



## Dealing with difficult people Factsheet

Teachers have to manage a series of complex relationships every day. Part of a teacher's professional training is learning to deal with pupils, so that issue is not covered in any depth here. This factsheet deals with adult-to-adult relationships in the context of a school.

*It covers:*

- *difficult people in schools - the nature of the problem*
  - *typical responses to conflict*
  - *difficult or different?*
  - *overcoming your own issues*
  - *identifying personality types and ways to cope with them*
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### Difficult people in schools

Everyone is difficult at some time or another, but some people will always have a character trait of some kind that other people may find difficult.

You cannot change these traits: you have to learn to cope with them.

Many callers to Teacher Support Line are concerned about their relationships with other staff, often headteachers, mentors, heads of department or deputy heads.

Conflict or discomfort can result from a number of behaviours:

- Some heads are perceived as ineffective or weak; do not offer strong leadership, or educational direction for their school. The weak head might allow a strong deputy to emerge, who in turn can be a source of conflict.
- In contrast, there are teachers who experience their heads as dictatorial to the point of steam rolling over their needs and feelings. These teachers feel no shared ownership of school policies, and are excluded from the consultation process. Teachers have had their timetables, classes and hours of working (if part-time) changed without consultation. They feel that the disempowerment they experience due to the constantly changing initiatives in education is exacerbated by the attitude of the head.
- Heads who cannot or will not support their staff often leave teachers feeling frustrated and vulnerable. This lack of support is especially evident when it comes to issues such as problems with parents and Ofsted inspections.
- Teachers who believe that their head has a hidden agenda in wanting to "work them out of the school" have also experienced distress. The teacher's perceived reasons for this range from being "too expensive" or some teachers have felt, after long-term sickness due to stress, that they are victimised because they have been off, and are being bullied into leaving the school through, for example, early retirement.
- Another issue has been the use (or misuse from the teachers' perspective) of the head's power to enforce directed time. At a time when teachers feel that their contractual hours bear no relation to the hours they actually work, they have felt aggrieved when they have been expected to attend unplanned meetings outside the 1265 hours limit.

- Heads have called Teacher Support Line due to conflict with governors where members of the governing body, with little knowledge of educational changes, have proceeded to interfere in the running of the school - even to the point of blocking school initiatives

All this is not to say that teachers are in some form of constant warfare with heads. Think about all of the issues outlined above and look at them from the reverse point of view. The “weak” head according to you may be supportive and consensual to others. The dictator may be a strong leader.

Conflict between other members of staff can also result from:

- imbalanced teamwork - where one member of the team does not pull his or her weight
- lack of support from a mentor
- disagreements about approaches to particular pupils, curriculum or staffing issues
- competitiveness over areas of responsibility or expertise

... or any number of problems that occur when people just don't get on.

We cannot get on with everyone we meet. All of us have distinct differences that will cause difficulty for others. We need to understand those differences to enable us to cope with them. We also need to understand conflict and how that works as it is a symptom of dealing with a difficult person.

## Conflict

What all the situations outlined above involve is conflict, a direct disagreement between participants.

### Common responses to conflict:

- Collaboration: everyone is involved in reaching a solution that meets all needs - the ideal situation.
- Compromise: everyone is involved in reaching a solution that meets some, but not all needs.
- Decisive: a decision is taken which ignores some members of the group.
- Avoidance: nothing gets done.

Disagreements will consist both of the objective point of issue and the subjective emotional involvement invested in the conflict by the participants. Both parts of the equation need to be addressed for effective resolution.

Different personality types can work in different ways in conflict situations. Recognising the dynamics of the situation is the first step to beginning to cope with that situation. The first step in this process is to recognise your role in the process: are you the difficult person?

## I'm different, he's difficult, they're impossible

Difference is not the same as being difficult but you would do well to look at your own behaviour and consider on which side of the line it sits when thinking about handling a relationship you find problematic. Is the object of your difficulty a difference physically, culturally or socially? If so, the source of your difficulty may be an inability to find a shared basis for communication.

This is why knowing about different types of difficult people can help: by learning about personality types you can benchmark your responses to a person against them and so assess how much is them, how much is you. You can then alter your behaviour accordingly in a controlled way armed with the necessary information you need to get results from your dealings with your difficult person. There will obviously be situations in which you do not have time to diagnose a personality type, but there are some useful tips you can use:

- Watch the person to see if there are repeat occurrences of the behaviour. If it happens more than twice, it is unlikely to be an accident.
- Think about stress, not only for the person involved but also yourself. Stress clouds the judgement and alters your world-view.
- Try talking on a personal level to the individual. It might not resolve the difficulty in itself, but it will certainly help in your assessment of your mutual situation.

### Overcoming your own issues:

- learn to recognise and control your defence mechanism
- learn to listen
- be open and receptive
- ensure that you understand what is being said to you
- learn about yourself, your own strengths and weaknesses
- try to work on weaknesses, and don't give up!

Sometimes an external facilitator or mediation service can assist when two or more people would like their relationships to be better. This can often prevent problems from escalating and keeps the control of the outcome with the parties concerned.

The rest of this factsheet looks at seven distinct types of difficult behaviour and at options you can use for handling them yourself in the first instance.

### Know-it-alls

#### Symptoms

Apparently very confident, the condescension implicit in this behaviour is hard not to resent. A know-it-all may actually know what they are talking about, but they can equally fake or falsify knowledge to maintain the same aura of invincibility. The know-it-all, however, usually brooks no opposition, admits no other opinion.

#### Coping

Be prepared is the key motto here: make sure that you have a solid grasp of all key facts. State your position in a less dogmatic, more open way but be careful with correcting errors, leave them a way of saving face.

This coping strategy is, at first sight, submissive, but the key aim is to get the over-confident person to accept you so that you can work together. Controlling a situation does not always involve being dominant.

### Moaners

#### Symptoms

Complainers have some easily noticeable traits in common. They often are people who are very comfortable in the way they themselves do things but who feel powerless to change the issue at hand. They will often be very prescriptive, so that any deviation from their accepted norm is automatically a source of complaint. Complainers rarely offer solutions, however, as a solution may involve challenging their own perfection.

#### Coping.

The best initial strategy is often to take the moaner at his or her own self-worth. Listen carefully to the complaint and summarise it back to show that you have understood it. You can then throw the complaint back at the person by asking for solutions: "what do you want to happen?" "how would you handle this?"

You therefore engage the moaner into the conflict resolution process and force the person to look for positive responses.

### Procrastinators

#### Symptoms

Delay and indecision characterise the procrastinator, but this does not necessarily imply weakness. Apparently indecisive people can often have a particular solution in mind and they use stalling tactics until they get their way, or they may simply be unable to confidently represent their actual position. There is often a high level of sensitivity to external opinion with such people.

#### Coping

Procrastinators will often need your active support to bring out the reasons for their indecision. You have to work to make communication easy for the person and instil confidence that they will be

listened to. Try to avoid putting such a person on the spot, having drawn them out actively work with the person toward a solution.

## **Bullies**

### Symptoms

Hostility, anger, selfishness are all qualities associated with the bully. They can work out in the open, where what you see is what you get, or they can be insidious, hiding behind social norms but still being aggressive, confident and attempting to assert dominance. Sometimes this can take physical expression.

### Coping

Bullies try to overwhelm opposition, so you have to state your point cogently and with confidence but non-aggressively. Give them the opportunity to say their piece: let the bully run out of steam, bring the person hiding on the side into centre stage.

If the person is in danger of getting physical, keep eye contact and try to get the person seated. You will need to take the person seriously, and almost always you will have to deal with the issue raised there and then. To that extent, the bully may be perceived as having got his or her way, but the key issue for you is to discuss rationally the point in a way with which you feel comfortable.

Persistent or serious bullying is a form of harassment and is covered by legislation. If you have tried reasonable measures to cope with a bully and have had little or no success, you can take more formal action, either by yourself or with the help of colleagues. Keeping a record of your attempts to deal with the bully may be helpful later. If your school has an anti-harassment policy, you should read it before deciding the best action to take. With any such case, you can get guidance and support from Teacher Support Line and your union. Being on the receiving end of bullying behaviour is never pleasant and can be very stressful. You do not need to be alone as you consider your best options and develop your coping skills.

## **The quiet ones**

### Symptoms

These people handle difficult situations by shutting down, withdrawing all but the basic minimum communication methods. This can be aggressive as well as defensive behaviour, deliberately withholding a response to sabotage the process. The key difficulty is that because of the withdrawal of communication, you have less evidence on which to base your assessment of the reasons for the behaviour.

### Coping

You need to provoke some sort of response, so you should ask open questions, ones which cannot be answered simply by Yes or No. You may need to invest a good deal of time in this process. When they finally do open up, engage with the person actively but sympathetically; let them steer for a while.

If no response is forthcoming, end the situation yourself and arrange another time for a meeting. Do let the person know what actions you intend to take as a result of the meeting.

## **Killjoys**

### Symptoms

You will often have difficulty with someone who disagrees with anything put forward, and sometimes even with the process itself. Often, such a person actively seeks to pick holes in whatever is presented, just for the sake of it. This person may have some personal issues, but in work-related cases, such an attitude is often linked to a feeling of powerlessness and disappointment.

### Coping

The main strategy is to accept their pessimism while promoting optimism yourself. You can also raise potential problems and negative points yourself, so as to pre-empt negative comment. Make sure all points are discussed before promoting your own solution but ultimately, you may need to be prepared to take action on your own.

## Nice people

### Symptoms

Nice people cause difficulties too. Someone can be personally agreeable, apparently sincere and supportive, but will they deliver? For them, keeping everyone happy can be more important than dealing with solutions.

### Coping

Since these people have a need to be liked, show that you like them. Then you can actually begin to address the issues. Often this means dealing with personal matters before the real issue at hand, such as enquiring after family. Often nice people make a lot of jokes, which can hide deeper issues, so listen carefully to them.

Of course, dealing with difficult people is not easy, but we hope that this factsheet has raised some issues that will help you face up to a conflict situation the next time one occurs, and that you learn to cope more effectively with all the difficult people you come across in your day.

Teacher Support Line can give you further information, support and counselling on dealing with difficult people.

In England, call 08000 562 561 or email from the web site at [www.teachersupport.info](http://www.teachersupport.info). In Wales, you can call 0800 085 5088.