

# Project Pointers

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Summer time and the living is easy...or is it? Your nonprofit projects may still feel overwhelming during the season of vacations and fun events. If you are experiencing recurring, significant frustration and stress, you probably are working with a difficult person or perhaps more than one. The next two newsletters will address the fallout resulting from difficult people and offer suggestions for overcoming their impact.

Please understand that on any given day, I have exhibited the behaviors that would put me in the category of being difficult! Nothing in my message implies that I have things all figured out. But I have learned some strategies over time and share them in a spirit of “constant improvement.” We all can be difficult given the right circumstances; our goals are increased awareness and practice in minimizing harm.

On the surface, nonprofits exist to improve the lives of clients. But if we scratch the surface, we find a hotbed of emotions. Given the complex motivations and dynamics, it is not surprising that difficult people influence our days.

*Difficult people are those who impede action. They stand between our goals and our ability to move forward with our project steps.*

Ultimately, the “difficult” label is an opinion and it is a very personal one. If we perceive someone as being difficult, they are—at least to us at work. We can use speech, body language and emotions to try to overcome the barriers they set up, but we still have to work with them.

## Reasons for Difficult Behavior

There are many possible reasons for a person’s inappropriate behaviors. We may know their history, interests and motivations and respond to them with empathy. We may offer support as they try to change. Ultimately, we must focus on the project requirements and our ability to perform our duties and not justify someone’s disruptive behavior. Nine common reasons for difficult behavior follow:

Marta’s popular Successful Project Management

workshop will be offered on

December 4, 2008 — 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Register online at: [www.healthfoundation.org](http://www.healthfoundation.org)

1. Jealousy. The jealous feelings may be unrelated to work but the workplace offers an excellent stage for acting out the drama. An old situation may be transferred to a current project issue. Or, the difficult person may have a well-established pattern of these unfortunate behaviors.
2. Criticism. These difficult types may make highly negative comments without acknowledging any positive qualities in a situation. And, they may make snap judgments without having all of the information, draining energy and dialogue. Their criticism can be directed to most people in the building or reserved for an unfortunate few.
3. Guilt. Often, difficult people have failed to resolve past events or conflicts; they carry their guilt forward through time and transfer it onto current situations. Or, they may feel guilty about something they did yesterday. Until they deal with their guilt, they are likely to continue acting out during the project life cycle.
4. Anger. Anger has two components: the root cause of an issue and the sense of helplessness that occurs when nobody listens. If both are in play, then the project is likely to suffer. Some project team members may have recurring anger management problems that leave the group collectively walking on eggshells.
5. Fear. This problem can be invisible until a difficult person reacts strongly to stress. Or, the person presents a front of being self absorbed, needy or “dug in” on a position. When this occurs, logical responses may not be helpful in overcoming the person’s fear.
6. Health issues. Wellness and disease have a huge impact on our offices. Someone may have trouble completing their work or contributing to the project team as they would like—or as you would like. They may be in physical pain or on medication that compromises their critical thinking abilities. They may be sleep deprived, edgy or anxious while waiting on test results.
7. Different cultural perspectives. A person may appear to be difficult because he or she is acting differently than you or your project team members. But their behavior may be welcomed in their family or country of origin. The person may also be behaving in a way that was acceptable in her previous work environment or project team.
8. Poor communication skills. Previous newsletters have addressed communication issues and are available at [www.martabrockmeyer.com](http://www.martabrockmeyer.com). The difficult person may not be skilled in listening or paraphrasing, may not take responsibility for actions and may routinely give orders instead of asking. They frequently disrupt work flow and cause confusion.

9. **Low self esteem.** This reason for difficult behavior lies at the heart of most others; it is central to improving performance. A person's self esteem has two components:

- A. Confidence in the ability to cope with life's challenges, fostering a sense of control over one's life
- B. Self respect and the belief that one deserves success.

To help build the self esteem of a difficult project participant, emphasize the positive and act as though you have high self esteem. Encourage the difficult person to set high standards, then give regular, positive feedback. You might also let them know it's ok to disagree and allow them to spend time with colleagues who have different work styles. Again and again, let them know you believe they can do something well.

## Workplace Boundaries

In working with difficult people, it is especially important to understand boundaries and how they can be applied and misinterpreted.

*Boundaries are the lines or parameters that define and protect the physical, emotional and psychological territory between individuals.*

### Quick Coping Tips

1. Distance yourself from the person's behavior and try to not take things personally.
2. Try to understand the person's point of view or motivations.
3. Decide to change how you interact with the difficult person.
4. Select the best time and place to talk with the person.
5. Choose techniques that fit the specific behaviors that you have observed.

These invisible markers differ from person to person, as each person has a unique set of rules. Because we are all so different, these expectations and guidelines must be communicated. For example, we usually do not know we have crossed someone's boundary until it's too late. In dealing with difficult people, five boundary issues are in play:

1. **Time.** What is the person's relationship to time? Try to learn if he is a planner or a procrastinator and when he arrives at meetings.
2. **Personal space.** A person may appear to be difficult because she does not like communal situations. She may not wish to share work space, have co-workers touch her things or be hugged.

3. Personal information. A person may not wish to discuss personal issues at work or know much about colleagues' lives. The person's sharing style may not fit with the culture, another factor in how he is perceived.
4. Emotional expression. Everyone is different about sharing feelings at work and office expectations differ. The boundary issue is one of containment: knowing the point at which someone's emotional expressions move from appropriate to troubling.
5. Noise. Offices are usually noisy! Project team members have different levels of noise sensitivity and comfort. A difficult person may simply be adapting to overcome troubling noise.

These boundary issues are key factors in project life. When boundaries are violated — the infringement of personal territory—difficult behavior increases. Encourage the difficult person to change in these ways:

1. If he is continually upset or angry, a boundary probably needs to be set.
2. When setting a limit with someone, he should state it clearly, without anger, in as few words as possible.
3. He should not set a boundary unless he is prepared to maintain it.

With this background, the next issue of *Project Pointers* will examine the seven types of difficult people and how to respond to them. If you wish to learn more in the meantime, I'll be happy to share more from my three-hour workshop on *Working With Difficult People*.

Enjoy the summer,



Watch for Marta's  
Fall Project Pointers via email!



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