

Managing Difficult People

2 Strategies

3 Low Fliers

- Sloppy Worker
- Procrastinator
- Latecomer
- Slowpoke

6 Power Players

- Warrior
- Dominator
- Prima Donna
- Top-liner

9 Negativists

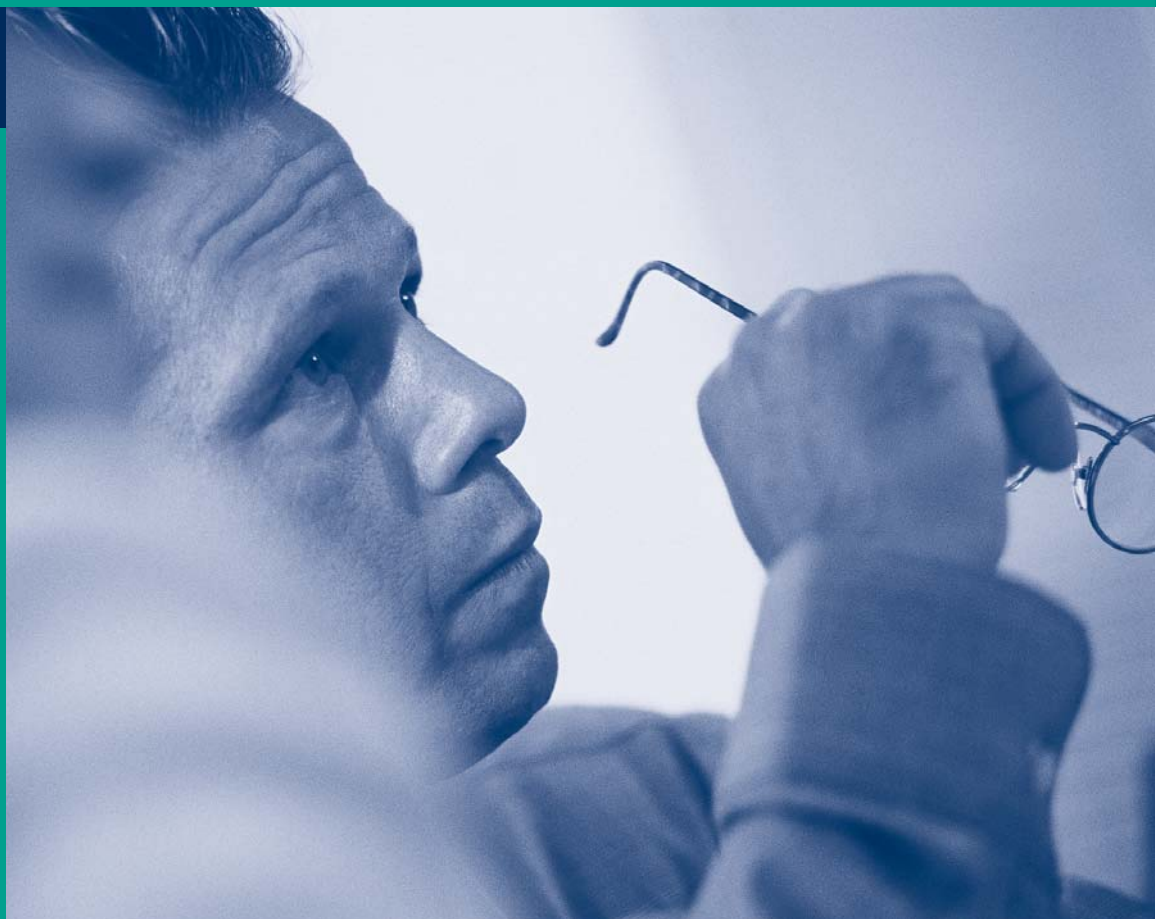
- Faultfinder
- Pessimist
- Victim

12 Deceivers

- Politico
- Gossip
- Unhealthy Resister

14 Communication Skills

15 Process Checklist



The People at Work Series

REPORT 1

Managing Difficult People

Most managers find themselves stressed out and in despair when dealing with difficult people. We're not talking about the vast majority of employees who do what's expected, who contribute skills and personality to make the workplace pleasant for everyone, and who often get little attention or positive feedback.

This report is about the 5% who've got their managers jumping through hoops, eg:

- accepting flimsy excuses for poor performance
- trying to see things from the employee's point of view
- offering them bribes to change
- and showing immense gratitude when they behave

Meanwhile, the other 95% of staff who are doing well 95% of the time are watching and learning what works and passes as acceptable, and getting a very clear message that poor behaviour and under-performance can get rewarded.

BULLETPOINT

FOCUS
REPORTS

INSIGHT
INSPIRATION
SOLUTIONS

KNOWLEDGE

IN JUST 16 PAGES

Strategies

GOT A PROBLEM?

Prerequisites that qualify an employee as 'difficult':

1. The employee's problem must persist
2. Job performance must be affected
3. A pattern must have developed

Suffering under the pressure of performance targets, top-down change initiatives, project cost overruns, schedule slippages, and constantly re-arranged priorities the typical manager would find it difficult to avoid being jaded, and would tend to see problem employees everywhere.

But a jaded view can rapidly deteriorate into a spiral of anger and frustration, which may produce results in the short-term (fear is a motivating factor when loss of job is threatened), but which are unlikely to stick in the long-term.

Putting aside the frustration factor for a moment, a good starting point in understanding how to deal with difficult people is to recognise that:

- all employees have problems at some time
- these problems may interfere temporarily with the job
- problems must be dealt with in a supportive manner
- managers must maintain a positive attitude about employees in general

... and crucially, employees want their bosses to treat them as employees with problems, rather than as problem employees.

Finding solutions

Premise: virtually everyone wants not only to succeed at work, but to give it their best effort, and get along with colleagues and bosses - even difficult people.

According to research, the keys to managing a difficult situation successfully are to:

- understand the 'difficult person' is as much a product of a *situation* as a *personality*
- take control - of the situation, not the person
- head off difficult situations - before they become disasters
- learn to 'read' others in order to objectively describe their behaviour
- categorise difficult people in order to apply specific techniques to change their behaviour
- co-operatively work towards a solution
- leave the person with the feeling you are helping them, not reprimanding them

At the same time, the challenge is to avoid creating a situation of 'special privilege' for the difficult employee in the eyes of everyone else in the team.

BEWARE BAD ATTITUDE: IT'S IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

One of the most common descriptions for difficult people. But it's not easy to get one's hands around 'bad attitude', and it's often the trigger for employment lawsuits. Attitude is really an expression of opinion, of body language or mannerisms that convey some sort of message. In managing people with 'bad attitude' it is imperative to get behind the label to find out how 'bad attitude' is exhibited; otherwise an employer can be accused of making subjective judgements about what's being communicated by the employee - judgements with which others may disagree. But judgements can harden into objectivity with customer complaints about rudeness or lack of professionalism, colleague complaints about vulgarity or lack of co-operation.

A HARD LIST OF SOFT SKILLS

- listen actively with ears and eyes
- make decisions by consensus
- make conversations, not statements
- share information
- accept individual differences
- resolve conflict cleanly
- embrace change
- facilitate; lead with questions
- act as coach and counsellor
- make use of your own sense of humour
- negotiate win-win
- credit who has done the work
- be open to suggestions
- give and receive feedback
- foster involvement and ownership
- show emotions/human side
- understand what others are thinking and feeling
- be candid, honest, even vulnerable

Low Fliers

Perceived as under-performers, the pattern of these people's behaviour can mask true capability - they're often unaware of the problem, and managers find it hard to address.

Sloppy worker

One of the most common workplace problems. Characteristics:

- **has an aloof and uncaring approach to the job**
unmistakable pattern of missed deadlines and poor work quality
- **appears bored and easily distracted**
distracts others by engaging them in tangential conversations and other work-avoiding behaviours
- **finds excuses**
explains away mistakes, missed deadlines, conflicts with others; their complaints include: perceived lack of co-operation from others, inadequate tools/equipment to get the job done, unclear performance expectations, inadequate staff support
- **minimises negative effects of errors and missed deadlines**
even if responsibility lies in lack of anticipating or planning for the problem, often sees cause in simple terms: something or someone else is to blame; tries to minimise severity of the problem

Dealing with them

1. **For the first incidence or two:** gently point out the error to the employee; don't comment but watch their work more closely
2. **If problem recurs:** sit down with employee out of earshot of colleagues; be positive: remember employee probably has no idea that their work is sloppy; but be candid: tell the employee that you are concerned about the work and cite specific examples of sloppiness; relate the clearest or most serious infractions that you have evidence of - don't discuss marginal problems or ones for which you have little evidence
3. **Encourage feedback:** but expect to hear excuses; avoid long discussions about how serious or unrepresentative the problems are; instead, shift to telling the employee how important their work is to the company; show them how to eliminate errors and sloppy work; try to end the meeting positively
4. **Keep observing the employee's work:** if after a few days, work patterns are improving, be sure to compliment them; if sloppiness continues, conduct another closed-door meeting - there is a good chance that employee is capable of better work and is simply refusing to recognise the existence of an ongoing problem; make a judgemental statement such as: 'I am concerned about the overall errors in your work'; again bring up the most flagrant examples
5. **For non-professional or entry-level employees:** assign someone with good work habits, especially in the problem employee's area of weakness, to work side-by-side with them for a small portion of each day; have the 'monitoring' employee suggest specific steps for achieving improvement, provide continuing feedback, and discuss any progress, or lack of it every few days

As long as the employee has the basic skills necessary to effectively perform in the job, sloppiness can be overcome in almost every case; it requires the efforts of a manager willing to invest time, and no matter how frustrating it may be, to adopt a coaching rather than a reprimanding approach.

THE PERFECT SOLUTION

In the US there's now a service that not only lets you avoid firing people but helps you get rid of those employees who just aren't working out. Employers call AT&S Recruiting in Ohio and tell them about the employee they want to shed. AT&S will then find the perfect job for that employee and recruit them away from the employer. It's a win-win situation for all: company rids itself of an employee who just doesn't fit in without the pain of termination, and all the personal baggage that goes with firing someone. The employee ends up in a position better suited for them but gets there without any trashing of the ego; in fact the employee is recruited away, a boost to anyone rather than the downer of being forced to seek a new job because they couldn't cut it elsewhere.

TIPS FOR PROCRASTINATORS

1. Breaking the Habit Mentally:

- when you're tempted to procrastinate on a task, envision the emotional and physical consequences of procrastinating vs following through on a plan to work
- imagine how you would behave the next hour/day if you weren't a procrastinator; get a clear picture in your mind, then act out that role
- when you feel an impulse to work on your project, follow up on it; do it at the moment you think about it, and keep at it until you don't feel like it any more
- watch for mental self-seductions into diversions eg 'I'll do it tomorrow, I deserve some time for myself'; dispute with 'I really don't have that much time left, and other things are sure to come up later'
- if you have something frightening to do eg make an important presentation, ask a friend to listen to you rehearse so that you can cope with your fear

2. Breaking the Habit Actions:

- write down list of tasks you must undertake to complete your project
- set priorities amongst these
- start with most unpleasant; get it over with; work way through list to easier ones
- write down 2-3 things you can do toward task completion that can be accomplished in 5 mins, and then do one of them
- schedule work on one of your avoided tasks so that it's contingent on something you'd normally do and enjoy eg 'I'll work on my monthly report for 20 mins, before going to play tennis'
- reward yourself for tasks completed

Procrastinator

Deceptively agreeable people who lead you on with hints and vague references to problems which various options raise; finally they agree with your plans only to let you down by doing nothing to realise them; three weeks later when no action has been taken, they listen sympathetically to your frustration, and pleasantly point out complications which have kept them from moving.

Characteristics of the 'staller':

- **doesn't like making decisions**
doesn't trust self, and feels any mistakes will likely lead to something bad happening; sits on plans until making choices is no longer needed; claims to value what is 'right' over what is 'expedient', quality over quantity; interesting research finding; may also doubt leader's ability or loyalty to the group
- **slow to deal with problems or conflicts**
doesn't want responsibility; never does things quickly; thinks timing has to do with not making the wrong move
- **wants to be liked**
their dilemma: however they decide, someone will not like it; since they don't want to hurt anyone they do nothing; harbour strong fear of rejection
- **is perfectionist**
avoids starting tasks because of worry that they'll fall short of own high standards; will become absorbed in the detail, attempting to control every aspect of the task and ignore moving project along

Dealing with them

1. **Make it easy for them to articulate their misgivings:** ask 'What's the conflict?'; listen carefully for indirect words, omissions, hesitations, and gently explore the reasons for them
2. **Identify specific problem:** if problem with you, acknowledge weaknesses to win their confidence; if not with you, have them rank-order possible solutions, and reduce to two feasible alternatives - process makes the choices, they don't have to; point out preferred alternative's best qualities, and link to benefits for staff, customers and anyone that employee thinks is important
3. **Work on increasing employee's faith in themselves:** emphasise positive outcomes; ask 'What do you think?' 'Should we do this?' 'Why would you do it that way?'; close with 'You seem to have some good ideas about this; use your best judgement'; when they start to take more chances and make decisions, important not to be too negative when things don't work out right away
4. **Follow up:** to prevent their second thoughts from taking control, and to reinforce the decision; use supportive statements, eg 'You've done the right thing' or 'You're the best suited to be doing this because of your thoroughness'
5. **Give a time frame for action to be carried out:** keep monitoring situation until the decision has been implemented; if task is urgent, fully explain urgency to the employee; also review work schedules to determine if they are operating under overload conditions, or if there are other priorities needing attention

Be aware that when employees procrastinate and get away with it you are allowing them to weaken your management authority - and to some extent become boss.

Latecomer

Not only a loss in terms of productivity and money, but can severely undermine morale by building resentment among co-workers. Furthermore, lateness is an infectious disease. Characteristics:

- **has an active social life**
conventional wisdom for lateness is disorganisation and lack of motivation but study: nearly 20% of latecomers have romance to blame for their lateness
- **feels they shouldn't have to work to a schedule**
eg saying they feel like 'professionals' and assume therefore that they can come and go as they please

Dealing with them

1. **Don't raise it as an issue with employee who is occasionally late:** they'll appreciate your tacit understanding, and take it as a sign of your trust in them
2. **Have a gentle talk with the employee:** unless problem is extremely severe, stick to a light approach, eg 'Joe, overall I really enjoy having you on our team, but I'd really appreciate it if you could cut back on your lateness. I can understand being late on occasion. But enough is enough. Can I count on you for a little improvement in this area?'

CLOCKING IN

Merle Norman devised a preventative programme to reward workers for their on-time, in-the-office performance; for each year an employee goes without missing a day, they collect merchandise and travel prizes ranging from cookware or flatware (2 yrs) all the way up to a 2-week all expenses paid trip anywhere in the world for two (15 yrs of perfect attendance). The prize for 1 year? A watch of course.

Slowpoke

Can be among the most difficult problems to resolve, unless you have standards or goals against which to compare actual performance. Performance characterised by:

- **lack of skills**
different from sloppiness, which is nearly always correctable; often difficult to identify skill deficiency and whether it is a performance requirement of a job
- **lack of awareness**
where employee thinks they are working at what they consider a good pace

Dealing with them

1. **Create standards for output:** for non-professionals quantitative measures of output, eg processing of data entries, sales calls/day; for professionals specific time goals for completion of projects, eg writing a software programme
2. **Meet and present facts:** 'How do you think you can increase your output?' Be pleasant, encouraging, and set a target date; encourage employee to monitor themselves and make progress reports to you at various intervals

BAGGAGE COMPARTMENT

People who let their personal problems affect their professional work are human; while you may feel that anyone who brings their personal life to work is unprofessional or undisciplined, there will always be times when even the most disciplined employee will carry some personal baggage to work. It is unavoidable.

SKILLS SCORECARD

A shop floor manager may not be great at giving performance reviews, but terrific at scheduling and maintaining production runs and inventory management; obviously their strengths far outweigh their weaknesses in carrying out the primary responsibilities of the job. It's often okay to have an employee with a serious weakness, as long as you are aware of the problem area, and the employee compensates for one skill deficiency with a super skill strength

Power Players

DISEMPowering WARRIORS

1. Philosophy

“It is only one who is thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war that can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on”

“In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory”

“Rouse him (the enemy), and learn the principle of his activity or inactivity. Force him to reveal himself, so as to find out his vulnerable spots”

“He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain”

Sun Tzu - The Art of War

2. Practice

DON'T

- react or respond negatively
- be intimidated
- rise to the bait ie defending yourself, attacking, becoming frustrated
- get pulled into conflict or confrontation
- knowingly do anything that gives the person any more power

DO

- stay on point and on task
- be assertive and calm
- avoid win-lose positions
- understand own 'fight/flight response' ie urge to strike out and competing urge to avoid these types of people; both suit the warrior - so need to do neither
- if situation becomes desperate, think about something else; do not pay attention, mentally back away for a while

These people tend to be seen as strong individuals, capable of influencing decisions or pushing through preferred outcomes, often through sheer force of personality.

Warrior

Harsh, abusive, abrasive, bully, insensitive, loud, confrontational, are words often used to describe these types who are overly aggressive. May also suddenly break into a tantrum to get their way. Other characteristics:

- **has an unusual need to control people and situations**
mistrusts everyone and their motives, so operates mostly out of fear, insecurity, and honestly believe that keeping absolute control is the only way to be safe
- **steps on the feelings of others**
plays on others' insecurities; ready to go to war over anything; even if get what they want, will find something to argue about; uses phrases that imply other person is at fault, but understands that barb must be short, quick to work well (no chance for discussion); likes feeling sense of superiority by demeaning others
- **never lets anyone take advantage of them**
though thinks people are always trying to do so; an automatic question for them is 'Why?'; need is to evaluate everything in terms of how they might be 'had'; motto is 'If I don't take care of myself, no-one else is going to do it for me'
- **expects others to adjust to them**
'It's my way or no way' - believes own view of the world is right; does not believe in being flexible or accommodating to the needs, preferences of others

Dealing with them

1. **Don't argue with them:** arguing with them refuels their energies, so does performing before a crowd; give them time to run down, verbally run out of gas
2. **Lead them away:** mid-tantrum, use their name to get attention, and take them away to a place where people cannot hear - usually so busy screaming they can be led anywhere; if possible sit down - people are less aggressive when seated
3. **Maintain eye contact:** hold your ground until you can state your point of view; do not humiliate them - they have a deep need to be accepted; no matter how hard it is to do, listen - it's a way of gaining their respect
4. **Show them how co-operation will work to their advantage:** put out negative outcomes, eg 'I see your point about the price and appreciate your concern; nonetheless it may be better to test things out now instead of running the risk of your having to deal with irate customers. What do you think?'

HOW TO RESPOND BUT NOT REACT

Reaction	Response
try to find someone to blame	try to solve the problem
outcome out of control	responsibly choose outcome
victim of feelings, thoughts, attitudes	what you say, how you say it is suitable, no matter what you're feeling
be negative, destructive, take things personally, hit back, put up barricades	listen, acknowledge, think; then act positively
let energy level drop, and say or do nothing	keep energy level up but channel into constructive behaviour

Dominator

Has strong ego needs - uses 'I' a lot; can come across as a know-it-all. Characteristics:

- **radiates personal authority**
often accurate thinker, competent and highly productive; may overrate own skills and abilities, even if only slightly so their claims will seldom be contested
- **can come across as condescending**
to add insult to injury is often right, which humiliates people; doesn't encourage others' ingenuity nor suffer other people's judgement; interesting research: their aim is to become a father or mother figure
- **feels above it all**
believes they can control all pertinent factors: fate is irrelevant; once mind is made up, is hard to dissuade, even if wrong; situations are win/lose, right/wrong; security rests in knowing facts and how they fit together
- **uses self as a standard for everything**
if they are interested, what others say and do is interesting; if they are frustrated, things are a mess; if something affects them, it is important, and if not, it is irrelevant; if they like it, it's good, and if not it's bad; if they're happy, things are going well, if not things are falling apart

Dealing with them

1. **Do your homework:** if you are unspecific or imprecise, unprepared or inaccurate, they'll dismiss you; offer them alternatives, get them to consider the consequences 'What if we did it your way and this happened?' or look at the contingencies 'How would it work if ...'
2. **Don't buy into their superiority:** treat them the same as everyone else; don't give them special privileges; avoid tendency to reinforce their perception of being better, smarter, more skilled, and more important than others; be self-assured, assertive - for most of them, being fair, firm and consistent will be enough to affect change in their behaviour

Prima Donna

Characteristics: flamboyant personality with an inflated sense of self-importance; gives off a sense that companies couldn't get along without them; rants and raves until they get their needs met; theatrical, creative and fully aware of the 'flair' or special talent they bring to the party.

Dealing with them

1. **Give them the constant praise they need:** to prop up their hefty, yet fragile egos; underneath the bravado is a serious lack of self-esteem
2. **Confront them:** a hands-off approach can wreak havoc, setting double standards, demoralising those who are playing by the rules
3. **Focus on the behaviour not the attitude:** confront them in a non-threatening way, in a neutral setting and give examples; even if they deny everything, by confronting the problem you've announced to them that you're aware of it, and you've indirectly said your expectation is that it won't happen again

'ACCOMMODATING' PERSONALITY

As most people interact with each other, each person does two things:

- first, they adjust to and accommodate one other
- next, they project their personality and style in a way that enables others to adjust to and accommodate them

The process may be understood as reciprocal accommodation; for most people, it quickly leads to 'fit' within the group.

The dominator neither understands nor functions within this reciprocal process; their social learning has taught them that they do not have to adjust to or accommodate others; they assume others will adjust to and accommodate them - the effort is all one-sided.

When you see the pattern, you need to treat the dominator the same as you treat everyone else, ie by not adjusting or accommodating to them any more than to others.

SPECIAL PRIVILEGES

At one ad agency, a top creative person had a legendary deal: a peeled orange was delivered to his desk at 1:30pm every day.

SOLO PLAYERS

1. MAVERICKS

- people who get isolated because they don't want to 'own' something
- like to find something, bring it back to the pasture, let go of it, and then go back out to the free range
- they don't want to stay in the pasture and manage what they've brought back
- don't understand why organisations may not reward them for bringing something new back - organisation will tend to reward the person that took it and grew it

2. THE HUMAN COMPUTER

Thankfully rare these days, these 'impersonal' people are incapable or unwilling to think about things in human terms: people are replaceable production units and all other aspects of operations are performance variables - organisation reduces to production and performance. They also believe that thinking about people is an inferior way of interacting. Usually calm and rational, there can be no personal relationship. Like a computer their interaction is based on data and well-defined actions; the computer has no interest in how its output impacts people or situations. Similarly it has no ability to accept input that does not exactly match its programme or specifications.

Best way to deal with them? use the same medium and the same level of detail and exactness they use; input must match output; keep it impersonal.

Top-liner

Individual who has developed the habit of 'winging it', likely developed during schooldays when they found success in exams despite barely preparing for them.

Characteristics:

- **dives in with no need for preparation or planning**
relies on instincts and agility; starts before understanding what is expected; solves problems before knowing why the problems came up in the first place
- **avoids definition**
knows that there is not a best way to do things or think about things; does the job without knowing how to do it: 'knowing how' only limits and inhibits their range and flexibility
- **sees everything as new or unique**
the more complex the task or more serious the problem, the more points of newness or uniqueness they find
- **focuses on the big picture**
sees anyone who tries to reduce things to understandable parts as having 'a little mind' and who 'cannot see the forest for the trees'; steers clear of people who are analytic and systematic; either avoids entirely or obsesses over the details; resists breaking down projects into manageable chunks
- **gets a thrill out of crises**
lives on adrenaline, rushing from one unfinished project to another; doesn't really get motivated until the very last minute

Dealing with them

1. **Must carefully manage top-liners:** can lead you into complex projects and spend a lot of money on the back of a grand vision which runs astray on implementation, or which founders on unrealistic expectations
2. **Bullet-proof projects at the outset:** need to identify if top-liner characteristics are present in project participants, particularly project leaders, up-front, and
 - build into every important project an evaluation or monitoring process separate from and not linked to the project; should include people who are qualified to judge every aspect of the process - must also have the ability to tell when *circumstances* are the problem vs when the *people* in the project do not know what they are doing
 - set a clear goal or task, then define what progress is, and set specific criteria for deciding if things are moving towards or away from the goal; if no movement, listen to excuses and explanations but then need to hold individual accountable
3. **Do not accept excuses which are not factual:** top-liners' greatest fear is to be found out; are often very articulate and able to come up with believable excuses and cogent explanations
4. **Wean them off the intoxication of the adrenaline rush:** bring to their attention how their need for last-minute action infuriates people, and damages their own and others' productivity, quality of work; should lead into an open discussion about how their adrenaline needs can be met outside work; may also require an analysis of their priorities and workload

Negativists

These people share a propensity to complain and may come across as demotivated. Be aware the negative outlook may be temporary (mood, stress, problems at home).

Faultfinder

Takes pot shots at people, usually with a smile on their face. Characteristics:

- **is apt to be seen as confident, and with high standards**
unfortunately, cannot separate the important from the unimportant; focuses on problems, negatives and things going wrong - from the important to the trivial
- **given the opportunity, like to get people into trouble**
never forget the world is full of things and people to analyse and criticise; seldom do it face-to-face - behind the back makes it easier to avoid anyone directly contesting what they have to say
- **does not accept people as they are**
enjoys blaming, accusing; they always do better, they believe, so it is reasonable for them to expect others to do the same; always has an excuse for own shortcomings; attacks someone else whenever they feel threatened
- **not proud of the achievements of others**
stingy with praise; often dripping with sarcasm or cynicism; expects others to foul up - when you expect the worst there is seldom any surprise

Dealing with them

1. **Resist temptation to react against them negatively:** remember they are often right; should neither directly contradict the allegation, nor allow them to pass on an 'objective truth'
2. **Discover whether they're doing it to themselves:** often as critical of themselves as of other people; may find they have as unrealistic expectations of themselves as they do of others
3. **Find opportunities to say supportive things:** without over-doing it, point to things that they have done especially well; comment on it when one of their skills and abilities makes things easier or helps things turn out successfully
4. **When they criticise others:** resist temptation to ask how to improve situation - gives credibility to their criticism if it's treated sympathetically; instead say eg 'Linda has her hands full; that project is more complex than it seems at a glance; you should be glad you don't have the time to get involved'

DEALING WITH EMPLOYEES WHO ARE SENSITIVE TO CRITICISM

- be factual, specific and totally objective in your description of any error; be sure of your facts, and do not go on hearsay or second-hand evidence; stick to the facts, regardless of the personal reaction of the employee
- if the performance has been objectively measured and observed, discuss it from that vantage point
- consistently evaluate how you are delivering the criticism; assure yourself that you are focusing on the problem, not the person
- approach from the perspective of wanting to coach vs wanting to reprimand

GIVING FEEDBACK

DON'T

- insult, inflame, berate and negatively criticise the employee
- accuse, or bring up issues over which person has no control
- belittle employee, no matter how trivial you consider their issues to be
- if person gets defensive or emotional; don't try to convince, reason or give additional information; respond in non-reactive way

DO

- intend to be helpful *and* communicate this to the recipient
- state the situation in measurable and observable terms, so there can be no denying the facts; mention the impact of the behaviour on people and task
- present perceptions and reactions as such, not as facts
- take time to listen to employee's explanation, then ask for input on how to solve the problem
- try to establish a feeling of trust in order to work with the employee to generate a solution; trust will also give an insight into true motivations
- give specific suggestions about what employee could do differently, or ask what behaviours they would suggest

WHINERS & COMPLAINERS

Within the category of Pessimists are chronic whiners and complainers:

- keep warning you about something that has gone wrong in their world
- regard themselves as powerless to manage their working lives
- feel that any problem is beyond their control to solve
- they want you to fix it for them - not with them

Dealing with them

- listen - sometimes that's all they want someone to do
- don't let them dwell on past grievances
- show you understand by paraphrasing the main points
- even though they want you to play Fixit, switch them onto taking a share in solving the problem; tell them what can and can't realistically be done; work on a list of solutions; focus on one, articulate a plan and follow-up
- expect frustration - they want you to do it all

CUT THE COMPLAINTS

One programme a manager created for a chronic complainer who was perceived as loud, abrasive and far too quick to complain about management: manager issued him with a number of coupons each week that he could redeem with co-workers when he had a mind to complain; when he ran out of coupons, he was no longer licensed to let loose with his negativity; his objective was to have coupons left over at the end of each week - meaning he complained less and less; this reinforced his progress, without making him feel that he wasn't allowed to share or vent his feelings; manager recognised that a little of this kind of communication is only human.

Pessimist

Also known as 'negaholic'. Has a hundred reasons why things can't be done, tapping the potential for despair in all of us. Characteristics:

- **has a knack for turning any conversation in negative, problematic directions** makes things seem worse than they really are; also makes things that are quite positive seem less positive; idea is to move things just a little in the negative direction, whether it starts out positive or starts out already negative
- **keeps things stirred up** has opinions on everything, including people, but tries not to be seen as an agitator; impression is of a likeable person, who only has the best interests of the company at heart
- **tends to deny malicious intent** not always trying to be obstructionist - believes the barriers perceived cannot be overcome; when being negative about people: 'I don't want any bad feelings, and wouldn't want to upset anyone, but I just have to say this'
- **likes to be in the spotlight and complain** stock-in-trade is to have information, without a high level of importance placed on its accuracy or relevance; underlying motivation relates to the acquisition of power and influence; research: often has unresolved childhood problems
- **sees negativity as safe** articulating a negative position means that when it happens, they will be seen as 'powerful and intelligent'; picks times to be negative and make an impact: when things are going smoothly (finds a little problem and predicts it will grow into a crisis) or when stress and tension are unusually high (giving people someone or something on which to focus their frustration, negative energy)

Dealing with them

1. **Don't try to argue them out of their positions:** pessimists thrive only on hearing negative things about anybody or anything; trying to reform them drives them towards a win/lose position which they'll fight hard to win; avoid the temptation to lecture or patronise - they don't want advice, and it will only get their backs up
2. **Explore alternative solutions:** demonstrate your own realistic opinion, while acknowledging their own vulnerabilities; let them articulate what the worst consequence could be; take negative statements as useful warnings
3. **Present your thinking as the lesser of two evils:** be a bit of a pessimist, talk about the negative effects of any alternatives; let them enjoy the horror of the terrible possibilities you've brought up; then follow up with a few optimistic but realistic statements, and some past successes involving similar problems
4. **Give them time:** if left on their own to think of a plan, pessimists often turn themselves around, and the delay lets them save face

Pessimism tends to be contagious. People who just enjoy small talk - usually about people who are not present - inadvertently pick up and massage negative comment. It's important to stop it quickly if it has infiltrated a group or team, and address the issues in the same way - by being a facilitator and seeking alternatives. The key is: people must themselves begin to change their behaviour, however slow it may seem.

Victim

Often complains that they are being treated unfairly. In a child the pattern of behaviour would be called pouting. Characteristics:

- **main strategy is to get people feeling sorry for them**
'I'm worn out for trying' or 'I'm giving this firm all I have'; tries to get a guilt trip going
- **does not expect to succeed**
never says things like 'I'll take care of it' or 'Leave it to me'; instead says 'I'll try' or 'I'll give it my best shot'
- **behaves like a martyr**
does not stick up for self, and usually does not respond to attacks on ability, credibility, or integrity; is usually uptight or nervous, and talks slowly in a little or quiet voice; aim is to give impression of a whipped puppy
- **has difficulty dealing with the ups and downs of organisational life**
does not have much energy; doesn't value the people and activities in the organisation; tends to think: 'I wish everyone would leave me alone and let me just do my job'; may look exhausted, and have a very obvious, visible pile of work to point to, to show how much is on their plate
- **reacts to any disagreeable situation by closing down**
can use silence as an offensive as well as defensive weapon: it's a way to avoid revealing themselves or their fears, a way to remain safe, or to preclude a reprimand; may, however, also be calculated aggression - to hurt you by denying you access to desired information

Dealing with them

1. **Look for and use body language cues:** eg frowning, folded arms, staring or glaring; maintain a friendly, open facial expression; focus your eyes on their mouth and chin which is less threatening than eye-to-eye contact
2. **Ask questions, then wait:** bring up issues and ask open-ended questions; be prepared to prolong silences past the point of your own comfort, then try a question like 'Is there some problem ...?' or 'Maybe you're feeling ...?'; if this doesn't work, ask a question you know they can comfortably answer; set a time limit to reinforce your expectation that they will respond: 'I've allowed 30 minutes to sort this out; how much time do you have?'
3. **Be patient:** often victims will not open up until the last ten minutes; as a last resort, shift the burden of the decision onto them: 'I'll go ahead as I have told you unless I hear from you by ...'
4. **Be persistent:** if they open up, be attentive, listen, paraphrase back what you think you heard, even if the initial conversation may not appear related to the topic you want to discuss
5. **Work to get them into a positive frame:** like pessimists, suggestions for improvement need to come from them, helped by nudges of optimism from you; coax, coach them into giving positive ideas; they need plenty of practice

Victims often have a protector they call on to come to their aid, defence. Try not to confront protectors about their role; instead ask them to help in getting the employee to get the job done. Avoid becoming a protector yourself.

WHINE BADGE

One manager in Texas believed that one of the biggest barriers to change in her organisation was people constantly whining about things, but not taking responsibility for making them better. She had 'No Whining' patches sewn on everyone's uniform, and explained that complaining about something without trying to do anything about it was unacceptable.

BODY BARRIERS

- **Resistance**
 - arms crossed: doesn't agree with you - hand them an object, eg a pen to open their posture
 - legs crossed: reserved or defensive - try and put them at ease
 - leg clamped with one hand, ankle on knee: dogmatic, stubborn - try agreeing with them
- **Anxiety**
 - arms crossed and gripping each other: restrained or anxious - give them reassurance
 - disguised arm cross (often fiddling with watch, ring, bag): trying to hide nerves - try talking to them about something they can easily relate to
- **Insecurity**
 - standing leg cross (often at conferences, meetings): how people stand when among people they do not know well - include them in the group
 - sitting ankle cross: trying to hold back a negative attitude like nervousness, fear - sit beside them vs opposite them or behind a desk
 - partial arm cross, where only one arm touches other: shows lack of confidence, subtler version of child holding parent's hand for security - time to offer some encouragement, or perhaps a teddy bear?

Deceivers

DIFFICULT PEOPLE IN MEETINGS

Interrupter

- stop them cold
- indicate interest in their contribution, but after current speaker

Dominator

- interrupt tactfully with closed-ended question or summarising statement
- assign them to take notes and summarise at end of meeting
- respond with 'That's an interesting point; now let's see what others have to say'

Too wordy

- ask them to summarise in just a few words
- at a pause, thank them, and paraphrase key points
- ask someone to summarise participant's main thought

Aggressive arguer

- control own temper
- avoid letting group respond argumentatively
- ask them to restate what they disagree with
- indicate you want tone to remain non-combative; find merit in one point, acknowledge it, move on

Inarticulate speaker

- protect them from ridicule by demonstrating respect
- avoid saying 'What you are trying to say is ...'
- paraphrase contribution by saying 'Let me repeat that ...' and state idea clearly

Non-participant

- try to decide why not talking (boredom, nervousness, insecurity, shyness, was attacked earlier)
- boredom: arouse interest by asking for opinion
- nervousness etc - compliment person for slightest contribution
- when asking a question make eye contact
- draw out someone nearby; ask quiet one for their view

Obstinate arguer

- restate their point of view so they realise you've heard it
- indicate you need to find out how others feel
- place viewpoint on 'Issues to Resolve' sheet; ask to continue discussion after meeting

These are people who think they 'know' the organisation and can manoeuvre around the rules and influence people, often in a somewhat manipulative or deceptive way.

Politico

Also known as Committee Member, appears to be ideal employee, until you need action from them. Characteristics:

- **has found the key to dealing with people is to agree with them**
has seen this rewarded, and has grown to expect favoured treatment by using the same method; bends over backwards to avoid offending anyone
- **rides the coat-tails of others**
never takes the lead and has difficulty making decisions; waits for others to register views and sees which way the wind is blowing before venturing own; wishy-washy, often in 'undecideds' camp
- **always has excuses for not getting the job done**
appears too busy or stretched to pitch in; gives off a Not Me or Poor Me signal; takes everything personally, and withdraws if challenged; avoids risk, and has an explanation for failure made up ahead of time
- **avoids responsibility**
wants to be able to point the finger and blame; never does anything quickly; knows how to postpone: 'Let me get back to you on that'
- **seeks approval**
may try to take on responsibility because knows that success in the firm depends on being seen as accepting responsibility, but doesn't take on the liabilities - delegates all tasks or decisions to people below; trick is being leader and not part of the group or people who are responsible

Dealing with them

1. **Avoid being rude or abrasive:** they tend not to trust themselves and feel any errors or mistakes will likely lead to something bad happening; work on emphasising positive outcomes, and encourage them to believe in themselves
2. **Make it non-threatening for them to be honest with you:** when discussing tough subjects, make them feel accepted; make it comfortable for them to tell you the truth
3. **Find ways of pointing out their behaviour:** either directly or indirectly; remember underlying motivation is 'seeking approval'; ask them: 'What do you think?' or 'Should we do this?' before you ask anybody else, and wait for reply; will force them to venture a point of view
4. **Walk them through the decision process:** 'Why would you do it this way?'; using the same techniques as with Procrastinators, give them opportunities to make decisions, take chances, give personal commitments, and deliver; avoid being too negative when mistakes are made
5. **Expect them to fulfill their commitments:** hold their feet to the fire in a pleasant, but firm way; monitor their progress on commitments and check that they haven't delegated where they made personal commitments
6. **Give them positive feedback:** the reward for the employee comes primarily through success and gradually increasing judgement and initiative

Gossip

Someone who makes a career of spreading truths and half-truths about bosses and co-workers. Characteristics:

- **classic time-waster**
talking and laughing during all-too-frequent coffee breaks; often hear whispered conversations, with rapid dispersal when ‘enemy’ approaches
- **socialise excessively on the job**
spends inordinate amount of time ‘getting around’ to get the news; information, opinions, personal problems, overheard conversations are their stock-in-trade

Dealing with them

1. **Separate ‘mates’:** place them in separate locations, assign them different tasks
2. **Give them time-driven tasks:** enforce definite deadlines for completing tasks, phases of projects
3. **Address the rumours:** if gossip gets chronic, tackle it head-on; lets offenders know that you are willing to talk about things in the open, and would prefer hearing them face-to-face rather than second-hand

Unhealthy Resister

Heavy drinker whose habit is out of control, the permanently depressed secretary who occasionally dissolves into tears or lashes out. Chances are that they have been counselled, been given a sub-par performance evaluation, and even had their pay docked - everything short of being fired. Still, their behaviour continues to give managers their biggest headaches and poses great risks to the organisation.

Shared characteristic: tries desperately to hide their ‘problem’; invariably resists help.

Dealing with them

To deal with behavioural health problems and intervene with them earlier, some employers are turning to peer-to-peer programmes; an impaired worker will listen less defensively to a colleague than to a boss, from whom they’re more likely to be hiding the problem; it’s a matter of being approached about their problem by a co-worker, with whom they share much in common, instead of an authority figure.

PEER-TO-PEER

Weyerhaeuser Corp has found that peer helpers can identify and intervene with troubled co-workers; they are trained in basic listening skills, peer-to-peer counselling, work stress, return-to-work issues and substance abuse. The programme has evolved beyond its founding mission and now functions informally as an organisational development tool and talent mine. Many peer helpers develop a knack for spotting problems that cause work stress - in short they manage crises. Peer helpers are usually selected by the workers; as they gain self-assurance, they become more assertive in seeking out people for active intervention; over time, many of them use their skills in new roles in the company, eventually becoming effective and mature team leaders.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Though many managers have been on effective presentation skills courses where they learn to *talk at* people, few really know how to listen. Active listening means:

- an exchange of *information*: leads to higher quality decisions
- an exchange of *feelings*: builds mutual understanding and respect

How to listen actively:

- **concentrate:** focus mental energy on what is being said
- **observe:** hearing is the beginning of the listening process; listen with other senses as well
- **maintain eye contact**
- **take notes:** but not so many that your listening is impaired
- **react responsively:** let speaker know you are listening by using head nods or spoken signals, eg ‘yes’ ‘mmm’ ‘go on’
- **judge content not delivery:** not everyone has a stage-like delivery
- **listen for ideas, not words:** there is a difference between ‘when I look at you time stands still’ and ‘your face would stop a clock’
- **hold your fire:** don’t make up your mind until you know you understand what the speaker is really trying to say; avoid pre-set ideas or assumptions; if you have the slightest doubt on meaning, clarify with the speaker
- **look like you’re listening:** sit up and look active, interested and involved; don’t interrupt - learn to recognise when to speak
- **capitalise on the fact that thought is faster than speech:** let the other person speak and use this time to anticipate, weigh the evidence, summarise - but don’t lose concentration on what is being said

Communication Skills

HOW PEOPLE LEARN

Research findings:

- **38% take in information visually**
'let me see the documents'; have specific eye patterns; usually talk very fast and use a lot of visual words eg 'It's not clear to me what you want' or 'Just show me so I can see how to finish this'; have excellent eye contact, because they have to look at you to see when you're talking; usually well-dressed - tend to notice what you're wearing
- **28% are auditory**
'just tell me what you want me to do'; speak much slower than visuals using words such as talk, tell, listen; very serious and show little emotion; often can't tell whether they're in a good or bad mood; usually strictly business - facts, detail and information; may be professionally dressed, but things don't necessarily match
- **34% are kinesthetic**
'I learn by doing'; have speech pattern that's choppy because they're trying to find the right word to get the feeling across; individuals are feeling-based (kinesthetic means to touch or feel); readily show emotions, are very animated, proactive and use emotional words like 'I'm under a lot of pressure right now' or 'The stress is really getting to me'; might say 'Is that comfortable for you?' or 'How does that feel?'

Important to know an individual's preferred strategy especially when they're under stress, or making an important decision. Keys to getting into their strategy:

- **listen:** to determine whether individual is primarily visual, auditory or kinesthetic
- **empathise:** with how they communicate by using visual, auditory or kinesthetic language, eg 'I see ...' or 'This sounds like ...' or 'We should do ...' - without sounding artificial, or patronising

One of the keys in effecting a change in a difficult person's behaviour lies in effective communication:

- **observe**
communication is a two-way operation involving sending and receiving signals:
 - **learn to receive signals:** by observing, to become proactive vs reactive
 - **step into the shoes of the other person:** read body language, tone of voice, silences; investigate employee's motivation and fear
- **ask open-ended questions**
goal is get enough information so you can work with employee to resolve problems; it takes practice to self-edit and reframe your questioning technique: we're conditioned to accuse and assume, not to accumulate information
 - **a yes/no (closed) question:** will only give you a yes/no answer
 - **a question that begins with 'Why?':** puts people on the defensive; think about how you would react when asked questions such as 'Why were you late?' or 'Why did you act like that?'; compare to 'Would you explain ...'
 - **avoid words that evoke defensive responses:** 'should/ought' - people feel like they're being instructed; 'never/always' - hard generalities that take emphasis away from specific issue
 - **if you have to criticise:** criticise the act, not the person - 'You are late for every appointment' better than 'You're unprofessional'
- **listen intensively and avoid solving other person's problem**
it's easy to play amateur psychologist, and get caught up in analysis - but dangerous; often good intentions prompt us to provide solutions to people's problems when they actually don't want advice, but simply want to be heard:
 - **your comments might seem weak:** eg 'That must be painful for you' or 'You sound angry. It seems like you're feeling frustrated' especially if you're used to communicating directly and giving orders
 - **listen carefully:** will enable you to read between the lines of what an employee is actually saying; use technique of 'mirroring' or 'echoing' to help them uncover their own problems, eg if they say 'I'm really unhappy because ...' you say 'You mean you don't enjoy your job because ...' and repeat what they've just said; makes employee feel understood
 - **once people feel genuinely understood:** they'll entrust you with more information - what you want because it gives you control
- **frame your responses using the 'I-language' technique**
not blaming employee for their actions: 'You're not performing up to scratch', but pointing out how their behaviour affects your feelings: 'I'm not happy with our progress'; to start with, comment on observed factual behaviour and state the consequences; finish with involving employee in a collaborative resolution
 - Example: 'When you give me your reports at the last minute (fact), I feel frustrated because I must rush and wonder if I'm not catching errors and I end up barking at you (give consequences that matter to them). I wish you would give me more lead time (ask for behaviour change in terms of 'start doing a' versus 'stop doing b') so that we'll both be less stressed (state the benefits). What do you think?'
- **match your words with your body language**
if you're honest your body language will confirm it; if you're feeling angry and denying it, your tone of voice will probably give you away; finally, if your words don't match your non-verbal gestures, you won't be taken seriously

Process Checklist

First steps

Be diligent and precise when dealing with employee problems - mere accusations of a 'bad attitude' won't stand up in court. Analyse the employee's 'attitude' to see if it's causing poor performance, or if the 'bad' behaviour is due to perception; examine:

- **past behaviour:** noting differences, both positive and negative
- **daily job responsibilities:** check employee has skills and tools to do their job
- **your actions as boss:** make sure you're not giving employee non-verbal messages that contradict what you say
- **check all documentation:** for specifics surrounding the incidents, including substantiated accounts from co-workers; documentation is critical, because it shows that when a problem arose, you addressed it
- **schedule a time and place for your first meeting:**
 - time: allow plenty of time and choose a time when you aren't stressed yourself; take into consideration that employee may not want to go right back to work, and need time to think about what you've said; a good choice is late afternoon, but not just before a weekend or holiday
 - place: preferably a setting away from the office - gives a new perspective; if possible sit next to them rather than across a desk or table; set up a relaxed atmosphere in which they'll feel more open to share real roots of the problem

The meeting

- **prepare mentally:** your tone of voice and choice of words are critical
- **explain the purpose of the meeting:** summarise the problem; avoid blame
- **review the employee's performance:** noting both positives and negatives
- **state expectations:** what constitutes appropriate behaviour; be direct and specific
- **give employee a chance to tell their side of the story:** be an active listener
- **get agreement that a problem exists:** and work out a plan to change behaviour
- **plan should be in a document employee takes with them including:**
 - an explanation of why the performance and/or conduct is unacceptable, and the expected performance standards
 - agreed-upon actions to improve performance, from both manager, employee
 - all dates and reasonable deadlines
 - a next step for failing to meet the agreed-upon performance expectations
- **ask employee to sign off plan:** when employees sign name to documents, there's a healthy sense of paranoia that they could be used later to establish patterns in their actions; if the employee refuses, note: 'refused to sign'
- **follow-up:** most failures to correct performance are due to lack of follow-up
- **ensure that employee has followed agreed-upon actions:** make sure you too have held up your end of the bargain
- **if the performance improves, recognise it:** while it's not always easy to reward people for doing what they're supposed to do, there has been improvement
- **if no improvement:** immediately take disciplinary steps spelled out in the plan; further steps may include additional written warnings and/or suspension with pay; gives employee time to consider how important the job is - a final opportunity to change the inappropriate behaviour

KNOW YOURSELF

- **learn as much about yourself as possible**
know your own hot button; what is your threshold for tolerating different behaviour patterns; establish what motivates you, and how it differs from your employees, eg you may be motivated to get recognition for doing excellent work; an employee who works for you may be motivated to come to work for social rewards
- **be assertive**
not passive or aggressive, simply communicating directly and appropriately; about knowing what you want and thinking enough of yourself to assert your needs; when honest and up-front with words and actions you're neither lying in an attempt to be overly nice and protective (ie passive), nor denying anger to the point of one day blowing up; asserting yourself allows you to hold your ground without putting other person down, creating a win/win for both parties
- **don't try to solve a problem that's too tough to handle**
don't feel you have to solve all your employees' problems - you might be a terrific manager but an inadequate therapist; once you've listened, asked caring questions, involved the person in a possible solution, but still failed to reach a resolution, call in the troops: HR, your boss
- **learn you can't change others**
you can change your own behaviour and hope that by serving as a model, employees will follow your lead; understand that ultimately people will do what they want, despite your best wishes and intentions; protect yourself by learning to deflect their negative behaviours, and don't take them personally
- **be flexible**
we're all different, and we view the world through different glasses; our upbringing, environment, education, values, and culture all define us in one way or another; learn to accept the differences, even if you don't agree with or condone others' choices; life will be a lot less stressful

References & Further Reading

- 201 Ways to Deal with Difficult People*** A Axelrod et al *McGraw-Hill* 1997
- Beware the Toxic Manager** A Furnham *Financial Times* 29 November 2000
- Coping with Difficult People*** RM Bransom and RN Bransom *Dell Books* 1988
- Damage Control Without Discipline** P Falcone *HR Focus* October 1997
- Dealing with Difficult People** LL Cole *Executive Excellence* January 1995
- Fire Them? Coddle Them? Strangle Them?** J Lawlor *Sales & Marketing Management* September 1997
- Five Ways to Cope with Difficult People** GA Bielous *Supervision* June 1996
- The Frustration Factor*** GA Crow *Glenbridge Publishing Ltd* 1995
- Getting by with a Little Help from Friends** RMYandrick *HR Magazine* October 2000
- Here Comes Trouble** L Lowndes *Office Systems* May 1994
- How to Supervise Problem Employees** AJ Urbaniak *Supervision* September 1993
- How to Work with Difficult People** P Jacobs *Test & Measurement World* June 1999
- Managing People - Ch 15 Managing Problem Employees*** B Adams et al *Streetwise* 1998
- The Maverick Way*** RE Cheverton *Maverickway Publishing* 2000
- One Bad Apple** M Boyd *Incentive* August 1994
- Prima Donnas on Your Staff** K Moreno *Forbes* April 6 1998
- Problem Employees Challenge Managers** PM Perry *Test & Measurement World* April 1998
- Stop Toxic Managers Before They Stop You** G Flynn *Workforce* August 1999
- Tough Love** S Couper *New Zealand Management* May 2000
- What to do about Procrastination** LR Dominguez www.workforce.com
- Working with Difficult People** www.plainsense.com
- You Can Say Good Riddance to Bad Attitudes** G Flynn *Workforce* July 1998

* Indicates books

Managing Difficult People is published by Bulletpoint Communications Limited, Furness House, 53 Brighton Street, Redhill, Surrey RH1 6RD, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1737 231431. Fax: +44 (0)1737 231432. Entire contents Copyright Bulletpoint Communications Limited. All rights reserved. Reproduction in any form is unlawful. This publication reflects a synthesis of the references listed. Any opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of Bulletpoint. Bulletpoint may occasionally make its subscriber list available to top quality third parties; please contact us if you do not want to receive their information.

Cover photograph supplied by Gettyimages.

FOCUS REPORTS

The People at Work Series

Upcoming Reports:

- The Human Side of Change
- Leading Teams
- Coaching Skills
- Positive Appraisals
- Recruiting Effectively

BULLETPOINT

... For busy managers

For information on our 16 page monthly journal please call +44 (0)1737 231431

Order Form

To order additional copies of **Managing Difficult People**, please photocopy this form, complete it and send it back to the address below.

Please send me _____ copy(ies) of **Managing Difficult People** at £99 each

Name _____

Position _____

Company _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Fax _____

E-mail _____

Signature _____

Payment details

Cheque enclosed
(made payable to Bulletpoint Communications Ltd)

Credit Card Payment

Mastercard Visa Amex

Card No _____

Expiry Date _____

Please return your order with payment to: Bulletpoint Communications Ltd, Furness House, 53 Brighton Street, Redhill, Surrey, RH1 6RD

Tel: +44 (0)1737 231431 Fax: +44 (0)1737 231432 E-mail: subs@bulletpoint.com

