# How to Deal with Difficult People by Jay Johnson

I want you to think of a time when maybe you were interacting with somebody who you felt was difficult. As you're sitting there and you're talking to them maybe getting into an argument, maybe the tensions are starting to rise, you can feel your palms starting to sweat, you can feel your breath starting to get shorter, you can feel yourself getting angry and at some point, in time in that conversation you decide I've had enough of this it's time for me to walk away – you walk out.

You get about five steps this way and it hits you, and you're like oh, I should have said this. I would have totally got them!

That is a product of our brains. When we meet somebody, maybe for the first time, and we shake their hands we say hello, how are you? my name is Jay nice to meet you and

something in the back of your mind is already hitting you and going I'm not going to like this person.

Well, if you've experienced that, trust me you're not alone. Our brain is designed for survival.

What Daniel Goleman calls the low road is something where we look at, others call it the limbic system, our fear regulation, our fight-or-flight response. When we deal with difficult people, ultimately, what we're doing is trying to get past that response. It's a natural response that we have, in fact, it's an important response. It is the response that stress comes into the body, so we see things like adrenaline, norepinephrine, cortisol flood the system when we're engaged with those difficult people.

We're in a heightened state of anxiety during that and our other systems start to shut down. we don't think rationally, our metabolism slows we can even get acne from having too much stress hormones put into the body.

Is that a way that we want to live our lives? Conflict in the workplace between

difficult people are not difficult people has serious impacts and ultimately what it does is it causes turnover, absenteeism, it can even cause projects to fail.

So, what can we do about that? We can't change other people's behavior. I can't make somebody behave in a way that I want them to, so I guess maybe we need to look at a different framework of operating from internal.

When we look at people, one of the ways that we can start changing this conversation with ourselves is to look at how we label them. So, we label somebody difficult or a pain in the you-know-what. We also have these archetypes that we tend to create so, for example, one of the people you might encounter them in the office place, you walk in to have a conversation with them, and they won't lift their head up they're just sitting there, they're texting, they're playing on their computer, and they're not paying any attention to you; that's the archetype of the not listener.

We have other archetypes, such as the one-upper. If you've ever been I had a party and you tell a story, and then what happens? Somebody has to tell a better story or you go and get a new dress and somebody has to get a better dress or something of that nature; anything that's always the one-up archetype.

How about the gossiper? The person that walks around and they gossip all about different people in the office place it almost just to stir up trouble.

What about the curmudgeon? The person that's been there and done that and remembers the glory days of everything that's right or wrong with your organization.

Now part of my framework is behavior, and I can guarantee you that at some point in time when I was talking about those archetypes you put a name and a face with each one of those individuals. Yeah, I see the knots. When we look at that and we understand that those are the different behaviors that really impact us, individually, we know that we need to change. The simple message is this: why should we have to change ourselves because of somebody else's behavior? Because it's your heart attack; those stress homework hormones are killers. It's your heart attack so if we can't change other people's behaviors, the only thing that we can change is our own behaviors.

Let's look at a unique approach through behavioral intelligence. Behavioral intelligence really has four quadrants: to be able to explain existing behaviors, predict future behaviors, influence other people's behaviors, and control our own behaviors, and we'll talk about that in the context of difficult people.

So, one of the things that we want to look at is how do we explain behaviors? When we see somebody do something that we really just don't like, and we label them. Maybe they're stubborn. Well, at the same time couldn't we see our friend doing that and say well they're just headstrong? We see somebody do something that we feel like it is aggressive but on the other side of things we look at our friend that does the exact same behavior and we say wow, they're dedicated, motivated, passionate – even. So, some of these labels start to infiltrate the way that we understand the world.

It's a bias that we have so we want to look a little bit deeper and ask the question of why? Why did somebody behave that way? Is it something inherent? Is it an intrinsic desire that is pushing them to behave that way? Now this is a tough question because we're in a heat of the moment. One of the things that we get really frustrated with is ourselves, in that moment. We don't take the time to actually ask, we just label and continue, but again it's your heart attack, it's your organization that's suffering so we have to look at this in a different way. Asking questions is one of the best ways to explain behavior and I'm going to give

you an example of a case study.

One of my favorite case studies of when I was working with two different divisions in a management organization. One division had manager and I'm going to rename them Bill and Ted to protect the guilty. We had Bill on one side, and we had Ted on the other, and these two could not get along in any way, shape, or form. They were constantly at odds with each other,

causing projects to fail, and ultimately, I was brought in to take a look at this and say what behaviors are existing that's creating this situation. So, I had Bill and Ted both write out everything that they felt about the other person I asked them to put everything onto paper and then I had them submit that to me. So, I take a look at this I review it, and as I'm reading through it, and the value of being an objective outside observer is something incredibly valuable, to take yourself out of a situation is something that you can do

also.

As I start reading, I read Bill’s all about Ted and Bill says Ted is constantly coming to my office asking questions. He's bothering me. He will never leave me alone. He's such a constant contact.

Okay, so, then I read Ted's and Ted says Bill

just can't be bothered with me. My manager keeps telling me to go to Bill and ask him these questions to find out more because all of his experience, his knowledge, his value to the organization, but he just won't listen. He's such a not listener.

So, I bring these two people in and I put them at the table, and I share with them each other's perspective, and I swear it was just like Lady and the Tramp when all of a sudden, they looked at each other like oh my goodness, I had no idea that you valued my opinion so much, and

on the other side it was oh my goodness I can't believe that that's the way that

I'm coming off in this environment, and all of a sudden, we start to look, and they were able to answer each other's narrative that narrative that was hidden to them because they didn't ask questions they didn't go to why, they just labeled; they labeled them difficult.

Once we can explain behaviors then we can predict behaviors. We can predict what's going to happen, that'll help to reduce uncertainty. Uncertainty is one of the things, if you've ever gotten a phone call from a superior saying hey, can you come down to my office immediately? What happens? You don't think oh I'm going to get a raise; this is going to be great. You start thinking yourself what did I do? Oh my gosh, this could be the worst. That uncertainty creates some of that anxiety and when we bring that anxiety into a conversation or into the relationship, that's going to be felt by the other person.

So, by being able to predict those types of behaviors, it'll actually reduce the

anxiety. if you've ever been in a situation where you've said hey, listen, my friend is probably going to say X Y or Z, don't be offended by it, that's just how they are. That's a fundamental effect of prediction we can forgive, or we can be prepared, so that we were not hit with an

onslaught of anxiety.

Influencing behaviors. We look at this and say how do

we necessarily influence that person that is a difficult person.

One is by using inclusive language. when we talk about somebody. If I say your behavior is doing X Y & Z, immediately the walls going to go up, they're going to get defensive, they're going to look for the ways in which your behavior contributes to it, and fire back and all of a sudden, we're now in an argument, and we're in a place where we can't necessarily get out of that difficulty versus when we start to talk and use inclusive language, like

I noticed that we're having some trouble communicating here; that key word we're we are having trouble communicating because communication is a two-way street. We should probably take a look at this a little bit more effectively, and now all of a sudden is togetherness, we're engaging the other person, we're bringing them together.

One of the other ways in which we can actually influence other people's behavior is reward and

recognition, just like a child that goes potty when they're supposed to and where

they're supposed to; we give them an M&M. We never really get beyond that behavior as adults but when we're at odds or when we're working with somebody difficult, it is very hard for us to think that giving them recognition, or a reward, would be a value to us, but if they do something nice, we can reach out to them and say hey, I thought your report today was fantastic and all of a sudden, we start to move ourselves out of that enemy zone and into being a friend, and let me tell you it's much more valuable in work or anywhere else to be a friend because if people like you, they will do business with you and if they don't like you, they will do whatever they can to usurp your ability to be successful, so utilizing something like a recognition or reward scenario is something that can actually help build that influence and that report. They're going to start looking to you as maybe not necessarily the difficult person.

I used to be a difficult person. When I talk about difficulty, I'm sure that there is plenty of people that still find me to be difficult, but the reality is, is until we recognize that each of us are a difficult person for someone else, we're never going to be able to adjust our behavior, and that's where we get into control; some of the self-awareness aspects.

So, some of the things that we can do to control that low-road system,

that limbic system, that fear, that flight-or-fight response that we have when we're interacting with somebody who we find to be difficult is as simple as we learned in kindergarten. First, take a deep breath. When we take a deep breath, and out, we flood our body with oxygen. Now that system that's fight-or-flight, it doesn't know the difference between you interacting with a difficult person or a lion chasing you, and if a lion’s chasing you, are you going to go [inhales], no, absolutely not, you're going to run, you're going to scream, so when we take that deep breath, we're literally telling our system, that low-road system, everything's okay.

Look at how we're breathing, look at how we're managing ourselves. Another way

is to count to ten and that doesn't mean standing there going one, two, three, four,

five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, I'm still angry. That's probably not going to be effective in working with that difficult person, but counting to ten is as simple to say you know what I noticed that both of us are getting a little passionate about this, why don't we take a small recess? Why don't we take a step back and reset and in come at this with clear heads? Notice again, I'm using that inclusive language, the we, us, together, because together we can solve the problem.

So, when we look at that another way that I love to look at difficult people is to separate out the person from the behavior. In so many cases, we label them tough to deal with, difficult, bad, but if we look at it and say I dislike this behavior that this person, this human exhibits. It separates those two things for us. The label is no longer on them, it's on the behavior, and then we can carve that out and say is this the hill we want to die on? Is that behavior worth my heart attack? and I would like to think that the answer to that is no.

So, with all of the impacts that we see this model of behavioral intelligence gives us the opportunity to explain the existing behaviors to ask those questions of why, to predict future behaviors, to reduce the uncertainty surrounding those, to influence other people's behavior. Why? Because our relationships matter and if we're not engaging in those relationships, well

guess what, they're going to continuously go down and we see the impact of conflict in the workplace and on ourselves, and then we can control our own behavior by being a little bit more thoughtful and aware of how we are, and again, why should we have to do this? Why should we be the people that has to change our behavior to deal with difficult people? Ultimately, because it's your heart attack and someone else's bad behavior should not be the cause of your heart attack.

Thank you very much.

[Applause]