

Project Pointers

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Issue 17

Winter 2009

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Thanks to all of you who contacted me after receiving the last newsletter. Many readers commented on the new electronic format; even more discussed individual colleagues who are making your projects more frustrating. As we think about the many economic challenges facing nonprofits this year, effective working relationships are more important than ever. Time, energy and clarity can serve as "found" resources during a season of added constraints. This issue of Project Pointers will continue the discussion of difficult colleagues, focusing on three types: Know It All, Placater and Overly Sensitive.

Working with Difficult People

Know It Alls

There are actually two types of know it alls: the delusional and the true expert. Most of us know people who think they know everything, just as we know a smaller number of people who truly do know a lot! Each has distinct qualities that require different responses.

Delusion Know It All

Scenario: The development director is out of the office. Janet, an accountant with long tenure, happens to hear the receptionist talking to a potential donor. Janet immediately instructs the receptionist to give her the call, then tells the donor about the agency. She also

suggests that the donor serve on a board committee, offers to send her a donation envelope and proposes that they have lunch next week.

Janet's inappropriate behavior would concern any development professional. But even the rest of us can spot a woman who thinks she knows it all. The delusional know it all thinks she is a walking knowledge base for anything affecting the nonprofit. She may be impatient and unconventional as well as absent-minded or standoffish. The great irony is that this type of difficult person is usually not overly intelligent or creative - they just have a very high level of misplaced self-confidence. Often bluffing their way through things, they exaggerate or even lie.

The delusional know it all is often trying to compensate for some insecurity. As a result, they usually do not listen to others and demonstrate minimal tolerance for correction or any differences of opinion. They can be extremely controlling and their way is the right way, end of discussion.

When responding to this type of difficult person, ignore them if you can. Try not to say, "I disagree with you." Instead, give them the illusion that they are right and that you like their ideas. Then introduce your ideas - after they trust that you value what they presented. They have to receive your approval before they can even begin to hear your comments.

Do give this type of person praise when it is due. Even if it is a minor or rare contribution, go out of your way to show respect for their knowledge. But once you start sharing any position that runs counter to what this "expert" believes, you may have to point out the downside to their position and show them the consequences.

If you work closely with this type of person, you may not have the time to consistently try these strategies. When possible, assign the person to work with someone else who may not react as strongly as you do. Or, if the indirect tactics are not helping, you may need to role play a very direct response. Try this:

You are the best person to work on this program. But because you cannot listen to the suggestions of others and assume you are right, no one wants you around. If you could take a slightly less aggressive approach, your knowledge could shine. And

people would probably do it your way.

True Expert

Scenario: Tim Johnson, a retired corporate technology whiz, is hired to overhaul a nonprofit's technical infrastructure. After working alone to quickly assess the organization's computers and equipment, Tim immediately develops a technology plan, engages vendors, gives the development director related fundraising contacts and presents the implementation schedule at the next management meeting.

True experts know their stuff. They are highly competent and knowledgeable. In addition to having content knowledge, they are assertive and excel in presenting their views. Your efforts to counter their views will be obvious - they really are smart enough to resist attempts to modify their behavior. They also expect colleagues to be well prepared, thorough and articulate. When others do not have the same level of competence, many true experts avoid working with them.

Of all the categories of difficult people, this may be the one that requires bending the rules. Since the true expert has unique talents that are valued by others in the organization - or by other organizations -- you may just have to tolerate eccentric behaviors to avoid losing his expertise. As long as the behavior is not dangerous and the person generally shows respect for others, try to let them be the expert and don't pretend that they are like other employees. Do not try to mold the true expert.

If you do need to curtail the true expert's feelings of entitlement, keep them well informed about daily operations throughout the organization. Overwhelm them with details and opportunities to give input. In addition, ask them to most organizational meetings. Then watch to see how these huge time commitments affect them - they may ask to opt out or become more quiet simply as a result of being tired. At some point, they will be unable to focus on too many things and will eventually return to their immediate scope of work.

Placaters

Scenario: Jan is in charge of an accreditation process for which she regularly chairs meetings. Two vice presidents bicker and disrupt

meetings. Jan tries to change the subject, make soothing comments or take responsibility for any friction. She meets with each of them privately, then plans easy agenda topics to avoid any confrontation. As a result, critical issues are not being addressed and the accreditation process is running behind.

Placaters are peacemakers, caregivers and natural counselors in the workplace. They cannot tolerate disharmony and need the appearance of calm and agreement at all costs. Placaters focus on people and have an extreme need to be liked. While they behave in an agreeable, friendly or caring manner, they are anxious.

They also are struggling to communicate in clear, direct ways. As discussed in previous issues of Project Pointers, a person cannot be assertive while relentlessly avoiding any hint of conflict. Placaters are often passive aggressive, determined to sabotage honest disagreement. It is especially difficult for them to change their behavior because the short-term possibility of being disliked is so high. And, they often cannot tolerate emotionally uncomfortable situations of any kind.

When working with a placater, model solid professional behavior. Show him how to communicate honestly and assertively. State your positions without hedging and avoid such expressions as "sort of" or "possibly" or "maybe." Also, help him practice saying no. Assist him in making realistic commitments and tell him directly what you expect.

If you are the caregiver with whom others may have trouble working, you can modify your behavior and begin practicing new relationship techniques. Encourage colleagues to limit conversations about their personal lives. This may give you some breathing room while you practice responding less. Also stop making excuses for others based on their personal issues. Instead, focus on the job description and measure performance objectively.

Overly Sensitive

Scenario: Jill, a marketing manager, gets teary if the marketing committee does not adopt all of her suggestions. Even differing ideas about paper color or format can upset Jill. As a result, committee members accept what she has proposed even when they are less

than enthused. People feel they cannot say anything to her.

Overly sensitive staff members are eager to please but they are devastated by any hint of criticism or error. While they take their jobs seriously, they also take everything to heart and greatly magnify it. As a result, they may withdraw and avoid people. They are often late with work because it is hard for them to set or meet deadlines, creating a domino effect for staff. Of course, this leads to more criticism and more tears. The overly sensitive person is also more likely to quit and leave the organization stranded.

It does take energy to give the extra sensitive person the special handling they expect. But practicing new techniques may save time in the long run. First, reassure the person about how valuable they are. Begin with what she is doing right. Then tell her that making suggestions is a normal part of the business culture and important for quality assurance. If she is a new employee, this is a good opportunity to review how things operate at your nonprofit. You also should explain that your organization values the preferences and styles of others. If your culture encourages partnering, make sure this person is paired consistently with those who are tougher.

You also can use this opportunity to model desirable behavior. If others disagree with you in a meeting, let her see how you respond. You might even share with her moments when you were criticized and how that helped you be more effective. The overly sensitive person often does not understand how to set and maintain boundaries. You can discourage her from revealing too much personal information with colleagues.

Give the overly sensitive person a brief opportunity to express her feelings. If she continues to emote, let her know it's time to move on or keep changing the subject. Since many of them tend to apologize a lot, you may have to remind them that you are only interested in change, not apologies. Finally, the overly sensitive are not the best leaders because they do not have tough skins. If you must assign them to a leadership role, make it a shared position with a co-leader who is not also overly sensitive.

Hot Buttons

Why do some people just drive us up the wall? Why do we react so

strongly to certain people? We all have hot buttons. If I have extremely strong responses while working on a project, it often has nothing to do with the actual project. It may be transference from a past situation I did not handle well. These are our teaching moments. Stop, slow down, walk away ... and ask yourself if you are reacting to some difficult person or issue from your past. Then, try to modify expectations and behaviors for the work at hand.

In the next issue of Project Pointers, I will share observations from several of my **nonprofit strategic alliance** projects. For now, I wish everyone a rewarding, productive new year.

Best wishes,



Workshop Announcements

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Partnerships & Strategic Alliances

Marta will deliver a presentation on Partnerships & Strategic Alliances on April 14, 2009 from 4:00 to 6:00 PM. This interactive event is sponsored by the Fine Arts Fund and attendance is limited to representatives of arts and culture organizations. For additional information, please contact Joyce Monger at jmonger@fineartsfund.org



Project Management Workshop

**Marta's popular Successful Project Management workshop will be offered twice in 2009:
May 4 & December 8 - 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
at The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati
3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500
Cincinnati, OH 45209
Register online at: [Workshop Registration](#)**



Working With Difficult People

Marta also teaches Working With Difficult People. Please contact her to learn how this class is customized to meet the needs of individual organizations. Additional information is available on her [website](#).

Resource Highlight:

From time to time, I will highlight an exceptional resource for nonprofits. Karen Turner of [A.T. Professionals](#) is just that! The clients to whom I have recommended her have been thrilled with her services and calming manner. Karen provides administrative and technical services to nonprofit organizations and independent consultants. Services for nonprofits include administrative support and coordination for special projects, workflow analysis and streamlining, policy/procedure and forms development, event planning, technical support, general administrative support, and printing services.

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