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# For the Management of Difficult People [[1]](#endnote-1)

## STOP – the old count to ten rule

The first rule when facing a difficult person is to maintain your composure; the less reactive you are, the more you can act rationally and handle the situation.

There are times when you are confronted, particularly if you are a ‘decision maker’, by an upset member concerning an issue or they may even be attacking you for something you or the Club has done.

Don’t say something you might regret later; take a deep breath and count slowly to ten. In most circumstances, by the time you reach ten, you will have figured out a better way of communicating the issue so that you can reduce, not escalate, the problem. If you're still upset after counting to ten you probably are not going to handle this situation well – so reschedule. “Can I talk to you about this tonight, tomorrow, give you a call”….Revisit the issue after you calm down.

## 2. Just listen

Sometimes people simply want to complain. Hear them out, and unless there’s something important at stake, don’t waste your energy trying to change or convince a person who’s opinion is firmly entrenched – and they want to be heard. Whether you’re dealing with a difficult colleague or an annoying Club member, be diplomatic.

## 3. Shift from Being Reactive to Proactive (the plan will help)

Try to avoid personalizing the person’s behaviour. When you feel offended by someone’s words or deeds - try to put yourself in the difficult individual’s shoes. Consider the person you’re dealing with, and complete the sentence: “It must not be easy….”

To be sure, empathetic statements do not excuse unacceptable behavior. The point is to remind yourself that people do what they do because of their own issues. As long as we’re being reasonable and considerate, difficult behaviors from others say a lot more about them than they do about us. By de-personalizing, we can view the situation more objectively, and come up with better ways of solving the problem.

## 4. Pick Your Battles

Try to REALLY assess if this is an important issue to you. Not all difficult individuals we face require direct confrontation about their behavior, nor do they need to be convinced that there is an answer that is different from theirs. Sometimes an issue really matters to the individual and it is not important to you and certainly not worth the time/effort to prove that they were wrong and you were right or that their behaviour probably led to the situation. Apologize; say you will write a letter; correct the mistake – whatever will help you all ‘move on’.

Think twice, and fight the battles that are truly worth fighting.

## 5. Separate the Person from the Issue

Establish yourself as a respectful, strong problem solver with excellent people skills. In every communication situation, there are two elements present: the relationship you have with this person, and the issue you are discussing. You can establish more rapport and potentially increase cooperation if you separate the person from the issue - be soft on the person and firm on the issue.

For example:

“I want to talk about what’s on your mind, but I can’t do it when you’re yelling. Let’s either sit down and talk quietly, or take a timeout and come back this afternoon.”

“I appreciate you putting a lot of time into this project. At the same time, I see that three of the ten requirements are still incomplete. Let’s talk about how to finish the job on schedule.”

“I really want you to come with us. Unfortunately, if you’re going to be late like the last few times, we’ll have to leave without you.”

When we’re soft on the person, people are more open to what we have to say. When we’re firm on the issue, we show ourselves as strong problem solvers.

## 6. Neutralise the bully

A common pattern with difficult people (especially the aggressive types) is that they like to point out your shortcomings to make you feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Typically, they’re quick to point out there’s something not right with you or the way you do things. The focus is consistently on “what’s wrong,” instead of “how to solve the problem.”

This type of communication often is intended to dominate and control, rather than to sincerely take care of issues. If you react by being defensive, you simply fall into the trap of being scrutinized, thereby giving the aggressor more power while she picks on you with impunity. A simple and powerful way to change this dynamic is to put the spotlight back on the difficult person, and the easiest way to do so is to ask questions. For example:

Aggressor: “Your proposal is not going to help this organization.”

Response: “Do you have an alternate proposal for which you have thought through the implications?

Aggressor: “That is so stupid.”

Response: “That response is disrespectful. I am not comfortable continuing a conversation like this. Is that what you want? I am willing to continue if we are working on a constructive solution. Let me know and I will decide if I want to stay or go.”

Keep your questions constructive and probing. By putting the difficult person in the spotlight, you can help neutralize her undue influence over you.

## 7. Use Appropriate Humor

Humor is a powerful communication tool.

When appropriately used, humor can shine light on the truth, disarm difficult behavior, and show that you have superior composure.

## 8. Set Consequences

The ability to identify and assert consequence(s) is one of the most important skills we can use to "stand down" a difficult person. Effectively articulated, consequence gives pause to the challenging individual, and compels her or him to shift from obstruction to cooperation.

## 9. Try not to take things personally

Sometimes, people are difficult simply because of who they are. It might have nothing at all to do with you. So try not to take it personally -- even if the comment is directed at you. That person might be that way with everyone. Taking such comments personally only makes dealing with that person harder for you.

## 10. Ask questions rather than make statements

Difficult people often have strong opinions. Sometimes they're right, but other times they might be wrong. And when they're wrong, a more effective way to point this out is to ask questions rather than to make statements. By asking questions, you might be able to help the person recognize the issues in his or her own position, with less risk of a confrontation.

# For the Ongoing Problem: Have a Plan



# Some appropriate phrases when needed

If you sense that a communication breakdown has occurred, address it immediately. The following phrases can be useful:

• "That's not what I said."

• "That was not my question."

• "Please let me finish."

• "We're [actually] saying the same thing."

• Use the "I" rather than "you"

"You never sent me that email," consider saying, "I never received that email."

• Separate the idea from the person. In particular, if you have a concern, make clear that the concern lies with the idea. Yes, the difficult person might still take offense, but it's less likely.

Rather than "Your idea has several issues," consider "That idea has several issues."

• Turn the tables

"We can't be ready by that date”," ask "When CAN you be ready?" or "What factors are keeping you from being ready on that date?"

# The Respectful Treatment Policy

## Policy

Every person can expect to be treated respectfully in CFUW. Every member, employee, and volunteer has the responsibility to refrain from participating in behaviour that is, or could be perceived to be, disrespectful in nature.

## Statement of Commitment

CFUW recognizes its responsibility to build and maintain a diverse, respectful organization where all enjoy an environment in which the dignity and self-respect of every person is valued and which is free of offensive remarks, material or behaviour.

We recognize that conflicts and disrespectful behaviour can jeopardize an individual’s dignity, self-esteem and well-being and possibly undermine our CFUW relationships, friendships and productivity.

A truly respectful organization requires the cooperation and support from each and every person in the organization. Everyone has a responsibility to set a positive example and behave in a manner which will not offend, embarrass or humiliate others, whether deliberate or unintentional.

The principle of fair and respectful treatment is a fundamental one that CFUW commits to uphold for its employees, members and those who work with us. This same commitment must come from all our members, employees, and volunteers. Together we can ensure that every individual is treated respectfully and courteously.

How to use this policy: see Administration Manual

<http://www.cfuwadmin.org/ApprovedDocuments/BoardDocuments.aspx>

1. Adapted from the work of Preston Ni, M.S.B.A., [↑](#endnote-ref-1)