

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

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Dealing with Difficult People

Introduction

All of us at one time or another have had to deal with disagreeable people both on and off the job. The results of how we interact with these people can range from total disruption and emotional outburst, to an easily shrugged off minor irritation. This information sheet provides tips on how to deal effectively with difficult people so that tension is diffused and smooth interaction is attained.

Who needs this information?

Everyone in the conservation partnership is capable of learning how to deal with difficult people. It is important to remember that, except for a small portion of the general population, people basically want to get along and want to avoid conflict. However, we are all capable of losing control. When people become difficult to deal with (i.e., extremely emotional or hostile), there is usually a reason. In these situations, we need to try to understand and address the reason or the situation may grow increasingly more hostile with future interactions.

When can this information be used?

Conflicts can occur in one-on-one situations, or in small or large groups. In a companion *People, Partnerships and Community* issue titled "Conflict Management - Issue 12," we explain how to manage conflict in one-on-one, small or large groups. This information sheet is designed to provide more detailed tips for one-on-one conflict situations. Conflict with difficult people can occur anywhere and at anytime. Hostile or difficult behavior can be a result of mis-communication, mis-understanding, conflicting personal values, or an unfair situation. We have to understand that in some cases people may have every right to be upset. In other cases, they may be wrong, while in most cases there is a lot of uncertainty with respect to who is right and who is wrong. When people lose control, we need to minimize the possibility of the situation turning violent. We can do this by listening, not arguing, and not being judgmental. Occasionally, if we give people the opportunity to vent their frustrations, the hostility will fade away. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. There are a few people who can be inflexible, hateful, bitter, closed minded and smugly confident of their knowledge. Recognize these people, and remember that it is sometimes best to walk away and not waste your time engaging in destructive discussions. Resolving conflicts takes a joint effort.

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How do you deal with difficult people?

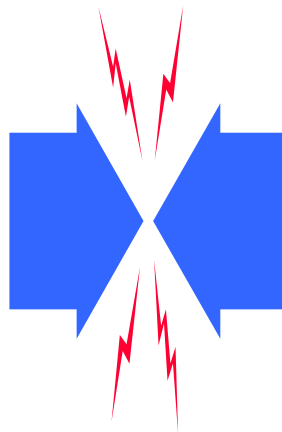
When faced with a difficult person, try to find out WHAT is upsetting them and WHY. Only after someone identifies a cause can you start to try to address the problem. In some cases, you may only be able to help yourself or the other person understand the problem, but this may not necessarily resolve the conflict.

Some tips to diffuse hostility in a person are as follows:

- ◆ do not become emotional yourself,
- ◆ do not interrupt,
- ◆ allow the other person to speak until they are finished,
- ◆ try to understand what they are saying; give them feedback that shows you are trying to understand them (e.g., “It sounds like you are saying USDA has unreasonable rules. Have I correctly interpreted what you are saying?”),
- ◆ never use an accusatory message (e.g., “YOU don’t know what your talking about.”) Instead a better approach would be “My understanding of the situation is different. Let’s see if we can find out why we have differing views.”
- ◆ if you are wrong, apologize and ask what you and he/she can do to right the wrong (e.g., “I apologize, how can WE fix this?”),

◆ if you disagree, do it professionally and unemotionally (e.g., “I see what you are saying, but we are required to follow the laws/rules of Congress/USDA”), DON’T repeat the same phrase over again when they object. Instead really try to explain the problem to them.

◆ ask him/her to help you both come up with as many options as possible (e.g., “Let’s try to think of some solutions...”)



How do you deal with underlying causes of hostility?

Once you reduce the tension, you may still need to figure out why this person was hostile in the first place. The following list presents some situations where conflict could arise, along with general solutions.

Creating a nuisance:

◆ The right to exercise one’s freedom can sometimes create a nuisance. People have a right

to do anything as long as it does not create a nuisance.

SOLUTION: When a person’s actions become a nuisance, avoid the nuisance or separate the irritating individual from those being bothered.

Conflicting personal values:

◆ The conservation ethic is a set of values. Values express what a person thinks is “right” or “ought to be”. A conflict that develops over values is not because of the value per se, but rather whether the values should be imposed on someone else. Conflict over values is most likely to occur with legal or political action.

SOLUTION: This often depends on the situation. For example, a strong advocate of private property rights believes that they are free to do anything they want with their land. Because there may be different interpretations of legislation regarding this issue, it is necessary (and wise) to obtain information about certain property laws or even have the legal documents (or their references) with you. If a conflict over this issue arises, you can help to interpret gray areas and point out those that are clear-cut. Work with the individuals involved to compromise on the gray areas but indicate where you also have to follow the law. Sometimes, it helps to point out larger environmental consequences of their actions.

Problems of perception:

- ◆ If there is disagreement about “what someone saw” (i.e. “what is”), this challenges an individual’s fundamental beliefs which can then cause a conflict. Challenging what someone thinks they saw (e.g. non-wetland vegetation in a

field that has hydric soils) is a threat to their perception of reality. **SOLUTION:** Depending on the situation and the nature of the relationship between the two individuals experiencing conflict, the solution may be to seek help from an outside expert to verify or dispel the accuracy of the belief in question. In this example, there may be need for a certified wetlands specialist to visit the field in question and conduct an evaluation.

SOLUTION: A possible solution would be to visit the farmer and talk about the expense and impact of sediment running off of their farm clogging nearby streams, destroying trout habitat and killing fish. If this farmer were also a trout fisherman, a little education could go a long way. Quite often people are not aware of the consequences of their actions.

Where Can I Get More Information?

- Rubin, J.Z., Pruitt, D.G., & Kim, S.H. Social Conflict - Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement. Second Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc, 1994.

- SSI *People, Partnerships and Communities* Issue titled “Conflict Management” (Issue 12)

- SSI Web page: <http://people.nrcs.wisc.edu/socsciinstitute>

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Competing uses of limited resources:

- ◆ You are faced with several farmers who need to borrow the district’s no-till drill. **SOLUTION:** Some solutions might be to have the farmers help each other with the planting so that each field gets done faster and also get many fields planted in the same day; try to get the farmers to rent another drill from a neighboring farmer; or have several farmers pay for custom no-till planting.



Rude customers:

- ◆ The worst thing that can happen in a discussion is to resort to name calling and insults. As a government official there is never a

reason for this but you may be faced with a customer who resorts to this kind of behavior. This usually occurs when the customer is competing

with someone or is suspicious of the government in general.

SOLUTION: A solution would be to try to diffuse the tension and find out what is bothering the individual. NEVER respond with more insults. Insults used in a conflict are about three times as destructive as just disagreeing with the individual.

Obliviousness:

- ◆ At times you may be faced with a situation where you might think there should be a conflict, but there is not. A farmer who continues to use a moldboard plow on a highly erosive hilly field should be experiencing conflict with himself and his neighbors because he is causing excessive erosion.

If a negative situation can be neutralized with both parties still respecting one another, subsequent discussion can lead to meaningful resolution including creative thinking and cooperative problem solving.

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