

# How to manage difficult people (part 2)

## KEY WORDS

- » Conflict
- » Difficult people
- » Toxic team

We all know that problems come in different forms and sizes in life and problem staff are no different. In this second paper in the managing difficult people miniseries we identify some of the personality types and behaviours that are characteristic of difficult to manage team members. Every manager and team member knows there are people they work with who appear to be difficult to manage.

In the last paper in the series, we considered the thorny question for many managers asking if the manager is themselves the problem and whether they need to address some issues in themselves before moving on to manage apparently difficult people in the team. We identified how the manager must exclude themselves as the problem in the team before they can go on to tackle any 'problem' individuals.

We all know that problems come in different forms and sizes in life and problem staff are no different. In this second paper we identify some of the personality types and behaviours that are characteristic of difficult to manage team members. We go on to consider, briefly, what motivates the difficult behaviours in some people before considering in detail how the manager might go about gaining an understanding of the behaviours and motivations of the members of their team.

## DIFFICULT PERSONALITY TYPES

There are many definitions of difficult to manage personality types identified in different places in the literature as well as online. The definitions by Lilley (2006) are among the most useful for the manager to consider, because they appear to cover most difficult personality types.

As ever when reviewing these, always ask the question of yourself, "does one of these describe me?" There is no getting away from the fact that managers are people too and that some of the personality traits that enable them to succeed, like single mindedness, might sometimes come

across in a negative, difficult to work with, light.

Lilley's (2006) difficult to manage personality types fall into seven groupings:

### 1. Hostile types

» The Tank: sets out to make others look bad, so they can look good themselves. They can be abusive and abrupt in their manner and they will frequently comment on and demean the personal characteristics of others in their interactions

» The Sniper: is unlike the Tank in that they are subtle in their attacks on others. They hide behind being friendly but make personal remarks and indulge in innuendo to try to make themselves look better than their colleagues

» The Bomb: has an explosive personality, as the name suggests, and can become enraged and argumentative for no reason.

### 2. Complainers

These are the people in the team who feel they are not heard even though they, and often they alone, have the answer to all and any problems. Because they feel people do not listen to them using the usual channels, they complain and moan instead.

### 3. Silent types

Sometimes people who are the quiet members of the team simply lack the confidence to talk.

Some silent types use their silence as a weapon, thinking their silence can be used to

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harm others by not letting them know what it is they are thinking or feeling and leaving other people wondering.

**4. The super agreeable**

These are the people who will always agree to do anything, sometime characterised as the nodding dog. They are always on side and want to please, so they say yes to anything and everything. The problem is they often fail to deliver what they say they are going to.

**5. The negativist**

These people do exactly what their name suggests, they are always critical and negative and can bring the mood of the team down. Their criticism is not necessarily bounded by things they disagree with, but they always see the downsides and difficulties in a project.

**6. The know all**

Needs to feel a sense of self-worth within the team and so sets them self up as an expert in all things, regardless of whether they are or not. They want to appear intelligent and are not afraid to let others know what they think.

**7. The ditherer**

These people rarely manage to get things completed because they are a perfectionist, and nothing quite lives up to their, usually, extremely high standards. They can also struggle to communicate their thoughts and ideas and so can delay the actions of others as well.

If the manager is to learn to use their understanding of the difficult to manage personality types to address the shortcomings or behaviours of team members, it is important that they identify the personality type correctly. It is also important to remember that in much the same way that Belbin (2020) identifies the need to have a mix of team member types in a team, teams can be the richer for having difficult people in them; the trick is to turn the personality to your advantage. At this stage of the process there are many issues the manager needs to consider before making their move.

The dividend the manager might take from understanding the motivations of these difficult

to manage people is that once they have seen past the label of difficult and identified the individual's motivations, these difficult to manage staff can become among the easiest to manage. The average employee does their job, is easy to manage but difficult to motivate, and will not, necessarily, choose to be innovative because they are by nature team players who find conformity easy but don't really like change (Belbin, 2020). In contrast many of the 'difficult to manage' staff are passionate about something e.g., perfection, being well thought of or the avoidance of problems.

**IDENTIFYING THE TYPE**

Identifying what motivates a team member to behave as they do is not the same as making a psychological assessment of them as a person, nor should it be. Neither is this a job for the manager to do on their own, in the same way you need to understand your own potential role in any difficult relationship, you also need to be aware of your own prejudices and not allow these to dictate your approach to this stage. Perhaps the best way to do this is to work with colleagues you trust to try to understand individuals you have mutually identified as being difficult. This is not about going on a witch hunt nor is it about idle gossip, this needs to be focussed on the growth and development of the team.

What you are looking for is patterns of behaviour that have been noticed by you, as the manager, and other trusted senior members of the team. Remember anyone can have an off day, so being quiet from time to time, or a one-off argument should not colour your approach to this exercise. That said, if the individual behaviours you are noticing are dangerous for the individual, the team or the people you care for, you must get help dealing with the individuals as soon as possible and that may mean via a formal route.

While thinking about your difficult to manage team members, you need to identify:

- ▶▶ The behaviours which you and others have identified as difficult
- ▶▶ The characteristics of the behaviour
- ▶▶ The situations in which these behaviours are displayed

- » Who these behaviours are displayed to and who they are hidden from
- » How frequently the behaviours occur
- » What the motivation might be for the behaviour.

What you are looking for here are trends in their behaviours that give you clues as to how you might be able to turn the behaviour to your advantage. It is also worth considering, that many individuals will not fall neatly in to one box or another and some difficult to manage individuals may have characteristics of more than one difficult to manage personality type,

This is not a job for a manager who is new to a team to undertake, nor is it something you can delegate. There are inherent dangers in both which include jumping to unfounded conclusions about an individual because you don't know them or their history and being influenced by other staff (perhaps negativists) who have their own agenda causing you to lose control of what it is you are trying to achieve. Of course the biggest danger is that you are not understood by those you ask to help you in the process, and they disclose what

you are doing which could be damaging. The need for trust in the relationship between the manager and the people they rely on to support them in this process is therefore evident.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper we have identified some of the classic personality types which are often considered by managers as belonging to people who are difficult to manage. We have identified a little of the motivation which lies behind the behaviours some people display in the workplace and considered how the manager might start to collect information about personality types at work in their team.

In the next paper in this series, we will consider how having identified personality types and motivations among the team, the manager can turn these to the advantage of the individual and the wider team.

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