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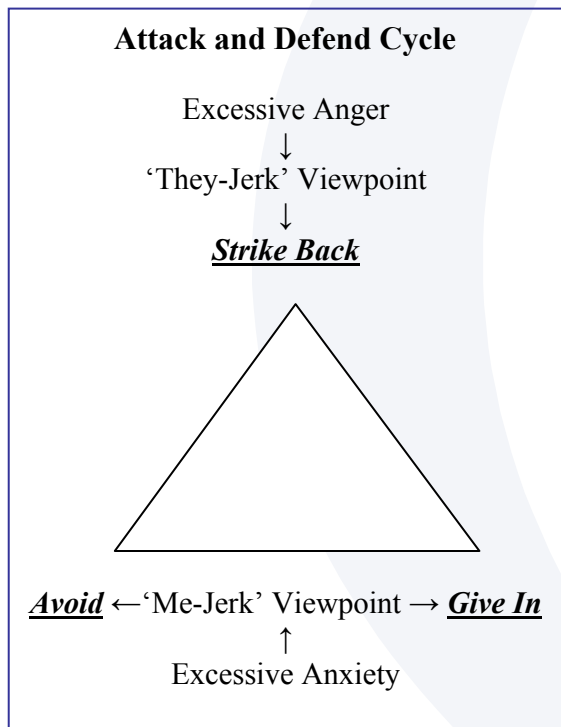
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Welcome. In this inaugural e-newsletter of Asherman Associates, Inc. we look at the topic of difficult relationships and effective ways of handling them. Our discussion is drawn largely from the workshop we developed in partnership with our colleague, Jay K. Cherney, Ph.D., a psychologist in the Philadelphia area.

—Ira and Sandy Asherman

Confronting the Difficult Relationship

By Jay K. Cherney, Ph.D.



Most of us have had at least one. Difficult relationships derail our best laid plans and block us from important objectives. They sap our energy and time and sometimes affect our relationships with other people. Difficult relationships are tough, but don't have to become unmanageable. Fortunately, we can remain effective with a change in attitude and perspective.

- **Stop blaming and labeling.**

Our knee-jerk impulse when we're criticized is to blame right back. We tell ourselves stories about the other's permanent traits, calling them "control freaks" or "selfish" or "arrogant." One problem with these reactions is that it invites them to label you. The attack- and-defend cycle can harden into a self-defeating relationship where your input sparks the very behavior you wish to extinguish.

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Confronting the Difficult Relationship

- **Give up being right.**

Insisting your reality is the only sensible one keeps relationships stuck. Assume their unproductive position somehow makes sense and be curious about why they see things as they do. If someone comes at you with “Your report was really disorganized,” your first reaction might be to attack back. Instead of responding with, “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” try: “I’m really surprised to hear that. Can you show me how you think it needs work?” Taking the lead in acknowledging and validating the other person will help them feel recognized so that a collaborative, rather than defensive, conversation can begin.

- **Keep your composure.**

When we act in the heat of emotion we can’t really listen. Slow down! Listen to the story you are telling yourself about the difficulty. Is this person always difficult? Perhaps they are overwhelmed or are trying to be helpful, but don’t have the same information or skills you have. Considering alternative explanations gives you a chance to calm down and choose a response that serves both of you and your common purpose.

- **Consider a style difference.**

Behavior you find annoying and obstructive may simply be another person’s most comfortable way of working—different from yours but no less valuable. With some investigation, you may find you share the same goals and differ only on how to reach them. Recognizing a work style difference can save you a lot of personal grief and wasted energy. ■

Research ■ **Ever back down from a tough negotiator? You’re not alone.** Researchers studying negotiators who believed they were going up against a tough opponent found that they tended to lower their expectations before the negotiation and left the proceedings with less than they had hoped to get. The 2003 study, published at the University of Utah’s David Eccles School of Business, reported that in a mock 30-minute negotiation over a bonus, people who anticipated tough going wound up with \$13,130, while those expecting a less competitive opponent came away with \$15,540. ■

Taking Action

Confronting the Difficult Relationship

When you are ready to confront the person who is giving you trouble, consider the following questions as you plan for that meeting:

- What specifically has this person done or said that has so upset me? Be specific in describing behavior.
- Can I see any positive intent, as viewed from their perspective, in what they did? What do I think they were trying to accomplish?
- How do I think they view me?
- Have I contributed in any way to the problem?

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- Is this person always difficult? When are they difficult to work with? When have they been easy to work with?
- What has been the impact of the problem on my work relationship with them?
- What points do I want to cover in the meeting?
- What do I think the other person might say or do that would put me on the defensive? How might I respond to them? ■

Resources

“How to Negotiate with a Hard-Nosed Adversary,” by Anne Field, *Harvard Management Update*, March 2003.

Book Corner

SANDY AND IRA'S FAVORITES

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most
Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project
New York: Viking Penguin, 1999.

For additional book and article recommendations:

Visit us on the web <http://www.asherman.com> or send your e-mail comments to Sandy Asherman at sandy@asherman.com or Ira Asherman at ira@asherman.com ■