



Difficult People or Different People?

Is there someone in your life who is difficult to deal with? Don't worry, you have plenty of company. All of my clients can think of at least one person with whom they have a strained relationship or who simply "rubs them up the wrong way". This is not surprising when you think about the wide variety of character types that inhabit this planet. You may be able to choose your friends but what happens when the relationship is not of your choice and is important for business or other reasons?

The differences between you and your "difficult person" are likely to be quite deep – perhaps very different values and beliefs – and they are likely to manifest themselves in unsuccessful communication experiences. The premises for this column are:

1. The relationship with your difficult person has some significance for you
2. You are not happy with the current state of your relationship
3. Your difficult person is not going to change their communication style

Hence, perhaps sadly for you, the conclusion from these premises is that if there is going to be an improvement it will be up to you to change, at least something, in your personal interaction.

Let's start with your mindset towards this person and from this point on I will refer to your difficult person as your "different person". You see, I don't think that they set out to be difficult. I think it is more likely that they are just different. So, let's be specific about the differences in their communication style (and I will leave differences in values for another day). Think about each of the following aspects and assess your style relative to theirs:

- The use of gestures and body movement, including personal space
- The pace of words and frequency (and duration) of pauses
- The volume of speech and the range of pitch as well as volume
- The use of eye contact
- The type of language and the articulation of words
- The energy employed in the communication
- The level of interest in detail
- The emphasis on the written word compared with the spoken word



Now please identify the aspects for which the contrast is greatest. I suggest that a subtle modification to your style to better match their personal style will, consciously or sub-consciously, appeal to them and improve your communication. For example, if they speak slowly and carefully, pausing often, then this could be frustrating and annoying for quick thinking or quick speaking people. If you accept that this is their (legitimate) personal style then you might experiment with slowing down your speech and insert a few pauses. Please don't overdo it lest it appears to be mimicry or worse. However, a subtle modification may reduce the chances that they are thinking that you are always in a hurry and talking without thinking. Am I suggesting that you should change the real you? Of course not! I am simply suggesting that your communication, and your relationships, may benefit from some flexibility around your natural style.

This principle extends to email communication. If their emails seem curt and unfriendly (eg no "dear", no sign-off, little punctuation) maybe they value brevity and task-focus more than you. If so, it probably annoys them that you are wasting key-strokes typing "kind regards". Perhaps you can modify your next email (just to this person), cut back on your people-focus and see what happens...

I would like to wrap up with two potentially disturbing thoughts:

1. If your different person bothers you it may provide a hint that there is something about you that you are not satisfied with. For example, if their planning and attention to detail annoys you and seems "anal", maybe you are, consciously or not, worried about your own frequent state of disorganisation. Alternatively, if their ideas seem way out and unrealistic and you think that they are "off with the fairies", maybe you are, consciously or not, concerned with your lack of creativity.
2. For whom are you a difficult person?

If you really would like to improve the relationship with your difficult (I mean different) person it will be up to you to make the first move. One way is to identify what is different about your communication styles and subtly modify yours. Are you prepared to be flexible in your communication in order to rectify your strained relationships?