Conflict Resolution - Winning With Difficult People
By Bruce Lee

Why are some people, be they friends, clients, family or co-workers, so difficult to deal with? How can I talk to them without getting mad? What, if anything, did I do to create a tense situation and cause them to lose control?

The reality is we all have difficult people in our lives. Professionally, they are clients or colleagues, or our boss. Personally, they can be people we live with or gave birth to!

People become difficult for a variety of reasons – some of them justifiable. Perhaps their needs are not being met, or they have experienced poor communication or service. Perhaps the culprit is the lack of authority to deal with the problem, and they resent having to always defer to someone else.

Some people are quick to anger and take their frustrations out on the nearest person they perceive as lower in status than themselves. And, we let them. Worse yet, we react negatively by taking their anger personally. We get angry right back at them, and "fire the client" by being difficult ourselves. In other words, we have successfully become the problem.

There are two primary types of conflict. One is performance-based. This type of situation is caused when a person's work performance -- whether it's an issue of quantity or quality -- is not meeting expectations. It creates stress and problems for everyone.

The second type of conflict is relationship-based. You don't get along with the client or business associate for various reasons, but particularly because the other person's behavior and personality clash with your preferred communication style. In your opinion, they might be overly aggressive or demanding, too detail orientated, or just slow to respond.

Ironing things out

When you find yourself in a tense situation, one solution is by "results management." You should work to become very clear about what the problem seems to be, write it down, and work on creating constructive win-win solutions.

The fact is that we have choices ranging from doing nothing and continuing to feel guilty about possibly causing the situation, to changing our attitudes about the other person and the event. Our attitudes can range from, "That's just the way they are and I can live with it because it's not about me," to a full-blown decision to resolve the situation once and for all!

If you decide to try to iron out the situation, you will have to meet or talk with the other person. When you do so, seek to understand them and ask lots of questions. Also, keep these strategies in mind:

* Focus on what happened, not who caused it.

* Assume a positive intent by them (it may just be that their personality style does not allow them to communicate effectively).

* Let them know your positive intent -- you want to find a solution.

* Reinforce what your shared goals are. As the client, their goal is what they hired you   for; yours is to create and deliver the service.

* Set a time frame for solving a problem when it arises; let nothing stay unresolved. Conflicts are best handled within 48 hours. Remember how bad you felt the last time you had a difficult situation and then how good you felt when it was resolved quickly?

* Resolve to learn from the situation and share your findings with everyone involved so it does not happen again.

* Both parties should commit to changing the cycle of conflict. This might mean more frequent communication until trust is re-established.

Remember, everybody is different in how they manage others and in their expectations for how they in turn are managed and supported. You must have different solutions to every situation. As Abraham Maslow said, "If the only tool is a hammer, you treat everything like a nail." This article suggests several tools, but the best tool is having great communication and clarity every step of the way.

A final reminder: there are two main sources of difficult behavior – the other person, or you. Make certain you are not the cause of it!