Dealing with Difficult Members

By Chris Geiger

Dealing with difficult members in an organization is not only one of the expected speed bumps on the road of leadership, it is also sometimes a “rite of passage,” testing a leader’s patience and skills while preparing one for greater experiences. Difficult members can appear in meetings or within organizations as a whole. However, leaders can easily develop skills to assist themselves in dealing with personnel challenges in their organization, or can draw on their already existing skills to rise above the interesting and sometimes amusing situations that dealing with difficult members can present. Either way, leaders can develop an understanding of difficult members and then utilize these skills to keep a meeting and organization on course. The following list of difficult member archetypes and responding skills was originally developed for orientation leaders at the University of West Georgia (now State University of West Georgia). However, dealing with difficult members is a universal leadership issue and the information that follows may be helpful to anyone who’s ever been faced with a leadership challenge involving a difficult member.

Difficult Member Archetypes or “Who Are You and How Did You Get into this Organization?”

You may have seen their faces, but I doubt you know their names. Let’s meet them, shall we? We will also look at some potential motivation behind the behaviors these difficult members present and how to deal with them when they catch you off guard. The best plan of action in all situations is to be prepared to re-involve them in the meeting with a minimum amount of disruption.

Who: “The Talker” or “The Rambler” talks about everything—literally!

Well, everything but the topic.

Why: Why are they so eager to share everything? They could be nervous and their anxiety comes out in chatter. Or they may be quite well informed, but lacking in membership skills that would allow them to positively contribute to the group.

What to Do: Don’t embarrass them and don’t use sarcasm to silence them. If they are having a sidebar conversation with someone in the meeting, ask them to join the group discussion. Slow them down with a group question, “That’s an interesting point. What does the rest of the group think?” Or try, “That’s a little off track—let’s get back to the agenda.” If they are well informed, find a way to use that information.

Who: “The Aggressor” also known as “The Arguer,” “The Clash” (no, not the ‘80s rockers but two or more folks who can’t get along), “The Heckler,” or “The Underminer” (devious and proud of
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No matter what name fits best, they are often intimidating, hostile and/or threatening and disagree with or correct most everything being said.

Why: They may experience undisclosed anger, unknown issues, personal conflicts, past conflicts with others in the group, not enough sleep, or even simply not enough coffee.

What to Do: Don’t argue, but do keep your cool and the group cool, too. Try to honestly find merit in a point, agree and move on, or ask the group for responses. Respond to this member type by name, be concise and clear with your responses, and possibly set up a time outside of the meeting to discuss their meeting behavior expectations. Avoid humor—nothing is funny when you are angry. Try not to react to anger in a meeting and try not to encourage it in any way.

Who: The “Non-responsive Type” also known as “The Flatliner” or “The Seat Filler.” This person is quiet, never reveals thoughts, ideas or opinions and rarely contributes to the group discussion.


What to do: Attempt to bring them into the group without “spotlighting” them. They may not appreciate the spotlight and other members may question additional focus on one particular member. Be patient and friendly. Ask opened questions (those that can’t be answered with a “yes,” “no” or nod of the head). Watch for clues: the partially raised hand, the “inhale” (that intake of breath as they are about to contribute to the discussion) and then ask, “What were you about to say? Did you want to contribute something?”

Who: “The Lovers.” This pair consists of a couple who are so in love they do everything together.

Why: They are so in love they do everything together.

What to do: Involve each of them as individuals, ask them questions as individuals rather than as a couple, and delegate responsibilities to each of them as individuals. Also, institute an icebreaker at the meeting that requires members to change seats, assign seating with name plaques, etc. to help keep them separated.

Who: “The Buds/Best Friends for Life”

Why: Very similar to “The Lovers,” they seem to feel that everything is better if they do it together. However, they may be saying, “There’s no way we can do it alone.”

What to do: See above, but don’t forget to praise and reward them as individuals as well.

Now that we’ve met them, know that difficult members aren’t impossible to deal with; they are just difficult to deal...
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with. But using some tried and true communications skills can make it much easier to deal with these special members. In every situation, it is very important to stay cool, calm and collected. Remember, all meetings must come to an end. Nothing lasts forever, even a bad meeting, a bad event, difficult members or poor membership/leadership behavior. Don't underestimate yourself, your abilities, or the fact that you are in charge. You lead, and you lead by example, so set a positive tone from which others can learn. Try to de-escalate and avoid conflict. The following skills will help you do all of this and more, and there are also conflict management options listed in the event that a difficult member can't be handled and creates a conflict. When in doubt, take a deep breath, count to 10, or 100 if you have to, and lead your group out of any mess in which it may have found itself. Communication skills can benefit you in any situation, especially those involving difficult members.

Non-verbal Communication

Body language communicates a number of messages, even when you think you aren't saying a word. Practicing the "SOLER" position can help you communicate effectively with your members and prevent you from sending the wrong message (Hall & Short, p.4).

- **S**—Sit or stand squarely; no slouching, leaning back in the chair or practicing your new yoga positions.
- **O**—Open posture: watch the folded arms and legs that say, "I'm closing myself off to you."
- **L**—Lean forward: lean slightly, to communicate interest and attention. Don't lean so far forward that you land on the floor or appear to be menacing and aggressive, though.

- **E**—Eye contact: make eye contact, keep it natural and don't stare—this isn't a contest.
- **R**—Relax: again cool, calm and collected behavior saves the meeting. Keep your body relaxed and no one will realize how nerve-wracking an experience this may be.

Other Communication Skills

**Clarification and reflection** ensure you are actually hearing what the other person said and help avoid conflict by allowing for immediate correction. "So what you are saying is ...", "Let me make sure I understand your points ..." are statements that clarify or reflect.

**"I" messages** are personal statements of thought or feeling. "You" messages can be aggressive or blaming, which can back a person into a corner or end a conversation. "I think ..." or "I feel ..." are appropriate ways to begin statements that could help diffuse a potentially unpleasant situation.

Avoid the "Backpack of Anger." Almost every student today has a backpack. Some even have soft-sided luggage they roll around campus. It is a great way to keep everything organized and in one place. This works well for books, food and supplies—the necessities of campus life. However, a lot of people carry a second backpack of which they are unaware most of the time. Some of us like to take each incident in our organization (or life for that matter), and put it in the backpack. Instead of dealing with a situation or emotion created by a difficult member, we put it in the backpack and carry it around with us. When it becomes full, it triggers an unexpected explosion of emotion and the rest of the group is left wondering, "What happened?" or "What was all that about?" Anger, hurt and fear are natural emotions. However, the trick is to deal with each of them as they occur and release them. When we trap these emotions or put them in our "backpack of anger," we are setting the stage for a randomly intense leadership moment.

**Listen.** Sounds simple, right? Guess again! It is one of the most difficult communication skills to master. To listen, we have to:

- **Stop talking;**
- **Be patient;**
- **Stop thinking about our rebuttal or next statement;** and
- **Try not to read minds, daydream, filter, compare, discount, placate, etc.**

There's an old adage about having two ears and one mouth and that this is a reminder that we should do more of one activity than the other. Think about it. Think about the times in your life when you felt someone truly understood and heard you. They were listening. Try it.
Well That Didn’t Work—
Now What?

In the event that communication skills don’t rescue the meeting or program, you still have some options for dealing with the ensuing conflict. Regardless of the method you choose, be hard on the conflict and soft on the people and utilize any already existing group procedures for remedying the problem at hand.

1. **Communicate.** As the leader, you can try to get your team members to communicate. Ask any disagreeing members to paraphrase each other’s statements for mutual understanding. This action gets the members to clarify and reflect.

2. **Work out a compromise.** Get the members to agree on the source of the conflict, engage them in give-and-take, and then agree on a solution. Summarize the conflict and ask for agreement. Ask questions: “What does each want and need?” “What can each agree to?” Then ask them to agree.

3. **Ask “What should the other person do?”** Make lists, select a compromise all are willing to accept, and ask if it meshes with your team goals.

4. **Hold a question session.** Allow each disagreeing member to ask a set number of questions. The answers may lead to understanding or agreement.

5. **Ask, “Could you be wrong?”** No one wants to be wrong or admit that they are wrong. As a leader, you can explain that it shows strength and leadership to admit one is wrong and then help them to move along. Most folks don’t like the word “wrong,” so try another phrase.

6. **Share expertise.** Bring in an “expert”—an advisor or a staff member who can resolve the situation or at least bring in additional information. More than likely there is a person on campus the whole group respects and would welcome into a difficult situation. You may also have a faculty member with expertise in arbitration and conflict management who would be willing to provide an “in-meeting workshop.”

Options for Dealing with Conflict

Each person in a conflict, including the leader, has five basic options for dealing with it.

1. **Competition:** focusing on “winning” at all costs. This is the offensive, aggressive approach, which takes advantage of others’ weaknesses. This involves little listening, little information sharing, and no input from others. It can be a relatively fast way to resolve conflict, but it can also be incredibly destructive for the group.

2. **Avoidance:** ignoring it now or forever. While complete avoidance does not resolve a conflict, temporarily deferring it to a better time could save the group from suffering a lot of discomfort.

3. **Accommodation:** agreement through yielding, cooperation in the spirit of harmony, or agreement in the name of peace and tranquility, even if you don’t buy into it. You may not enjoy this particular conflict management option, but it may be the best you can do as a leader for the benefit of the group as a whole.

4. **Compromise:** the search for a solution that is mutually acceptable, meeting in the middle through give and take. Or in other words, “everybody wins something, but they don’t get everything.” Compromise is a viable option in which you settle for the best you can get at the time, especially if time is short or total agreement is impossible.

5. **Collaboration:** the total-membership approach. The group accepts the fact that there is conflict, generates creative solutions (possibly through a brainstorming session), weighs the consequences of solutions, considers member needs and concerns, and forms a team to plan, implement, and evaluate. It is reserved for those issues of greatest importance because of the time and commitment it requires of members and leaders.

Also, don’t underestimate the importance of setting expectations and ground rules at the beginning of your semester or at the start of your training program. If everyone has a clear understanding of how the organization works and how meetings operate, there are fewer chances of problems occurring. If you don’t set a direction for the group, or don’t set an agenda for the meeting, it is basically a free-for-all and you can expect behaviors and actions to reflect that.

Water Over Stones

Leadership is never easy, and it isn’t a popularity contest. Suzanne Vega once said, “I figured if I was popular, I must be doing something wrong.” Have you ever looked at river stones? In case you haven’t noticed, the most beautiful are the ones that have withstood the constant pressure of the river washing over them. Difficult members in an organization are simply the river washing over you, and with a little practice, you will shine brighter than the rest of the stones at the meeting table.

References


About the Author

Chris Geiger is associate director of Student Activities at State University of West Georgia. Active in NACA since he was a student, he has held a number of positions in NACA’s leadership, including National Convention Committee Operations Coordinator, National Convention Educational Program Coordinator, Commission for Student Development Chair and ultimately Chair of the NACA Board of Directors. He is the 2002 recipient of the former Southeast Region’s Shaw Smith Founders Award, as well as its Outstanding Campus Activities Professional Award in 1996. He holds a bachelor’s degree in human services from the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and a Master’s degree in student personnel services in higher education from the University of South Carolina.