication: a great many patron problems stem from mismatching expectations between ourselves and our patrons. Everyone involved in the lab, both staff and patrons, needs to understand what services the lab does and, equally as important, does not provide. While normally we want to be able to do everything our clients request, and do it immediately, that's often not possible for any number of reasons. It's important that we don't raise expectations that we can't meet, either in terms of what services we can provide or in terms of the time-frame in which we can provide services. This communication can take any number of forms. We all do it every day verbally, but it's also important to pursue other avenues. Posting signs prominently in the areas of the lab that patrons frequent is very valuable. Some people will read them, and most of those who don't will find themselves taken aback when it is pointed out to them that they've been walking by such a sign for months without reading it. Another good idea is to create lab-services brochures and distribute them widely, especially to new faculty and teaching assistants. Again, this will reach most of the people you need to reach. Even in those cases where your brochure is discarded unread or relegated to a stack of things that will get read someday, it can go a long way toward achieving your purpose since most people in academia, however busy, are by long years of training sensitive to any implication that they didn't read and understand something that they should have.

Much of what you need to communicate should take the form of "policies" such as "You need to request service X at least Y days in advance." While it's always important to avoid being overly bureaucratic in

this regard and you should always be ready to make exceptions to your policies for good and sufficient reason (be "firmly flexible"), policies go a long way toward defining for all involved what is to be expected in the lab. On the one hand, this serves to protect lab staff from unreasonable patron demands (such as requests for service X ten minutes before class rather than Y days in advance). On the other hand, it also serves to protect clients from staff (such as requests for service X made at least Y days in advance to staff member Z, who feels that the requester has been treating lab staff badly of late and is inclined to say "no" just on general principles).

Dealing with Unresolved Problems

These are some of the things you can do to prevent problems from arising and to keep people from becoming difficult. However, it's a simple fact that you can't head all problems off at the pass. Inevitably, you are from time to time going to have a patron raising Cain at a point of contact, or sitting in your office hotly demanding something. Dealing with such situations requires a different strategy, and above all, a cool head.

The most important thing to do in such situations (besides maintaining your equanimity) is to understand the problem. It will sometimes happen (one hopes rarely) that the patron has a legitimate complaint: he or she is requesting a service that the lab should be providing and has not (and even in cases where this is clearly not the case, it's almost always wise to give the impression initially that you believe this *may be* the case). There is simply no question about how to deal with this one: you have to fix the problem, if possible immediately and if possible personally. Don't try to pass the blame off on a student employee or other staff member but instead take responsibility yourself. Make sure the problem is

resolved. If appropriate, follow up on the problem to the patron after the immediate crisis is past. Let him or her know that you've looked into how the problem occurred and what steps you are taking to insure that it won't recur. It's a curious fact of human nature that a *contretemps* can often be an opportunity if you're smart enough to take advantage of it. People will respect you more if you take responsibility for a problem and also take immediate, effective steps to rectify it than they would have if the problem had never occurred.

You will also, from time to time, receive complaints which are, shall we say, of more problematic legitimacy. In order to deal with them, you must again understand the problem, but in these cases the problem is often more multifaceted, and dealing with it is likely to place more strain on your tact.

The most common of these, and in general the easiest to deal with, are simple problems of incorrect expectations: a patron is expecting a service that you don't provide or can't provide given current circumstance (e.g., it's ten minutes before class and the materials requested are half a continent away). This is almost always a problem of communication, and if you've been taking the steps outlined above you can often deal with it simply by saying "Perhaps you've misplaced the services brochure that we mailed you at the beginning of the semester. Here's another." If you haven't done so, or if the issue at hand isn't covered in lab policy as communicated to patrons, you will have some explaining to do, but so long as those policies are reasonable, and the patron is also reasonable, such problems can be dealt with in short order.

Dealing with Cultural Differences

Unfortunately, not all of our patrons are always willing to be reasonable by our lights. People are often difficult simply due

to personality differences as discussed earlier in this article, but in the university setting, and especially in learning labs devoted to language instruction, people are often perceived as difficult because of cultural differences. Behavior considered reasonable and normal in one culture is often not so perceived by members of another culture. In American universities this problem is especially noticeable when (possibly senior) faculty members interact with student employees, who often don't have much background in dealing with other cultures. The faculty member is likely to perceive the student as disrespectful, while the student is likely to perceive the faculty member as providing grounds for justifiable homicide. Both reactions are, from their own cultural respective, understandable.

You can deal with this situation in many ways. First, you need to train (and train, and train) your staff to recognize such situations and not let themselves get angry or otherwise distracted. They are to remain polite and respectful, and follow lab policies as explained to them. If the patron cannot be mollified, they are to refer them on to someone more senior, often yourself. You yourself need to be as sensitive as you can be to these cultural differences and deal with them accordingly: often the patron is not really anywhere near as angry as your staff thinks, or simply wants to have policies explained (and enforced) by someone more senior.

Strategies (Rules) for Dealing with Difficult Clients

All that being said, sometimes you are going to have to deal with a difficult client, from whatever culture. It's not fun, it's not pleasant, but it is unavoidable. It also is doable: you just need to grit your teeth and do it. Some points to remember:

1. *Never* lose your temper. Angry is stupid. Angry means you've already failed in what you are trying to accomplish. It's not really a problem if the patron is angry; that just means that the patron is behaving stupidly and is unlikely to accomplish anything. In fact, often it's your job to *help* an angry patron accomplish something. You can't do that if you get angry yourself.

2. Don't let yourself get distracted. You have an issue at hand. Stick to it. One strategy that difficult people often use is to cloud the issue at hand, either on matters of substance or emotionally. "You never have anything ready" or "You're incompetent" is hyperbole intended to distract you. The issue at hand is almost always a single instance of a service not provided, correctly or otherwise. Ignore such ploys. Stay focused on the bottom line.

3. Know with whom you are dealing. Unlike the folks behind the counter at the local fast food place, we generally deal with the same people day to day, year to year. This gives us a tremendous advantage in dealing with them since we can know their personalities and their histories in dealing with the lab. We can form clear ideas of where their cultural biases are going to cause friction when interacting with us and our staff. You know these people. Use that knowledge.

4. Use appropriate coping strategies, as mentioned above. Drag them into your office, sit them down, and get them a cup of coffee. This not only tends to focus the discussion, but seated people are generally calmer, and people with a cup of hot coffee in their hands have strong incentive not to leap up and start screaming again. Form an idea of what personality type you're dealing with, and behave appropriately.

5. Keep your eye on the bottom line. Is the requested service something you can deliver? Is it something you can *afford* to deliver? Will it set a precedent you can't afford? What are you trying to accomplish in this conversation? What do you want to win? What's it going to cost you to win? You need to have a clear picture of these things, and you're unlikely to be able to form it with someone hollering at you. Decide these questions ahead of time, and stick to your decisions.

6. Always learn something for next time, because there will be a next time. It may be with the same person or someone else, but there will be a next time. One of your most precious resources should be your experience of what coping strategies work for you, both with particular people and with particular *types* of people. An article like this may help you with this, but in the long run your own experience will be far more valuable.

DEALING WITH EMPLOYEES

General Considerations

Many employee-related problems can be eliminated by hiring right in the first place. While none of us has a crystal ball, there are certain things we can do to make better hiring decisions.

1. Ask the right questions. Know exactly what it is you are looking for so you can ask appropriate questions. For example, rather than simply asking if the person has computer experience, you might ask specifically what type of experience they have, what software they have used, examples of projects they have completed using certain types of computers or software, and so on.

2. Listen to the answers you get. Often the interviewer hears answers to questions based on what he/she *wants* to hear. Try to understand exactly what the prospective employee is saying. When talking to references, listen carefully to the tone of voice, the moments of hesitation that precede a less-than-enthusiastic response, and so on.

3. Provide the right information. Interviews are a two-way process. Be clear up-front what is to be expected. Don't minimize the qualifications needed, nor the amount of effort that will be required. This not only is more fair to the prospective employee, but it also helps establish the ground rules for your employer-employee relationship.

The first several days or weeks of an employee's tenure should be characterized by three things: training, training, and training. Take time to make sure the new employee understands all the requirements of the job and how to accomplish them. Provide the person with any written guidelines or manuals that may help him/her do the best possible job. Establish early what channels of communication are available, and give the person opportunities to use those channels.

And finally, establish and follow a regular routine of performance evaluations. Work that must be evaluated or reported on tends to be the best work. Fair, and clearly defined performance evaluations can actually be a source of relief for employees since they come to learn that what they are doing will be recognized and appreciated. For you as an employer, these sessions establish the importance of accountability by your employees.

Dealing with Problem Employees: The First Steps

Most employees respond sufficiently to verbal suggestions and comments. Nevertheless there can come a time when the employee decides to act on his/her own special interests rather than for the good of your organization. When this happens, it's time to hold a one-on-one meeting with the person to try to get things back on track. Delaying the holding of such meetings only results in having to deal with a more difficult situation later. The following should take place in such a meeting:

1. State clearly what you perceive to be the problem.

2. Listen carefully to the employee's view of things and make sure the problem is real, not just one of perception on your part.

3. Determine what course of action should be taken. Often, the employee sees this on his/her own, but sometimes you must be prepared to dictate the desired solution. In either case, make sure both of you understand clearly what is to be done.

4. Set a time-frame for the resolution of the problem. Establish the time for a follow-up meeting where the employee can report on the progress or completion of the task assigned. Unless you do this, employees quickly learn how easy it is to agree with you, whether they actually intend to follow through or not.

5. A written summary of this meeting can be useful in establishing the importance of what was discussed and decided. Written summaries also can be useful for employees who may have difficulty with verbal instruction (for example, foreign-speaking employees).

Dealing with Really Difficult Student Employees

Student employees deserve to be treated with respect and trust, just like anyone else. Building student loyalty based on a favorable working environment benefits you in the long run because you have more experienced student workers, less turnover, and consequently less training.

Nevertheless, dealing with difficult student employees is important not only for the work that may not be getting done, but for the morale of the other students who are continuing to perform satisfactorily.

Certain performance objectives can be built into written student procedures handbooks. For example, you can clearly state: "Missing an assigned shift is a serious matter. The first time you will receive a written warning. The second time will result in your dismissal."

Fortunately, academic schedules provide built-in mechanisms for dealing with problem student employees since you can easily let a person know that they won't be invited back next semester. Make sure, however, that students are first given the opportunity to improve before they are dismissed.

Dealing With Really Difficult Permanent Employees

At many schools, civil service or other contracts or bargaining agreements establish specific rights for employees and guarantee them "due process" when being dealt with for performance reasons.

Too often, managers view such procedures as too overwhelming to deal with, and as a result many employee problems simply go unresolved. Instead, these procedures should be viewed as a protection for employees against unfair management

practices, rather than as a license for unsatisfactory performance. If performance really is an issue, you *can* and *should* take the necessary steps to resolve the problem or to dismiss the employee.

The following are some useful steps in dealing with nonperformance:

1. Begin to hold more formal evaluations, reviews, and meetings. Often problems can be cleared up at this stage since part of the problem may have been lack of adequate communication or unclear expectations. Formal meetings also help establish the seriousness of the issues you wish to resolve.

2. If it appears that the meetings aren't helping, begin putting things in writing, first as formal notes to summarize the meetings and the agreements that have been made, then as memos documenting problems and stating the expected resolution of the problems. Make it clear just how important it is that the employee perform differently. This documentation is critical if you need to advance beyond this stage.

3. At some point you must make a decision whether to seek dismissal of the employee. Before you make such a decision, however, make sure you understand clearly the facts surrounding the employee's performance. Are there extenuating circumstances that should be considered? Have you provided adequate training and clear enough direction? Remembering the personality types discussed earlier, can you honestly say the problem is one of performance, not just one of personality conflict? Is it possible that the problem is *you* rather than the employee? Seek other opinions, such as those of your dean or other supervisor. In short, make your decision as much as possible based on objective and documentable facts.

4. Be willing to make hard decisions for the good of your organization. If you have a large organization, could this person's duties be changed to better suit his/her abilities? Are there ways that the organization can learn to accommodate this person's performance? For example, does the good you get from this person outweigh the problem you can't seem to resolve? In smaller organizations, like those of most learning labs, positions are so precious that there is little room for someone who does not perform.

The last, and most drastic step is to begin procedures for dismissing the person. This is often difficult, and can be fraught with peril, especially in terms of legal considerations. The employee might begin a grievance procedure, or start a campaign to keep his/her job. If you have followed the preceding steps, in other words if you have objectively determined the need for dismissal and have documented carefully the reasons for it, then for the good of your organization have the courage to follow through.

SUMMARY

As learning lab directors we have the obligation to provide courteous and effective service to our clients, even when they are being difficult. We also have an obligation to help our employees reach their full potential, in spite of some of their difficult behavior. Finally, we can benefit from recognizing difficult behavior in ourselves.

However, none of this happens instantaneously or magically. Each of us must become a student of this subject. Read good books and attend seminars on this topic. The better you become at dealing with difficult

people, the more satisfying your job will become.

NOTES

1. The topic and contents of this article were presented by the authors at IALL '93.

2. The terms "affiliative" and "directive" are used in the Self Profile Test which is part of the National Seminars Group's seminar on "How to Handle Difficult People."

3. Adapted from "Self Profile of Interpersonal Interactions," by the National Seminars Group.

4. Adapted from material presented in the National Seminars Group's seminar on "How to Handle Difficult People."

5. The terms here are those of the National Seminars Group. However, they are based on the personality types defined in Robert Bramson's *Coping with Difficult People*, New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1988.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Much of the material for this session was inspired by the workshop "How to Handle Difficult People" by the National Seminars Group. Their workshops are relatively inexpensive, yet exceptionally useful. For more information on this workshop and when it will be in your area, contact:

National Seminars Group
6901 West 63rd Street
P.O. Box 2949
Shawnee Mission, KS 66201-1349
(800) 258-7246

Bramson, Dr. Robert M. *Coping With Difficult People*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1988.

Carnegie, Dale. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1981.

Dymer, Chuck. *How to Handle Difficult People* (four-cassette series). Shawnee Mission, KS: National Press Publications, 1988.

Elgin, Suzette Haden. *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Press, 1987.

Lacey, Walt. *How to Work With People* (six-cassette series). Shawnee Mission, KS: National Press Publications, 1988.