

## Dealing with Difficult People



*“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said”* – **Peter Drucker** (1909-2005), American Management guru

We often face the challenge of dealing with difficult people. Every leader faces ‘trouble cases’; people who annoy you repeatedly and you wish they weren’t part of your team. Incurable subordinates or even unreasonable superiors may suck away a lot of your energy and time, and you are left wondering if the returns are worth the effort and time you are putting into the relationship.

If any personal or working relationship causes you recurring stress, try the following four steps to deal with them.

### **STEP 1: Pay the price of ‘Time’**



Ask yourself how important this person is to you and your project/service. Do you want to address his concerns, and if the answer is 'yes,' you have no choice; you have to pay the price of 'time'. If the person isn't important, but is a 'trouble case', are you willing to pay the price – ranging from emotional outbursts to politics - of ignoring him? If you think ignoring him can affect your project/service negatively, you again have little choice; his issues have to be addressed.

In that case be ready to spend time; don't be miserly.

If you focus on cutting time to resolve issues, you have to pay later with interest. That means at a certain time in future, you have to spend more time sorting out the misunderstandings that will arise due to not having open communication now. Since he is a trouble case, ask yourself are you ready to clean up the mess now or you'd prefer handling a bigger crisis later? Better spend time now and address the problems; take the bull by the horns. A flight response will only compound your misery; you can't circumvent the distress, you are only delaying it.

Having internally accepted that time has to be spent, we are ready for the second step

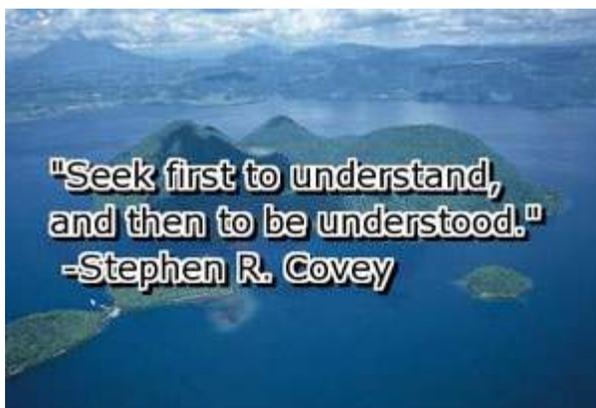
### **STEP 2:- Know your NIC**

Before confronting the 'trouble cases', spend time alone introspecting on your own 'Needs, Interests, and Concerns'. Remember that intrapersonal communication comes before inter personal communication. Besides, a spiritual leader also depends on consistent spiritual practises to nourish himself; the internal succor helps him deal with the myriad challenges of life cheerfully.

Dag Hammarskjold, the former United Nations Secretary-General said, "The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is happening outside."

Knowing oneself better helps us see the 'thorns' as human beings like us, with universal needs and feelings. We wouldn't be threatened by their idiosyncrasies or agendas because we are connected to the Lord through spiritual practises. Being thus internally equipped, we are ready for the third step, to approach the 'trouble case'

### **STEP 3: Seek first to understand, and then be understood**



The first round/session of the meeting is exclusively for understanding the other party. Strongly resist the temptation to give advice or solutions. Remember everyone has a common need to be 'understood'. Steven Covey calls this as the habit of 'Seek first to understand, then to be understood'.

The most critical element for you during this stage is to not get emotional. Your job is to simply put yourself in his shoes and be 'present' with him; understand and discover his NIC and bring clarity to his own emotions.

Confirm with him if this indeed is his NIC. If he's not sure, don't jump to the next step. Continue reflecting and let this phase continue till there is an affirmation from him that you have indeed understood him.

Here, with the permission of the other party, we can use a board and write down the points to help us understand. This also assures the person that we want to understand. Besides, tremendous amount of clarity is achieved. You could with the help of the person categorize all the issues raised to different categories and help put them under a few headings/points.

Time and again during the conversation, reflect back without attempting to give solutions. Be genuine; don't mentally prepare a rebuttal as he reveals his side of the story. People can quickly sense pretence and hypocrisy. Look for the feelings he is expressing and understand the various needs that he seeks to meet. As William Shakespeare said, "Hear the meaning within the word". This is empathic listening; the most critical step in the process.

Some leaders are reluctant to offer empathy because they fear this takes lot of time and they are also not sure how long should one offer empathy. Empathy, in the long run, saves time because it's a major emotional deposit; one of the greatest joys people feel is in being heard and understood. You don't have to hear eternally; you can know the person is satisfied at your offering of empathy when he has nothing further to say on the issue. Especially if you are reflecting back consistently during the conversation, and he is convinced that you have understood, you will feel a release of tension, he'd relax and would give up his defence.

Now you are ready for the next stage of negotiation.

#### **STEP 4: Express yourself humbly, yet fully**

Now that you are sure of both his and your needs, you can first address each of the points that had been earlier raised by him. Express graciously how you could facilitate the particular need; clarify honestly, apologize-only if needed- sincerely, and express kindly how you could either fulfill or your inability to provide for it.

In most cases, a humble, non-apologetic NO helps; especially if you have first heard and understood the other person. Beating around the bush is letting the problem escalate at a later date. Don't succumb to, 'Oh, he's going to feel bad'.

This stage requires us to practise maturity- the ability to balance ‘courage’ and ‘consideration’. If you yield and can’t express clearly, you will be miserable. On the other hand, if you are aggressive and blunt, you will hurt the other party and create unnecessary enemies.

You don’t have to give lot of explanations; you are not responsible for someone else’s emotional instability. State your points and be quiet.

Sounds too good to be true? You may wonder if this process really works. Most people are reasonable and behind the façade of loud emotional outbursts and troubles they create, there is a real human soul, wanting to express fully and also to receive kindness. By first sincerely understanding them and then humbly expressing yourself, you are helping the flow of positive energy and more often than not, the process works.

### **A real case study- Translating emotions to NIC language**

Recently I underwent a life enriching experience with Ritesh, a department head of one of our projects who was incensed at being removed from his service and somebody else, who he perceived was incompetent, was given the task. Ritesh perceived diplomacy and aggressive behaviour by the management; he was badly hurt.

On behalf of the management, I volunteered to mediate. I internally resolved to spend as much time as he wanted from me because the project and he, both are important to me (first step).

Then during the second step I wrote down my own NIC; our rationale for ousting him, and the various issues we had with him in the past. Then I entered the third step of negotiation, where I spent exclusive time with him, and he spoke for three hours on the heart burns he had on various management issues. As I sincerely tried to understand him, I categorized all of his issues into six categories.

As we discussed these issues on the white board, I was writing, erasing and re writing, all in a sincere attempt to understand him better. During the whole discussion, I was careful never to agree, disagree, advice or order him. I just tried putting myself in his shoes. On occasions it was tempting to suggest a few things, but I resisted. I rephrased his concerns and often reflected his feelings in my own words. This helped me understand him better. A couple hours later he was convinced that all his needs have been understood by me.

I remember when the meeting began he was tight and rigid in his bodily posture. At the end of this first round of meeting (the third step in the process), he relaxed in the chair and felt at ease. He was now relieved that the management heard and understood him. He was now ready for the fourth step.

During the second round of the meeting, in his presence, I presented each of the points to the other members of the management body and heard their replies. We, as a team affirmed and apologized for certain issues, clarified and reiterated our trust in him, and honestly expressed our limitations in addressing certain of his needs. During the whole exercise, Ritesh felt many misgivings were addressed.

The success of this mediation was the following day when he sent a mail to all the management members expressing his full support and cooperation for the new proposal.

### **Taking the initiative to understand**

This way of approaching trouble issues helps us avoid getting carried away by heated emotions; instead we are able to translate all emotions to NIC language.

The key however is our honest willingness to ‘hear’ and ‘understand’ first. British actress, Emma Thompson said it well, “Any problem, big or small, within a family, always seems to start with bad communication. Someone isn’t listening.”

When we take the initiative to first understand, we become instruments of positive change. Instead of negative emotions draining us and sucking out our vital life force, we will feel nourished and spiritually surcharged to serve all in a better way and with a more selfless attitude. Remember, as a spiritual leader our primary responsibility is to selflessly serve. Rather than holding grudges and feeling ‘hurt’, we have to take that extra step...to care and understand, and only then our services bear fruit.

### **About the Author**

*Radhanath Swami was born in Chicago in 1950. In his teens he set out to wander the world on a spiritual quest, eventually discovering yoga path of devotion. He presently travels in Asia, Europe and America teaching devotional wisdom but can often be found at his community in Mumbai. People who know Radhanath Swami speak of his dedication to bringing others closer to God. Almost in the same breath they speak of his lightness, simplicity and sense of humor. Visitors and friends are inspired by his unassuming nature and natural unwillingness to take credit for the works he inspires - community development, massive food distribution to indigent children, missionary hospitals, eco-friendly farms, schools, ashrams and emergency relief programs.*

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