

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

October '08

MANAGING THE DIFFICULT TEAM MEMBER



■ Raphael E. Lapin

The skill of an effective leader is not only measured by how he manages his straightforward assiduous people, but also by how well he works with the difficult people on his team. When an individual places his personal needs above that of the group, the performance of the entire group could be undermined. And yet, despite this concealed landmine that lurks in many teams, very few team leaders have had the necessary training in how to manage the destructive behavior of the difficult team member. In this edition of *Negotiation Strategies* I offer some guidelines in how to deal with the more common manifestations of the difficult team member.

THE ANTAGONIST

The antagonist will often blame, attack or criticize another for any failure or shortcoming and will seldom take responsibility. When left unchecked, the offended party, if present, will become defensive and an unproductive cycle of reaction and counter-reaction will ensue.

An example might be a deadline that was missed. The antagonist might interject with: "Well, if Amy would have gotten us the information when we asked for it instead of three weeks late, we might have made this deadline!"

Amy feeling attacked, might retort: "If you were more organized, you would have asked me in a timelier manner and not at the last minute. That kind of information takes time to research, you know!"

In less time than it takes to say the word "antagonist" the interaction will have deteriorated into an ugly battle of words, leaving all good intentions for a productive and efficient meeting in its wake.

As a skilled leader, you can effectively manage this insidious behavior and guide it towards a constructive end. A useful method is to redirect the antagonist's attention away from the offended party back to himself. You could say: "Fred, I am hearing your frustration and concern about getting information in a timelier manner. How do you think we might streamline the information flow to make it more efficient?"

He may continue to point a finger but you must persist in bringing it back to him again (and again if necessary) by saying for example: "What is there that *you* might do, that could help to improve this?"

By applying this skill, you have successfully deflected a potential confrontation and expanded the discussion towards a constructive purpose. You have also sent a subtle message to the antagonist that his

And finally, put the question to the group: "What are the group's thoughts around Maggie's concerns? How might we address them?"

This technique has engaged the defeatist constructively and rather than allowing the idea to be smothered, has channeled the interaction towards further brainstorming and refinement.

THE RAMBLER

The rambler holds the floor with an endless, often pointless monologue quite oblivious to anyone else in the room. No one can get a word in edge-wise and group productivity is brought to a standstill. Left alone, the rambler could dominate the entire session.

To regain control, you can use a com-

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behavior is unacceptable, but without humiliating him.

THE DEFEATIST

The defeatist is the pessimist and cynic in the group. Whenever an idea is presented, she will throw up her arms in despair and cry: "This will never work!" or "That is too complicated to actually implement!"

For example, someone might suggest a new incentive plan to encourage customers to buy. Before the group has had a chance to digest the idea, the defeatist objects with: "That plan is way too aggressive – we can't do that!"

Her statement immediately smothers the idea before it has adequately been explored and developed.

A helpful way of guiding the defeatist is to initially ask her what specifically there is about the idea that she finds unrealistic. In our example you might ask: "Maggie, what specifically about this incentive plan do you find too aggressive and why? What are your concerns?"

Then question her about ways she can think of to improve on the idea. You might ask: "What ideas can you think of that could build on this idea to make it more practical?"

bination of summary and a closed-ended question (a question to which there is only a yes or no answer). Let's say the rambler is holding forth about the wonders of a new product feature that he is promoting. Summarize the key and relevant points by saying: "So what you're saying, Chuck, is that this feature would provide the user with a great deal of flexibility" and then immediately follow up with a closed-ended question: "Have you discussed this with anyone in the design team?"

By using this technique, you have elegantly interrupted his counter-productive behavior and regained control of the discussion.

As in any skill development, with practice these processes and techniques will become natural and intuitive while greatly enhancing your leadership competencies.

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