A C.U.R.E. for Dealing With Difficult People

Difficult people. Would the world be an easier place to live in if there were no difficult people—if everyone behaved the way we think they should? Perhaps—and it might also be extremely boring. And by the way, just exactly what *is* a difficult person?

Let's define a difficult person as someone who:
- seems to be concerned exclusively with his or her own best interests
- refuses to accept a logical rationale or argument
- never listens to your point of view
- disagrees with your point of view
- disagrees with your way of doing things
- appears to be intentionally obnoxious
- doesn't relate well to anything that breathes

We generally describe people as "difficult" if we see them as being obstacles to the achievement of our objectives. Once they interfere with our jobs (or other aspects of our lives) *then* we have a problem! Interestingly enough, if they don't get in our way then we don't seem to care as much or feel as motivated to do anything to correct the situation.

People often search for formulas and approaches which can be applied to any situation with a difficult person and subsequently become frustrated when they experience little or no success. The formula gets blamed; the approach gets blamed; the other person gets blamed; the circumstances get blamed, etc.

In reality, the only control we can exercise in a conflict situation (which is generally what we have when dealing with a difficult person) is over ourselves. Oh yes, we can *influence* people, but that's more a result of the way we control ourselves than of the techniques we use.

One way of viewing life is that there are people who are genetically difficult to get along with (or else they spent years of intensive training to become that way). Another way is that there are no difficult people, only difficult situations that occur with certain people more often than with others. Let's take the latter view for one very simple reason. Our ability to control or change someone other than ourselves is extremely limited—in fact in most cases, it is non-existent. To what extent would you allow someone to control or change *you* so you'd be easier to get along with?!? It's highly unlikely they could directly do anything to force you to change and I imagine that if you suspected someone was trying to "technique" you into being different, you'd have a strong negative reaction!

One process which I've found to be successful in dealing with difficult people is to: (i) think in terms of difficult situations rather than difficult people, (ii) do whatever possible to ensure that I am not responsible for the difficult situation, and (iii) apply the following **CURE**:
- **C**are
- **U**nderstand
- **R**espect
- **E**mpathize

Care about: (i) the difficult person as a human being, (ii) yourself—yes, you must care about yourself, too and (iii) achieving a positive outcome from any interaction you may have. One of the fastest ways to increase the likelihood and intensity of conflict is to convey to someone that you don't really care about them or the outcome of your interaction.

Understand: (i) the interests and desired outcomes of ***both*** parties, (ii) the differences in perspective which you each bring to the table, (iii) the logistics of the situation—the appropriateness of the timing and environment for your interaction and (iv) possible reasons why previous sessions with a particular individual were found to be difficult. Simply making an ***effort*** to understand all the parameters of a difficult situation increases the chances of a positive outcome. True understanding comes from seeing things from the other person's "viewing point" (how things are seen from ***their*** perspective) rather than exclusively through your own "point of view" (how things are interpreted from your ***own*** perspective).

Respect is an important factor which generally runs in opposition to our nature of being judgmental. As human beings, we have a nasty habit of judging people and ideas quickly, following which we make an incredible effort to justify our initial opinions. We tend to see what we believe, rather than see what is really in front of us. Since many of our opinions are self-servingly negative, one consequence is that it becomes very difficult to respect the particular person whom we have judged. These judgments cloud our ability to recognize the strengths in either the individual or his/her point of view—which then makes it much tougher to justify the effort required to get along with them.

Empathize means to feel what another person feels. Life would be relatively simple if everyone was perfectly logical in every situation they encountered, yet the reality is that as human beings, we each have a personality which includes a strong emotional component. Most emotions have the ability to distort a logical argument or request in such a way that the message received may bear no resemblance to the one which was sent. As a result, miscommunication and misunderstanding occur. For this reason it is very important to make the effort to appreciate how another person may be feeling in a given situation. Through understanding the feelings of the person with whom you are communicating, you will be better able to adapt your approach to reduce or eliminate emotional clouding.

When it comes to "CURE"ing difficult situations, you'll find the following steps useful in improving your ability:

- ***Commit*** to going as far as you can using everything you've got to arrive at a mutually agreeable outcome. Without this commitment, it is unlikely you will put in the effort needed to shift a difficult situation into a more positive one.
- Second, ***visualize*** (or picture) a successful outcome with the person with whom you find yourself in constant conflict. This is an important step in breaking a previously established negative pattern. Research indicates that our thoughts and actions are much more strongly directed by a negative picture of an outcome than by a positive one. Creating a positive vision increases the likelihood of a positive result in two ways: (i) it reduces the more powerful effect of a negative vision and (ii) it provides a basis for making decisions to generate a successful outcome.
- Next, ***embrace*** conflict rather than avoid it. Conflict is a natural process which generates movement and progress. Seek the challenges of difficult situations and above all, keep things in perspective. The

continued existence of the world doesn't hinge on the outcome of *any* situation you are likely to find yourself in—even though it may sometimes feel that way! Too often we become immobilized by our fear of the possible negative consequences of dealing with certain issues. Yet one of the best ways to improve our ability to deal with conflict is to learn by doing. Sometimes we're successful and other times we're not. Avoiding difficult situations only improves our skill at avoiding difficult situations. As the current Nike slogan suggests, "Just
Do It"!

- *Finally*, review the difficult situations in which you've found yourself. What went well? What blew up in your face? Here is where learning and eventual mastery take place. Win or lose, take the opportunity to grow from the situation. It's the best way to improve.

There are really only two sure-fire ways to avoid dealing with difficult people. The first is the ostrich approach—hide your head in the sand and avoid the people with whom you have difficulty. The other is to choose not to perceive *any* person as difficult, but simply as different. By so doing you will allow yourself the freedom to explore, learn and grow with them. You will be better able to provide a "CURE" and by so doing, greatly increase the chances of a positive outcome. The choice is yours!