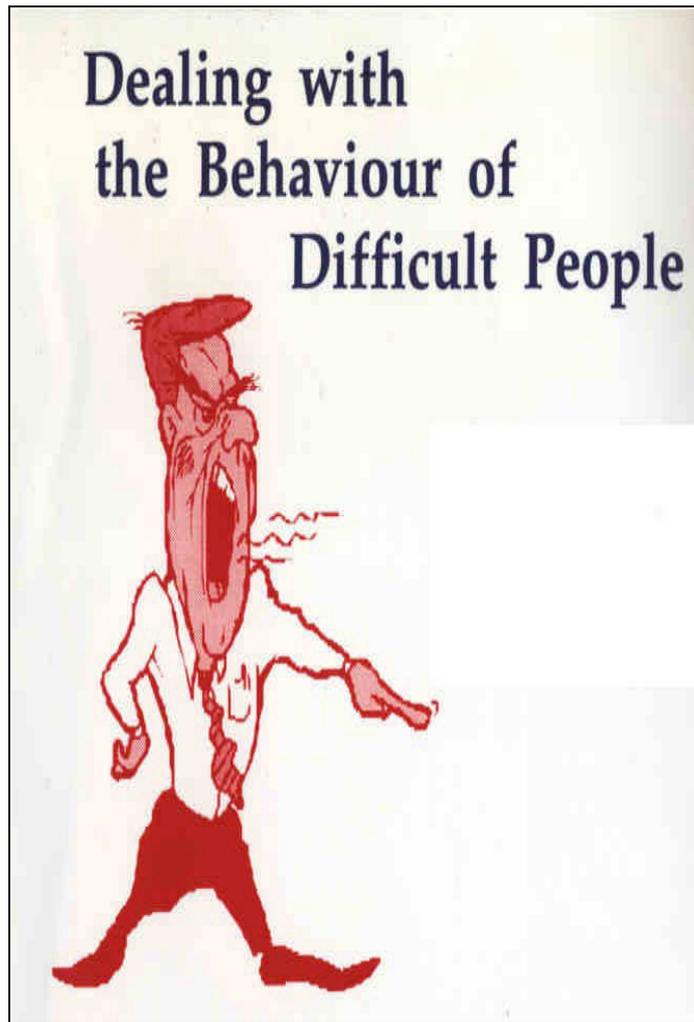


Dealing with Difficult People

An Interview with Michael Tunnecliffe



Judy Esmond, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

Hi, this is Dr Judy Esmond here. Welcome to this informational package for you.

A topic that has had people asking and sending me questions relates to issues and problems people have had in dealing with the difficult behaviours of others, particularly in the work setting. This may include those in management, colleagues, employees, volunteers and others. Such behaviours are certainly not confined to one group alone.

So for this package we're going to explore and find some answers to how to deal with the difficult behaviour of others with a renowned expert in the field – Michael Tunnecliffe.

About Michael Tunnecliffe

Michael is a leading clinical psychologist who has worked in his own private practice and also consulted with hundreds of organizations and businesses, running workshops and presentations on dealing with stress, critical incidents, peer support, conflict and of course, the difficult behaviour of other people.

In this session Michael will be discussing the importance of learning to respond not react to others. Focusing on the difficult behaviour and not the person. The main ways to provide constructive feedback and simple

techniques that can make an enormous difference in helping you handle the difficult behaviours of others.

We also have an extra bonus for you to download, just go to the website www.nodifficultpeople.com or www.dealingwithdifficultpeople.com to get even more ideas on dealing with the difficult behaviour of other people.

So join me now for this insightful presentation with Michael Tunnecliffe.



THE EXPERT INTERVIEW

Background on Michael Tunnecliffe

Judy: Today we have the opportunity to speak to Michael Tunnecliffe. A leading clinical psychologist who assists people in organizations to develop effective responses when confronted with stress, crisis and challenging situations. Michael is one of the leading experts in dealing with difficult behaviours and we're honoured to have Michael with us today. Michael, Welcome!

Michael: Hello there, Judy.

Judy: Michael, I'm wondering if we could just begin, if you could explain to people a little bit of how you've come to be in the field you're in and working in the area of difficult behaviours.

Michael: Its one of the areas I work in, that's largely came from when I was in private practice which was quite some years ago now. I had a lot of clients come to me and part of the problem why they were having difficulty, feeling very stressed and feeling very upset. When you actually start to look at it, it really came from having to deal with people in the course of their duties. These were individuals who really found that other people's behaviour, in terms of the way in which they spoke to them, the way in which they dealt with them, was quite intimidating and they really came along because they

were looking primarily for how to handle the stress. But what I found was that helping them to handle the behaviour was a really good avenue for teaching them how to handle the stress. And after putting a lot of material together I finally developed it into some workshops and manuals and courses and the like. And really found that it was a really good area of practice.

Dealing with Difficult Behaviour is a Big Issue

Judy: Michael, in terms of my work and working with the people I do, the issue of dealing with difficult behaviour is probably one of the ones that comes up over and over again. Can you talk a little bit about why it is such an issue for people? What happens for people?

Michael: I think there's really three reasons. Number one is that people genuinely do like to get along with other people. Whether at work or a social situation they like to have good rapport, good conversation, good communication and generally feel good about other people's company. When someone presents with set of behaviours which people find very difficult to manage it really spoils that first area.

The second one, I think is very important, is many, many people are quite self-conscious about how they present to other people.

And so, if someone is giving you negative feedback and negative vibes and really isn't responding how you want them to respond to you, that can be pretty uncomfortable as well.

I think the third reason sometimes is that often people just don't know what to say or what to do when someone engages in a set of behaviours which they just find difficult to manage. Most people go into that reactive stage, of reacting to the behaviour rather than responding to it. Then that can escalate into a confrontation or conflict or even some kind of verbal aggression. I really think people often are having difficulty judging just how they should be dealing with people around them. And for that reason, people generally get stressed if the behaviour is not what they expect.

Similar Types of Difficult Behaviour

Judy: Michael, in your work have you found that there are some similar characteristics that people are dealing with, similar behaviours that seem to come up a lot?

1. Negativity, Sarcasm and Criticism

Michael: Yes, I have. I think that first and foremost that people find that when they're dealing with someone who is unhappy about things, that person can be cynical, critical and sarcastic. A lot of people tend to get hooked into that. One of the difficult behaviours is just that kind of sarcasm and criticism, and negativity. I think we all know someone who when you tell them something and they'll come back with a negative comment if it just doesn't fit with what they want. I think it's a style of behaviour almost like habit that some people get into.

2. Manipulative Behaviour

And a second form of difficult behaviour is more of the manipulative type of behaviour. Manipulative behaviour is where people start to try to twist the situation around to suit their purposes. We are all probably manipulative in some way or another. But when I talk about manipulative behaviour, I'm talking about really devaluing someone else and taking advantage of them. And a lot of people feel very put out when someone engages in that direction with them.

3. Aggressive Behaviour

And of course the third type is purely the aggressive behaviour. People act very aggressively sometimes - the way they talk, the body posture, the physical stance, the invading people's personal space, intimidatory gestures, all those sort of things. They are probably the three areas that people feel most uncomfortable about.

4. Non-Cooperative - Passive Aggressive Type Behaviour

Perhaps there's a fourth area. The other is one the passive type behaviour. The non-cooperative behaviour. And it's not as those people are being critical, manipulative or aggressive, they just don't cooperate. It's called almost passive-aggression. Sometimes people will agree with you and say "Yes, I'll help you. We'll do that." and then just don't. And that's another form of passive-aggression, or just don't comply or just refuse to comment. I think

that disturbs a lot of people as well. They would probably be the four general types of difficult behaviour that people would present with.

Judy: And I know when you're talking about passive behaviour that many people don't think of it in those terms. But I do remember people who have spoken in their relationships about issues of being punished with silence and how effective that is as a technique of control and manipulation. It's a very difficult behaviour to deal with.

We are all Passive Aggressive at Times

Michael: I think what we have to remember is that we are all passive at certain times. It is very rare the person who doesn't engage in some kind of passive resistance or even passive aggression at certain times. From little kids when we're not playing with them, we're not going to talk to them. I think people extend that into adulthood – if you're unhappy with what someone does you don't cooperate, you don't talk to them. Another form of passive-aggression is when you go to a restaurant and there's something about the service or the meal we haven't been happy about. Very few people actually raise that issue and complain. What they tend to do is to pay the bill, leave then say, "We're never going back there again," and then tell all their friends what a terrible restaurant it is rather than feeding back that information to the restaurateur. That's a form of passivity which many, many people engage in which is really about perhaps I'll avoid getting into potential

confrontation because I don't know how that person is going to react to me. And that's a tough one. That's a really difficult one to overcome.

Basis of Difficult Behaviour

Judy: So when you're working with people or groups and running workshops where do you begin to look at some of the issues people are bringing up about difficult behaviours?

1. Personality Styles

Michael: I like to really start with some of the basis of difficult behaviour in general and appreciate that some of it is based in personality. We do have clearly different personality types. And you do get some people who have a tendency towards aggressive, dominant personality styles while there are other people who are fairly submissive, passive almost retiring personality styles. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, there are certain personality styles who try to take advantage or manipulate other personality styles. You do find that some of the difficult behaviour is just a function of who are the personalities coming together. And I think we all at some time or another have what we might call a personality clash with another person. It's pretty rare the person can actually say "I get on really well and enjoy the company of everyone I meet." To me that is pretty unrealistic. There are lots and lots of people we get on well with that and we enjoy their company but there are going to be people with something about their personality that grates with us. I think that's a fundamental basis of where difficult behaviour

comes from and what prompts us to react to other people's behaviour. It's the basis of that behaviour is perhaps their personality.

2. Habituated Learnings of Individuals

Another area of course is the habituated learnings of an individual. What has a person learned over time in terms of their interaction with other people? Some people just learnt through perhaps parents, school, something in their socialized environment to get what you want by taking it. If people don't do what you want you throw a temper tantrum and that gets things your way. And I think we've got a lot of adults who still have, I suppose, behavioural styles, they learnt as children that got them what they want, so they engage in that at the present time.

Judy: And as long as that keeps working you keep using it.

Michael: If you can get what you want from a temper tantrum, why ask nicely? Some people do that. It's spontaneous.

3. Emotional Intelligence

Michael: The other one of course, is the almost like the buzz word now and it's been around for a long time where we talk about emotional intelligence. In other words, what sort of social skills does the person have? A lot of people think that social skills are purely learned things. But I think it's a little bit more basic than that. A lot of people have almost social styles

or social skills that are perhaps part of their own personal makeup. Maybe it's an effect of the personality. Maybe it's a combination of a whole range of factors. But I think when we put this label on emotional intelligence it's quite a valid one. Because, I think we've all met the person, who just is simply intellectually, in terms of academic intelligence, incredibly bright, incredibly capable but their social skills are just very poor. And for a lot of those people it just doesn't occur to them to act differently. Even when you feed it back, they'll tend to brush that off as being not their issue. Like it's your problem if you're not happy with my social skills. I think that's probably another factor. The basic social skills that some people set and that some people have and a lot of people have far better social skills and social techniques than others.

Judy: So the social skills in a sense relate to being able to be aware of other people and their needs.

Michael: Aware of yourself and how you're behaviour impacts on other people. And then of course naturally being aware of other's peoples needs around you and accommodating that while accommodating your own needs is probably the balance that we have to get to, to function effectively.

Judy: Are there other ones in terms of when you're looking at – from personality styles, learning techniques and emotional intelligence? Are there other areas that you talk about when you work with people?

4. Roles You Play

Michael: Yeah, there could be quite often. Another one that could crop up perhaps in the workplace is the role the person has. I observed over the years that there are a lot of people who alter their behaviour towards other people based upon their roles. A lot of those roles are basically things that people have picked up. You believe that if you're the boss, you should tell, not ask. There are probably some preset ideas that people have which aren't always appropriate but people don't question them.

5. Beliefs and Values

Another powerful one is people's belief and value systems. We do have a lot of people in our society who actually believe that they are far more important, far more valuable and far more worthwhile as a person than other people. I suppose if that becomes a fundamental belief of yours, that you are more worthwhile and valuable than someone else then the next thing that follows from that is it's perfectly okay to humiliate, talk down to and disparage that other person because it doesn't occur to you to be polite and respectful to them. So that beliefs and values is another factor that we have to consider and look at.

Power and the Leadership Role

Judy: Just going back to roles, it's very interesting that many people talk about particularly colleagues who have been promoted to a higher level above them and how their behaviour towards them changes quite

dramatically. And that role brings with it a power that in some way changes the person's behaviour quite dramatically.

Michael: It's quite interesting. In the psychology area we actually call that role attribution. What it means is - what are the behaviours that we attribute to that role? I think there's been a lot of preset notions where many, many people feel that if you are put into the role of senior manager, supervisor, leading hand or whatever it is in the workplace then it's not okay to be friendly to people around you. You should now act in a way that stamps your role, stamps your mark. There's no validity for that I don't think, and of course many people don't do it. Many people get promoted and respond very appropriately to that situation. But it's just that there are some people who, it's quite amazing. I've seen this a couple of times myself. They really forget the human side of what they're doing and take on the attributes of the role what it means to them and that can create a lot of difficult behaviour for other people, a lot of difficult behaviour.

Judy: And just as you said then, there is an assumption often that when you take upon a leadership role, you must become almost machine-like and separate yourself from other human beings, in a sense.

Michael: Yes, I think that separation stuff is a good point, Judy. It's almost like you have to separate in a way that you behave towards the person very differently to how you behave towards them before. Probably,

there's some validity in that to some degree. If you have a group of workmates who all go out together. They're all in the same level in the organization they go out together and they have lots of drinks and have great fun together and that's part of what they do as workmates. Then one of those workmates becomes the leader of the group, or manager or team leader or something, perhaps engaging in those exact same behaviours is no longer appropriate because they do have some other responsibilities and they do have some other roles that they do have to perform. While it's appropriate to change in some ways, there are some people who, once again, don't read the appropriateness of the change they actually make.

Beliefs, Values and Attitudes

Judy: And in terms of values and beliefs, they are an extremely powerful thing in terms of people's behaviour.

Michael: I often say that if we use that word 'attitude' and that's a very important one that crops up when we talk about difficult behaviour. I've often said to people, "What was the person doing that you found hard to manage?" and the response I get is "Well I just didn't like their attitude." And once more attitude is a very broad general term and what it really means can be different from person to person. When I finally say, "Well, give me the example of what they were doing," the person may come back and say something like "They wouldn't talk to me," or "They wouldn't give me that information" or "They wouldn't help me out." Now I often see attitude as

reflecting the belief and value system of the person. That's a powerful one because our behaviour is often governed by our beliefs and values which brings up one other point, too.

The Behaviour Not the Person

Sometimes we've got to come back to focusing on the behaviour of the person, not the person. That's why I like the way in the earlier part of this interview; you've used the term difficult behaviour not difficult people because it's what the person says or what the person does that creates the problem for us.

Judy: Now Michael, that is a little confusing but the behaviour is the person. How do you explain that to people? Because it's often, "Yes I'll look at the behaviour," but the behaviour is the person.

Michael: Okay, now let's get clear. The behaviour is not the person because that person has multiple sets of behaviour. It's a little bit like, if you think of people close to us in our families and relationships. All of us have got family members that we can get on really well with and we have great time with, yet at the same time we may have a disagreement or some kind of even dispute with that same person. What we're dealing with, what we're in dispute with is the person's behaviour, not the person themselves. I think it's a really common thing that crops up all the time where people feel "I'm in dispute with that person." If that person was acting in a perfectly acceptable

way, engaging in behaviours that we approved of, we wouldn't be in dispute at all. So it's not the actual person we're in dispute of what the person is saying or doing at that time. Which brings back to another point.

Behaviours are What a Person Says and Does

Behaviours are only made up of two things: what a person says, and what a person does. If someone says, "I work with a very difficult person." You work with a person who says something or does something that upsets you, frustrates you, annoys you or intimidates you. What we're really saying is it's not the actual person but what they're doing at that point in time.

We Cannot Change Only Influence Someone's Behaviour

When I work with my clients it's a point I try to make very carefully, we have no power to change or alter people. What we can do by the way in which we respond to that person, we can influence their behaviour. For instance, if you and I were having a conversation and you said something that I was unhappy about. And I felt really unhappy about your comment to the degree that I felt angry. If I started shouting at you, berating you and criticizing you, you would probably get very defensive and we'd end up in what we classically call an argument. If I was to say to you, if I was to think about it and say "Oh, gee. I really don't like what Judy is saying. But I don't want to argue with her, but I do want to influence her." By coming back in a quiet voice, making a very clear statement of, "Gee, Judy I really feel uncomfortable by what you said," or "Gee, I don't see it that way. That

makes me feel a little bit unhappy when you talk like that.” What I start to do is probably increase my chances that you’ll listen to me because I’m not attacking you. And I also increase my chances that you may even modify you’re behaviour in particular, if you did not want to get me upset. But if your aim was to upset me, or was to annoy me, or worse to frustrate me or intimidate me, you’ll probably to continue to engage in that behaviour. Do you see the point I’m making?

Judy: Yes! Let’s go back and look a little bit more at the behaviours that we’re talking about here. People often talk about different types of behaviours and very much how do I deal with this, well they often say, person? How do I deal with this behaviour from a whole range of them that you would have worked with and experienced from the very passive to the aggressive to the bullying. Where do you start with that? Where do you look at working with people in groups?

Find out What that Person is Saying and Doing

Michael: My first step is always to find out what the person is saying or doing? In other words, where is the problem? For instance, if I have a person comes up to me and say, “We’ve got a very, very difficult person at work. Just a terrible person, he’s a real bully or she’s a real bully.” Now my first question is “Give me an example of what that person does that upsets you, intimidates you and humiliates you”, whatever the person is describing to me. Because by getting an example of the behaviour, I then have a much

better idea as to how we're interpreting and labelling that person as a bully. Do you see where I'm coming from? For instance, it may be that someone says "I'm having real difficulties with someone I work with because they're a bully. And I don't know how to deal with that. What should I do?" My first response is to find out "Give me an example of what that person does that gets you upset." And they say "Every time I try to talk to them, they raise their voice and shout at me." Now, that is a very different form of bullying to someone who actually invades your personal space or who humiliates you in front of other people or who is physically aggressive, by physically intimidating you with their size, their strength or whatever else. So, once more, once we found out what the behaviour is, there's a much, much, better way to then try to say, well what are your options are for dealing with that behaviour.

Judy: We're talking about identifying not the person but the behaviours, that really are, what is making you uncomfortable, upsetting you or frustrating you? So if we determine those behaviours, can you give me an example of what people may have described to you as a behaviour that they're dealing with?

Michael: Let's take a common workplace one. I was running a workshop recently and someone said "I work with a real bully who is very difficult to deal with." And I said "Give me an example of what the person does." "Well, we may be having a meeting and during the meeting I might make a point

and this person would immediately say 'That's a stupid idea. I don't know how you could possibly consider that,' and would immediately talk right over the top of me and it makes me feel humiliated in front of the rest of the group. I feel really embarrassed about it and I tend to withdraw and say nothing." So I say "Okay". I then check out a number of factors: Has the meeting got a chairperson? Are they actually doing their job? You maybe able to have a system by which everyone has a chance to talk, that maybe there need to be some ground rules set. So first of all, is there an organizational way in which that person's behaviour can be managed? Let's say there's not, let's say it just a group of staff that come together and meet and one person tends to dominate and basically intimidate or overwrite other people. It might be then an idea rather than to feel intimidated to come back with a very clear 'I' statement. "Excuse me", whatever the person's name is, "I would like to finish saying my thoughts first and then we could perhaps open up the discussion."

How Do You Respond to that Person's Behaviour?

Once more, I've had people when I've suggested things, they'll say things "Oh, I don't think I could do that." Sometimes, you've got to think about what would you be able to do? Because at the end of the day, I believe it's about how do you respond to another person's behaviour, to influence that behaviour to get something different. There are no magic solutions. There are no magic wands. There is no one going to suddenly come down from the heavens and say you behave yourself or a parent figure come in and control

the situation. People do have to be assertive. They do have to learn some very clear, some very practical assertion techniques like making clear 'I' statements.

Judy: Often people, sorry Michael, often people would feel very nervous about doing that, very unsure about...

Being Assertive

Michael: Sure, so the three things you do is:

Think of the situation and develop a very clear strategy or plan that you want to do.

1. Rehearse it. Maybe rehearsing it in the mirror. Rehearse it with another colleague or friend or family member.
2. Rehearse what you are going to say so you've got it very clear.
3. Do a little bit of positive self-talk. Tell yourself, "You can do it." Tell yourself, "You will do it."

But also bear in mind that people like to get other people operating how they want them to. What you may find is, you may get a plan, rehearse it, and then actually act in an assertive manner, only to find the person engages in even more disparaging or humiliating behaviour because they've turned it into a conflict. The next choice is to choose not to get hooked in. If they want to shout back at you or try to intimidate you more, you just quietly restate your situation or restate your comment. And you've got to determine

yourself to do that. So it means, sometimes one of the older assertive techniques is called the "broken record" technique where a person is making negative comments so you come back with a statement you'd like to make. Of course, they immediately ark up and try to humiliate and embarrass you so you just simply calmly make that statement again.

Judy: Often because you've changed the pattern of communication, that person hasn't and they're just going to try even harder.

The Bully that Doesn't Know

Michael: Exactly. Here's the important part. There is a lot of people who tend to act in bullying, humiliating, intimidating ways who don't intend to bully, humiliate or intimidate. It's just a personal style they've got in they don't give it a lot of thought. They don't have a lot of insight about how it impacts other people. But when someone actually says, "I feel really uncomfortable when you talk like that," or "I feel a bit embarrassed by your comment you made." Sometimes, people will really just alter their behaviour especially if the person does have some regard for you.

Handling the Brick Wall

I think you have a situation where you make a very clear polite statement back to the person about what you want and they immediately dismiss that and right over the top of you. Number one, you know they haven't got any regard for you or your feelings or for your statements. Number two, that

person may have such an anti-social personality type bent that no matter what you're going to say they're still going to argue and humiliate you. Sometimes you've then got to make a decision about to what degree am I going to engage with this person. I understand that's a difficult choice when it's a person you have to work with or a person perhaps you have to report to. But every now and again, we have to realize that we can use these techniques quite effectively and get what we want to some degree. But if we run into the brick wall, remember just hitting up against the brick wall doesn't make it go away. We either go around the brick wall or we decide to go somewhere else. And I think they are choices we make.

Judy: Michael, I was just wondering in terms of if you change your behaviour, you're more quietly assertive, does the person always immediately change or are they still stuck in their communication pattern?

Michael: Yes, some people have said that - you're right. There is always a possibility that by changing your behaviour and being clear and assertive you can make the situation worse for yourself because there are individuals who almost feel like they've got you where they want you, and they like manipulating situations. It gives them a sense of power and a sense of identity. There are some people who like to put other people down because of their own inadequacies. Now we just need to be aware that when we're dealing with human relationships there are no perfect solutions. Sometimes when you do something for your own self and your own self-esteem, if that

doesn't fit with someone else's agenda they will try and punish you for it. Just being aware of that and making some personal decisions about how you're going to respond to that situation is an important part of your integrity and your own self-respect.

Judy: I guess there's also the point that in order for someone to change their communication it might actually take them a couple of go's at doing that. Because they're stuck in the way they think you're going to react.

Michael: Exactly. Let's take a common family situation where there's a lot of difficult behaviours engaged in families, simply because families are sometimes those environments where people feel they can take liberties with other people's feelings and also in some families there's a lack of regard for how people treat each other. You can have a family member, in-law, or relation or something who acts in a negative, embarrassing way. One of the things that happens is you might clearly state your situation or your feelings to that person. Surprise, surprise, sometimes that's all it takes.

When Another Person doesn't Care

But if you got an individual there that simply doesn't care. They don't care how you feel. They don't care what your reactions are. They don't care that you're upset. One thing we've got to realize that's a choice they're going to make. And for better or for worse, you might have been very clear about the situation, but they simply don't care. At least in that situation you know

where you stand. And then you make your own decisions about to what degree am I going to have to keep continuing to communicate with that person, and what relationship do I want to have with that person. I suppose, families are a good example more so than workplaces or friends. Because with workplaces and friends we can have a lot more choices. In families, you have no choice. That's it. They're your family.

Judy: That's right - you don't get to choose them.

Michael: Yes, you don't choose them. You end up with them. Most of us have good family relationships. Most of us do get on well with most members of our family. In a lot of families there is always that one or two people who tend to clash. Some people go away feeling really upset after family functions and annoyed and frustrated. I've had many clients come in and say they were dreading Christmas with the family or they were dreading someone's birthday or someone's wedding because a particular family member is always difficult and rude and all this sort of thing. And I say "well basically, what you have to do is to think about how do you want to respond to that situation? Quietly, calmly state what you want." Now, people will either accept it or they'll reject it. But what you've got to remember is if they decide to reject that's their choice. You're being calm and stating what you'd like to have, or what you'd like to see or what you want from the situation. And you let other people make their choices.

Judge the Altered Behaviour by the Next Interaction

Judy: I think also, I remember at a workshop that you presented you talked about the fact that "Don't always judge their behaviour on their first response to you when you've changed your behaviour" because it may take them, I remember you saying, about judging it by the next time you engage with them.

Michael: That's a very good point because you see sometimes, let's say you and I have a conversation and I get used to putting people down and making negative comments and I get the reactions I want from that because I'm pretty manipulative. And then one day you come back quite differently. I'm not necessarily going to back down. I'm probably going to come back with an even more negative comment. You might just let it go but the next time we get together and I try to use the same thing. You don't go the same way anymore so I have to perhaps step back a little bit and realize "I'm not going to get what I want out of our friendship, if I keep acting that same way." So sometimes it does take a little bit time. And also, a lot of difficult behaviour that people have is quite habituated. It's not they're deliberately saying, "Here comes so and so, so I'm going to be really, really, difficult towards them." They are just in the habit of acting like that when things don't go their way. I think we really have to give people space and give them a chance to actually alter their behaviour.

Influencing Other People's Behaviour

Judy: In terms of understanding some of the reasons why people have certain behaviours. You talked about personality and learning, emotional intelligence, values and the roles they take on. And then you talked about some of the practical ways people can begin to alter and change their own behaviour but they can't change another person's. But they can certainly influence it. Can you talk some more about ways of influencing it, other techniques that people can use?

1. Pick the Time and Place for Difficult Conversations

Michael: First of all, sometimes picking the time and place for particularly difficult conversations. There are some people who time and place plays into their hands. It could be in front of other people, they might say things. You might just simply say "I'd prefer not to discuss this now" or "Can we talk about this later on" or "I'm happy to talk to you about it but at another time." Sometimes not fitting into what people want to use to manipulate it can be very important.

2. There's Times to Ignore Negative Comments

Also, there's times just to ignore people's comments. Sometimes people will make a negative comment, a criticism or some kind of sarcasm because they want to try to hook you in and rather than being hooked in you might just pretend you didn't hear it. It means that they have to make a choice perhaps

talk to you in a way that's reasonable and appropriate or you're not going to respond to them. There's another option there.

3. What's the Best You are Going to Get

Sometimes another important thing is to realize particularly if it's a co-worker, family member, friend, someone you know reasonably well, what's the best you're going to get from that situation? I think it really comes down to you're not always going to get what you want from a situation, but what's the best you're going to get from it.

4. How Important is the Relationship to You?

Judy: And also Michael, would it also be how important that relationship is to you?

Michael: Absolutely. It's a little bit like...I had a friend say to me one time, we were at a restaurant and he was moaning and groaning a little bit about the dinner. The food wasn't quite how he wanted it. There was something wrong with this and something wrong with that. I said, "Look, if you're really unhappy I suggest you say something." "Oh no, don't bother." Anyway it was quite interesting. We were walking out and we paid the bill and everything and the person at the checkout said "How was your meal?" In all honesty my meal was actually fine I said, "It was fine. Thanks." And my friend said, "Oh yes. No problems." We walked out. And I said, "Interesting comment. While we were having dinner you made a number of

negative comments about your meal and you told the person at the checkout that it was fine.” “Oh well, I didn’t want to upset them because sometimes these people can get really angry if you upset them.” And I thought that’s really fascinating because one of the reasons why people don’t say anything or don’t do anything is that they don’t want to upset another person. But we really got to ask ourselves sometimes, “How important is this person to me?” Now a person working at a restaurant, a waitperson or something, they are not as deep and significant in our lives. If there was something wrong with the food or service I think you’re actually do them a good turn by feeding that back in a very polite manner. My experience is vast majority of people in restaurants appreciate the fact that if there’s something wrong you tell them so they can fix it up. I just think it’s interesting that a lot of people who just don’t want to upset someone yet that person is a perfect stranger to them.

Judy: And the upset they keep inside it just builds up for them.

The Safe Environment and Difficult Behaviour

Michael: True. And yet, if it was a friend or a family member they’ll probably be more open about giving their opinion, someone closer to them. Which brings us back to the point is, we will probably be more open and perhaps even more difficult with people where we can actually predict their behaviour, predict their reactions. Which is a shame actually, because what it really means is we tend act more difficult without thought to people closer to us than people who are more distant from us.

Judy: Is that partly because it is a safe environment in which to do that because you know how that person will react?

Michael: Exactly. Safety is a very important word to use there. How safe we feel in voicing what we think and voicing what we feel? And that's why if we go back to that comment we had before about a person who bullies, it's an interesting one there. Often they feel they've got the safety because they feel they can control the situation. Their intimidation is a controlling mechanism. And so they make their world safe by intimidating other people around them. I've often said the person who likes to humiliate most and put other people down is often the most insecure because that's what they are doing – they are working on an intimidating process.

Judy: That insecurity means that they are going when backed in a corner - come out fighting.

Michael: Often that's the way they'll do it or they may use the passive aggression. What they'll do is they'll spend a lot of time making negative comments and disparaging comments about you to other people around them.

Judy: Right. Now one of the things people have asked about is also the situation where you are in management. You're in the management role and

you do have someone who is really negative, really disrupting of others. Where do you go with that because it's a different place in a management role I guess than a colleague or in another situation?

Management and Dealing with Difficult Behaviours

Michael: Well I think, I first of all get very clear about what is the behaviour they're engaging in that is disruptive or negative. I'd have a very clear idea of that exact behaviour because once more, disruption and negativity are very abstract terms and can mean many things to many people. Once you've got an idea exactly what the behaviour is that is a problem, I would then try to get some very clear examples of that behaviour and the consequence of that behaviour.

Let's say you got someone in the workplace that is continually interrupting other people perhaps interfering with the work situation, their ability to get on with their job. For one, you can then, when you talk to that person describe what you're observing. It's very, very hard to argue with facts and very clear the things that have been described. Then you can point out to them the consequences of that behaviour. And then very clearly talk to them about what you want them to do. That's kind of the three stages that we often talk about when giving constructive feedback to other people.

Three Stages in Constructive Feedback

Judy: When you talk about consequences what would you say?

Michael: Let's take one step back. There are three stages of giving constructive criticism or constructive critical feedback to people:

1. Be very clear on the behaviour they're engaging in that's a problem.
2. Talk about why it's the problem. In other words, if I'm talking about the consequences of it, it might mean that other workers are not able to finish their jobs, or get on with their work, or other workers are being disrupted or distracted in that situation at a time when they shouldn't be.
3. And then I'd be talking about what needs to happen. How they need to act in that situation or what you would like them to do. Let's say you're the manager, I'd probably say "What I need you to do or want you to do at this time is..." to make it really clear.

Once more there's no guarantees again. There'll be some people who will take them on board immediately and maybe feeling a little bit embarrassed but they'll alter their behaviour. But there are some people who might want to argue with you. Then you've got to take the reactive behaviour and then decide how you're going to handle it, what you're going to do about it.

Judy: And in some cases to not take it on board at that moment. To take some time to rehearse and think it through.

Be Clear on What You Are Going to Say

Michael: I think that's a very important one, Judy. If someone is engaging in a behaviour, let's say in a work situation or some kind of a group or organizational situation which is inappropriate, you need to consider very carefully how you're going to tackle that. That's why not just getting very clear on what the actual behaviour is but also getting very clear in your own mind what you're going to say to that person about the behaviour. I think it's an important comment you've made. Many times I've seen problem situations that perhaps should have been handled in a fairly discreet way made a lot more difficult because the senior person has kind of leapt in and tried to address the situation and yet not realizing what they're really doing is inflaming or escalating the situation.

When and How to Say It

So, number one, if you're going to make comments to people about their behaviour you don't do it in front of other workers or in front of their colleagues, because all it's going to do is trigger defensiveness in that person.

And then of course, number two, you've got to do it in a very calm way which explains to them what the problem is because we can't assume the person knows the problem and is engaging in it. Often, the problem comes because the person doesn't have insight into what they're doing and how it's impacting on other people.

Judy: Michael, is there times at all where perhaps in a work situation you have to make a decision that you may have given this your best shot, but it's not working. That you can't influence that person's behaviour. Are there times when people have to make other choice perhaps of leaving?

Using Mediation

Michael: I wouldn't do that automatically. I think you're partly right with what you are saying. I think the emphasis on "You" is very important. As we know, there are some people who can influence other people far more differently than we can. So maybe there's something about your personality and that other person's individual personality that means that no matter what you say or do it's not going to work. One of the things to consider you may be working with someone who you're really concerned about what they're doing or how they're handling things. You try to address it and get absolutely nowhere. You've don't influence the person's behaviour at all.

Perhaps you may need to involve a third party. If you can think about it this whole concept of mediation, that's what that's about. Mediation is where you have two people one of them whom perhaps is engaging in behaviour that's a problem. It can't be addressed easily or the other party has found it very hard, very difficult and almost impossible to address. They bring in a third party to help address the conflict. That's what happens in a mediation.

Judy: When you talk about this third party, who would that be?

Michael: It just depends. Let's say in a work situation and we're talking about a colleague that's really annoying or frustrating you. You might involve another colleague, you might involve a peer, you might involve perhaps a senior person in your organization to help you to resolve it. Now, I'm not saying it's necessarily going to work but it may be the way in which you try to address that particular problem. When we talk about the mediation, it is usually independent party or a person who doesn't have a stake in the conflict. That's why a lot of organizations use an external person. Perhaps someone from their employee's assistance association or someone external to the actual organization who's prepared to come in and help the two parties involved to clarify the problem and work out some options for solutions.

Judy: I guess that's part of removing egos in a sense that the mediator has no emotional attachment to what's going on.

Michael: Absolutely. That's why I often caution people about leaping into mediatory roles unless they really understand what they've got to do. I've had many situations where someone said to me "I got asked to help out with a conflict, so I thought I'd help mediate it but it just got worse." And then when you start to talk about what they did, you saw that the person didn't stay objective that they actually got dragged or hooked in. Because when there is a difficult set of behaviours going on and two parties are in conflict, one will often try to drag in allies. And so what they start to do is they start

to get people on their side to almost like weight of numbers, unless a person is a pretty skilled mediator or at least understands the mediation process it's very easy to be dragged into the conflict. It's not a role I'd be recommending for people to take on unless they really know what they're doing.

Judy: And once one party sees the mediator is favouring another it can escalate the situation.

Diffusing the Passive Negativity

Michael: Oh yes, it becomes two against one and you do get some people if there's a conflict in the workplace they go around shoring up allies "Did you know so and so said this about you" and the stuff that goes on is just amazing. In a lot of our organizations there is a huge amount of passive aggression where people will actually go around not just getting allies for their point of view but actually saying, "So and so mentioned this to me," or, "Someone has been talking about you," and its just amazing how people are very quick to spread that - as a way to destabilizing the environment and a lot of people feed off that.

Judy: That's a very interesting behaviour you're discussing then, because how do you look at that one because it's not in your face and it's not clearly directed?

Michael: It's a huge problem probably most of our listeners would have come across it in their own organizations because it's a massive problem. Even when you confront the person, they'll say, "Oh no, they must have got me wrong. I didn't say that at all." In my team leader and management work, I found this has cropped up a number of times, where people are very quick to pass on other people's comments but then when you try to get it sorted out there's a lot of vagueness about what was said and who said what or whatever else. And I tend to try not to get too confrontational. I'd much rather set some clear tones, about if we've got a problem this is the way we should be handling it or if you have an issue about a situation, this is the way you need to be talking about it rather than trying to work out what person A really did say about person B, because you can just go round and round in circles.

Judy: And I guess for those in leadership or management have a really clear role in that to be very clear on what patterns of communication should be happening.

Michael: Yes, in diffusing, what I call, the passive negativity stuff as much as you can. Because it's quite toxic in organizations. I've worked in organizations where most of the manipulation is done by people commenting on what other people had said about them. It just made for a very, very awkward work environment.

Displaced Behaviour

Judy: Do you also find in working with people in groups and in workshops that people also talk about situations where the behaviour of someone has really nothing to do with the work situation? It may be what they're experiencing in their personal life and it's being played out in a work situation. Does this happen?

Michael: Yes, look Judy great point. I think that's a common one. There is what we call a displaced behaviour or displaced stress that comes up sometimes. Displacement simply means that you can have an individual who is going through some tough times or difficult situations in their personal life and then everything about their work becomes negative. And I think most of our listeners at some time have actually worked with someone or have to deal with someone who really, really didn't have their heart in it. You could tell they were having their problems elsewhere that they didn't want to talk about or address but the way in which they acted while we were working is quite different. And that's that displacement which can be a very difficult one.

Judy: What would you do? How would you approach that?

Michael: I'd stay focused on where they are now and what they're requirements are simply because you don't want to start delving into getting involved in people's personal life and personal problems. On the surface it might seem very simple but usually when you get into it, it's very complex

and very difficult. I would be really focusing on what's needed at that time, at that situation with the person and ask them can they provide that or not provide it. And try and keep it as clear as I can. It's a tough one because even the person displaying the behaviour often has limited appreciation of what they're doing and the consequences of what they're doing.

Judy: And because they're so caught up in their personal situation, they may well have no idea that it's spilling over into the work environment.

Michael: Yes. They're not happy with the person that points it out to them either. It can be a very difficult one.

Dealing with Aggressive Behaviour

Judy: Yes. Michael, also just another question that people had. In relation to people who are aggressive towards you perhaps in a situation where you might be on the front counter, serving or something. Have you some suggestions for people about how to handle that?

Respond Don't React

Michael: I think the number one rule is always "Respond not react" because we are almost programmed to become defensive. Most people are at some level or another – defensive. Defensive really means we're either going into the old fight or flight reaction. But once we do that if someone is very rude, negative or aggressive towards us, let's say verbally aggressive. For a

lot of people there's a tendency to simply come back at them. Once more, that reaction means that the person is really dictating your behaviour. They're actually pulling your strings and you're doing exactly what they probably expect you to do. I think sometimes its really useful to just be calm, be clear, and come back quietly about what you want, or what's okay and what's not okay, and what you can do abd what you can't do. I think the most important thing is you have to respond to the behaviour and resist the urge to come back in a very aggressive manner yourself. It's quite interesting, I was saying that at a workshop recently and I had someone at the workshop come up to me in the break and said, "If someone is really negative and aggressive to me, I'd get right back in their face and put them in their place. That usually does the trick." And then I had to point out to this person they were well over 6-foot tall and very heavily built and there'd be quite a few people that would want to argue with them. And while that might work for that individual, for many other people it's not just going to work the same way.

Judy: Well not if you're 5'2" and petite, you can't use that physical presence to intimidate or stand over somebody.

Michael: Exactly right.

There are Times to Ignore the Conflict

Judy: Michael, do you also find that for some people in many situations when they deal with conflict or experience conflict their reaction is usually to ignore it or pretend it's not there or just hope it goes away?

Michael: Yes, for some people it's like the flight response - it is the opposite. In some situations it may not be a bad thing provided it's a conscious decision not just a result of being overly intimidated. It just depends on the nature of the conflict who it is and where the situation is. There are some people who like to go to almost goad or intimidate someone in a public situation, in front of colleagues, in front of friends because that's how they manipulate it. In that situation, it's probably a great idea just to say nothing, just to avoid. In other words, you're giving out the message "I'm happy to discuss this with you but I'm not going to do it in front of an audience." There are some people they just absolutely love an audience to show off in front of or humiliate other people.

Judy: I guess what you're saying is that in different situations you behave differently you use different techniques.

Michael: Yes. And of course, it really does depend on what the environment is - is it a work environment, a personal environment, a social environment.? And of course, what happens in terms of, in some environments there are

already some pre-existing interpersonal dynamics which can be a very powerful agent in what's going to be okay and not okay in that situation.

Judy: Are there any other things that you would suggest to people in terms of when they're dealing with difficult behaviours that we probably haven't discussed at this point?

Give it Your Best Shot and Look After Yourself

Michael: I think the main thing is to realize that sometimes you've just got to give it your best shot. And there will be sometimes it will work and sometimes it won't work. I think if you try to be very clear and assertive with particular individual and it hasn't worked, don't just assume that it's not going to work with that person. Because I think we all know you could try it at a different time and it could work quite well. Be prepared to come back and try it again. Be prepared to be a bit persistent yourself.

I think the other thing that's also very important is that if you have tried to be very clear and assertive to someone about their behaviour and it hasn't worked you've got to look after yourself. Because at the end of the day, the most important person in your life is you and looking after yourself in the situation - so learn how to switch off. I've often said to people:

1. Don't give people your strings to pull, in other words when you react to them they're pulling your strings, and

2. Sometimes just ask yourself how important is this person in my life? And if they're not important why am I getting upset about it? I think we are often very sensitive to how other people treat us but sometimes we are overly sensitive about people that have really no importance in our life.

Judy: I guess that also fits with you decide what battles to fight and what not.

Michael: Pick your battle. Absolutely.

Judy: And some of them are not worth fighting but we get caught in a position where we think we have to or that's the way we always respond.

Michael: And what we've got to ask ourselves there is "Am I just coming out my ego now?" or is it truly important for me to make a clear statement.

Judy: And ego has a lot to do with emotion and feeling and all those things that take away the calmness of your thinking.

Michael: It certainly does.

Can People Change Their Behaviour?

Judy: Just one more question people have asked about, can people change their behaviour?

Michael: I believe that people can alter their own behaviour. I think we've seen many, many examples of that where people can change the way they operate, change the ways they deal with things. The old saying that runs around "The leopard can't change its spots." I think what they're really confusing there are personality and behaviour. What you do find happen is that - personality tends to be a little more rigid than behaviour but if people have some insight and some awareness in what they do and how they impact on other people, they could make some personal choices to change their behaviour. But I don't want to sound too cliché here but the only people who change their behaviour are those who actually want to change it. And you've got to want to change it and often that want will would come from realizing on how it impacts on other people. But unfortunately there are some people who have either no insight or no regard for other people and they tend not to change their behaviour because of that.

Judy: And then you have to make sure that you look after you in that process.

Michael: Look after you. Absolutely right.

Concluding Thoughts

Judy: Michael, thank you very much for that. You've given us some really good foundations upon which to work. Beginning with simply

understanding that we're looking at the behaviour not the person. Being very, very clear on what that behaviour is and the consequences of that behaviour. What we would like to see changed or influenced in a sense in terms of that behaviour with people but also to recognize that you need to find the space in which you can calmly deal with this rather than simply, as you said, to respond rather than to react. And at the times, as you commented on, there are times to actually respond, to take some action. And other times, where ignoring or not responding can be a very effective technique.

Michael: It's so important - pick your ground. Don't let other people pick it for you.

Judy: And also to realize that sometimes people really don't have an insight into how their behaviour is affecting others but no one has ever been assertive enough if you like to have pointed it out to them. And that in itself can make a difference but never to expect that they will automatically change their response. It may take some persistence for them to see your point of view or where you're coming from in terms of their behaviour.

Michael: I couldn't have said it better myself. Well done.

Judy: Thank you, Michael. So are there any last words of wisdom for us?

The Key is to Respond not React

Michael: I just want to really emphasize the fact that the key comes down to responding not reacting because it all boils down to that point. People will engage in behaviour towards us continuously and all of the time for all of our life. Some of those behaviours are really great behaviours and ones we really appreciate. Sometimes they are behaviours that we do have a problem with. When we respond to the behaviour appropriately we have a much, much better chance of that changing than when we get hooked into their situation and react.

Judy: Michael, once again, thank you very much for your time.

Michael: No problems Judy. All the best.

Judy: Wonderful. Thank you, Michael.

Michael: Bye.



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