

## Chapter 1

# Dealing with Difficult People: Changing the Changeable

*Larry Constantine*

*Software development is hard enough without the added challenge of managing difficult people. The whole planet would be an easier place to live were it not inhabited by so many difficult human beings. Most of us do not think of ourselves as the difficult ones, of course; it is those others, always those others—the loudmouths and the recalcitrants and their sundry kin—who make life harder than it needs to be.*

*Reams have been written already on dealing with difficult people, primarily by pop psychologists and management consultants, primarily predicated on analyzing personality problems or on mastering techniques for manipulating people. I am duly hesitant to add to this genre of glib prescriptions. Instead, this chapter offers a way of thinking about difficult people and situations that seems to have helped many technical managers over the years.*

—Editor

For years, editors, clients, and conference organizers asked me to teach classes or conduct workshops or write articles on how to deal with difficult people, as if I were some sort of expert. I confess to having been somewhat suspicious of these requests. Did they assume I have some expertise because I myself am difficult? There must be some other explanation, however, because friends and colleagues who know me well will tell you that I am a pussycat, as easy to handle as an Isotoner glove, except, of course, on those occasions when I am being difficult.

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### TIME AND PLACE

Difficult people come in many shapes and forms. They are our bosses and our subordinates, our coworkers and our friends. They include the attention grabbers who must always be at the center of meetings and the whining negativists for whom contentment seems to lie in discontent. On the one hand are those creative prima donnas who could not possibly restrict themselves to routine programming; on the other are the plodding plan followers who seem incapable of thinking outside the box. Difficult people range from sycophantic suck-ups who hang on your every word to crusty critics whose greatest joy seems to lie in finding fault with everyone else's work.

Of course, some people actually appreciate a well-trained toady, and some count curmudgeons among their most likable colleagues. Being difficult is not necessarily a trait of temperament, but, like beauty, it rests largely in the experience of the beholder. The ignorant oaf who might try my patience to the limit could be the pliable peon of your dreams.

This perspective shifts the focus from the other person—that jerk who is being a pain or that lazy analyst who is exploiting my easygoing nature—to me. I am, after all, the one having difficulty, the one for whom a particular person is difficult. Even more importantly, I have no real control over anybody else. The only person whose behavior I can change is yours truly. Rather than wasting time trying to turn a jackass into a genial genius, I can concentrate on figuring out what I can do differently to make the situation work better for me.

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I am reminded of an American tourist we kept running into while on a consulting trip in Rome. He was having a miserable time. Wherever he went, whether having dinner in a *trattoria* or buying tickets at the railway station, he got terrible service and met with uncooperative resistance. No doubt he went home concluding that Italians were all difficult. How strange, then, that we found the exact same waiters and ticket clerks to be friendly and helpful. Could it be that he did something that assured he would encounter so many difficult situations?

Finding a way to make difficult situations better begins with questions. In my experience, asking the right question is the greater part of getting a useful answer. Instead of wondering why some person is so difficult, I find it more useful to ask myself why I am having difficulty with that person. It is, of course, usually far easier to spot the mote in a colleague's eye than to see the macaroni

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in your own, but every frustrating encounter with a difficult person is an opportunity to learn more about yourself. Over the long term, you may find yourself meeting fewer and fewer people who are difficult for you to handle.

Without waiting for the next difficult person to come along, I can ask myself what kind of people I find most difficult. Why are they, in particular, difficult? I would have to place near the top of my own list those people who seem rigid and immovable. Why? What's my problem? Maybe I pride myself overly in being a flexible and collaborative colleague. I can feel at a disadvantage with someone unwilling to negotiate, or be responsive, or consider other ways. And how do I usually cope with such immovable persons? I try to get them to move. Does it work? Hardly ever. From this sort of self-inquiry it becomes clear that I need to learn alternative ways to cope with rigid people. If I am having difficulty dealing with someone, it is really because I have not yet found another way to handle the situation.

Most difficult encounters are challenging and frustrating precisely because they drag on. For anything to keep happening between people, there must be some level of collaboration or complicity. For all I know, I am being difficult for the other person, too, like that American tourist in Rome who was difficult for the Italians and so found them difficult. My first rule, then, for dealing with so-called difficult people is:

### ■ ***Do Something Different***

Do something different from what you have been doing so far or different from what you have done before. It need not be particularly clever or inspired. Doing almost anything different changes the interaction, changes your experience of the other person as well as his or her experience of you. Offer that angry ogre a sweet or a cup of coffee. Ask that bloody bore if he would help you review a design diagram you have been puzzling over. I can't give you a set menu of options or a top ten list of brilliant moves because I don't know what you usually do. The most important thing is that you make a move that breaks from your own usual patterns of behavior.

*Difficult encounters can make you feel like you are caught in an infinite loop of frustrating interaction leading nowhere. The important thing is to make a move that breaks from your own usual patterns of behavior.*

Difficult encounters can make you feel like you are caught in an infinite loop of frustrating interaction leading nowhere. It can seem as if you have already tried

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everything and can think of nothing different to do. Next time that happens, try making a physical move of some kind. Walk to another place in the room. Sit down if standing, get up if seated. You might, for example, come out from behind your desk and sit in a side chair or rise and pace a bit before leaning on the credenza.

A remarkable thing happens as you shift your position and survey the scene from a new perspective: you see things differently. At the very moment you feel most stuck, you move, taking you to a new position that offers a new perspective. Inevitably, a change in position changes the interaction. Standing when someone else is sitting changes the relationship. Standing side by side to study a chart with your client conveys a different message than if you were to leave the chart on the table between you. Once unstuck, you can pause to study the situation, perhaps just listening and watching for a while before thinking about what you might do next that could help make the situation work better for everyone.

### BAD LANGUAGE

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Some things you might do are only likely to make the situation worse. Shouting at an angry colleague is likely to lead to an even more heated exchange, for example. I think of such actions as “escalators” because they are styles of communication or language that tend to escalate situations from merely difficult to potentially impossible or even dangerous. Escalators invite defensive or antagonistic responses because they can make people feel bad: trapped, belittled, threatened, or misunderstood. At best, they are unhelpful; at worst, they can set off even the most congenial and cooperative of coworkers.

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One example of an escalator is **categorical language**, which puts everything and everybody in boxes. In categorical language, the world is black or white, without shadows or shades of gray. Questions have only right or wrong answers. There is only one correct way to do something or only one way to view the situation. (“Absolutely nobody programs that way anymore.”) What I call “limit-stop language,” a close relative of categorical language, carries every distinction to the extreme. (“You always take the most inefficient approach possible.” “I can’t imagine in my wildest nightmare a more fouled-up architecture.” “You never have anything useful to offer.”)

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**Judgmental language** is blaming and accusatory. It puts a personal spin on discussions that can twist the knife in an open wound. (“It’s clear from the design that you didn’t have much time to work on it.” “The problem is not the compiler; the problem is you don’t know how to use it.”) The judgment can be merely implied. Spoken in just the right tone, “Do you *really* want to do it that way?” can imply the other person is unintelligent, misguided, and lacking in judgment.

**Dissociative language**, the refuge of those who wish to deny their own responsibility or participation in a process, is another way of shifting blame. (“It’s policy. I don’t make the rules.” “Objectively, it is obvious and unambiguous which logic is superior.”)

Escalators not only fail to help us deal with difficult people and situations, they also can turn us into difficult people ourselves. In other words, in dealing with anyone you find difficult:

### ■ **Avoid Being Difficult Yourself**

I find it productive to think of situations, rather than the people in them, as being difficult. This perspective shifts the focus from trying to fix the person to fixing the process—that is, the situation taking place between us. Even the most difficult person is not difficult all the time and in every circumstance. Being difficult is contextual. Everyone is difficult sometimes. Everyone is difficult for somebody. No one is difficult all the time for everyone.

Remembering this, you start thinking about what you can do to make a difficult situation easier for the other person rather than concentrating on what he or she could do to make it easier for you. You become more creative, making room for the other person to consider other options.

## **SMALL TALK**

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So-called influencers, at the other end of the spectrum from escalators, are language that can help transform difficult situations into successes and difficult people into winners. **Inclusive language** draws people together to meet a common challenge. (“We are having problems in our meetings. Perhaps we can come up with ways to make them more productive.”) Inclusive language recognizes the situation as a shared difficulty, acknowledging that you also take a share of the responsibility. It is neither the “royal we” of imperious leaders nor the phony “we” of comedy nurses. (“So, how are we feeling today?”)

**Speculative language** poses possibilities and raises questions. (“I wonder what might be done to speed up the process.” “Maybe it is possible to merge these approaches into a common design for the database.” “What might be done to enhance performance in this subsystem?”) Speculative speech is neither

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manipulative questioning nor a form of interrogation, both of which usually escalate tensions. It is, instead, an honestly tentative and conditional mode of expression that creates a verbal vacuum to draw others into a dialogue.

**Progressive language**, which builds involvement and commitments by small and easily taken steps, can be especially effective with people you find uncooperative. It starts with getting agreement on the smallest and least arguable matter and builds from there. (“Is it possible that this technique could work, even if it is not the approach you would prefer?” “Would you have any objection to our considering this approach just for the sake of discussion?” “Might it be nearly as good as the alternative under some circumstances?”) And so it goes.

Often the most influential language of all is silence. As long as I am talking, I am not learning anything new. If I listen well, the other person is more likely to feel heard and, feeling heard and understood, will be less likely to be so difficult. “Active listening” or “reflexive listening” is widely known, but many people who think they have mastered it forget the point. The point of listening actively is not to persuade others by your repetition and paraphrasing that you are a good listener and have heard them correctly. You reflect what you hear to help understand it yourself and to engage others in helping you understand what they are trying to say or to accomplish.

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### BIGGER VOCABULARY

Although any of us can be difficult at times, some people are more difficult, more often, for more people than the rest of us are. They are the ones most likely to be labeled “difficult.” Typically, we describe such people in extremes or even exaggerations. Difficult people are, basically, just like the rest of us, but they act “that way” all the time or do it to a fault. Often, what makes an employee difficult for colleagues and coworkers is fairly ordinary, even acceptable behaviors carried to an extreme or continued without pause or variation.

Being difficult is a form of impoverished vocabulary. In my experience, many chronically difficult people do not know any other way to act. Especially if they work for you or are otherwise in your charge, part of your long-term job is to coach them in building larger repertoires of behaviors. The payoff can be that a brilliant but very irritating programmer becomes merely brilliant. In the

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shorter term, it can be helpful during a difficult encounter to think how you might expand alternatives for the other person. (“Maybe we can brainstorm some other course of action here.” “Perhaps you would feel better dealing with another agent.”)

Regrettably, not every person or situation is salvageable. Part of dealing effectively with difficult people is knowing when to give up or back off. It is important not to throw in the towel too soon, but it is equally important not to cling tenaciously to false hopes that the unchangeable might suddenly change. It can be a good tactic to start off assuming that a relationship can be made to work or that a troublesome employee can become a productive and appreciated contributor, but there may come a point when that working assumption needs to be questioned.

Ironically, the very act of giving up can sometimes be a breakthrough. One manager told an engineer that she was considering reassigning him. His constant carping and crushing criticism in meetings was wearing on the entire team. He was astonished. He had considered it part of his job to point out problems and had never thought of it as a problem for other people. With some private coaching, he was able gradually to overcome some habitual ways of expressing himself that had not only been making it difficult for his coworkers but also had contributed to his being on the downsizing list more than once.

Much the same principle applies to those of us trying to deal more effectively with difficult people. The more choices we have for our own behavior, the greater the range of styles we have in communicating, the more likely we are to find an effective response that makes it easier for us to work with those people.