

Training With NLP

Dealing with Difficult People

"There is no such thing as a resistant trainee, merely inflexible trainers."

Difficult people, like difficult questions come in two main varieties. Those that deliberately set out to be difficult, and those the trainer just happens to find difficult. From the trainer's point of view, both can be a challenge and an opportunity. Think how boring training would be if everyone agreed with you all the time, although sometimes this certainly seems an attractive proposition. We plan to avoid giving stereotypes which talk about "The Know-it-all", "The Distracter" etc. It is more useful to focus on the behaviour rather than the person. Treating someone as if they were their behaviour is likely to make it more entrenched. Separate the behaviour from the person in your mind and always keep yourself in a resourceful state. The converse is also important, people are responding to your behaviour, not to you, your identity is not under threat.

Resistance is not something someone has like red hair or a grey suit. Resistance is a response to someone else pushing. It is impossible to resist nothing. So the first question for the trainer to ask himself or herself is: "How am I contributing to this person's resistance?" or, "What am I doing that is maintaining this person's problem?"

Preventing resistance is always easier than dealing with it, so the frames you set are important. When you review a training difficulty, always ask yourself what frame you could have set that would have defused the problem before it started. Listen for any negative embedded commands in the language you use. If you say things like: "You won't find this difficult." or "Don't let this worry you." Guess what will happen? They are likely to notice difficulties and start to worry, even if the idea had not entered their minds. You will tend to get what you ask for. "Any objections?" will elicit objections.

Respect trainees' points of view and do not get drawn into trying to win an argument. If you do win the argument, your adversary, and probably the group, will feel bad. If you do not, you will lose credibility. Change the frame to create a situation where you both win, like, "That is one way of looking at it, here is another..... what are their respective advantages?" Gather information about the group's concerns and interests. Acknowledge and pace their reality. When you elicit resistance, play what they say back to them to check you have got it right. Say something like: "So the way you see it is....." use their words. This will build rapport and reassure them that you do care about their concerns. You may need to apologise: "

"You are right. I made a mistake. Now, how else could I have responded?"

One difficult behaviour to deal with, is when someone constantly questions your credibility, or the credibility of the material. It is fine to be sceptical, but to get the most from any training you have to be prepared to suspend disbelief. Anyone who is not prepared to do this is wasting his time at your training. He could be doing something more useful elsewhere, and you can remind him of this. Turn the tables and ask him to be sceptical enough to test the material to see whether it works.

An important safety line is to have a downside plan prepared for the worst case. What would you do if someone persistently and aggressively interrupts? There are a number of moves: deferring to the break, identifying positive intention and reframing, asking to be allowed to continue, etc. If these have not worked, step aside to a new position you do not usually use and say something like this: "I'm sorry I cannot continue to train in this situation. My job is to present this material. Your interruptions are preventing both myself and the group from achieving what we are here for." At this point you can ask the person what he is achieving by staying and what he proposes to do. There may be a little more negotiation before he volunteers to leave. Alternately you may simply ask him to leave. If he does, you step back to your normal position and carry on as if nothing had happened. Another option is to keep sweetly and reasonably answering him, until the group cracks and challenges him for you. A more likely scenario is a dissatisfied trainee leaving during a break.

Be curious about any unusual behaviour. Suspect a hidden agenda if someone persistently questions or disrupts the seminar, or brings up irrelevancies. He may feel you have not dealt adequately with his concerns, or his beliefs are bruised. These covert outcomes or hidden agendas will occur more in 'In-house' trainings if there are relationship and power struggles within the group. If you suspect there is a particular hidden agenda at work in a group, there are at least three ways you can deal with it. First you can tackle it openly. Step to one side away from your training spot to mark out what follows as different. Say something like, "I am getting a strong impression, and I could be wrong, that there is some concern in the group about....." and address it. Secondly, you can be oblique. "The last group I taught this material, the group were concerned about..... and I said....." Or you can bring the conversation around by saying, "Some people in this sort of situation have concerns about..... (suspected covert outcome). How would you answer them so they have more choices about dealing with it?" This dissociates the problem from the group and makes it easier to talk about. Thirdly, you can tell a metaphor that suggests and deals with the concern without mentioning it directly at all. Not all difficulties are so high profile and often the group will take care of itself, perhaps with a little skilful facilitation on your part.

Sometimes one group member will consistently speak for another person's experience. You may want to remind her to speak from her own experience. This mind reading can come from different motivations. The mind reader may not be confident enough to give her own experience in the group. She may be speaking up for a quiet group member. Of course, she may just be a habitual mind reader. The opposite pattern is when a person projects their own feelings onto the group. So she will say things like: "People are angry that you are not going to do this....." People who project, disown their statements. Even if

the projection is true you must challenge the projection. Unless people speak for themselves you will not know how they feel. You may need to say something like: "Let's check out if other people are really experiencing what you say they are." or "I understand that is the way you feel, other people will need to speak for themselves."

A difficult behaviour to deal with is when someone is persistently disruptive in mild ways, yet denies any foul intent. He may act naive, make mistakes, or just be unfortunate. He seems to be hostile, yet expresses it indirectly. He may initiate side conversations with others, or maintain an uninterested or slightly superior expression. Keep in a resourceful state and make a general evaluation. Your best approach is probably during a break. Ask how he is getting on with the course, or if this draws a blank, express your concern about a specific behaviour and allow him to respond. This usually surfaces some issue. A direct expression of hostility is a step forward. If you were inaccurate, you can apologise for your misunderstanding. If someone is taking more than their share of the air time during questions and answers, explain that you want to be fair to everyone by allowing each person only one question or comment per session. You can then interrupt the excessive talker legitimately, "Excuse me, (their name), you may have forgotten that you have already used your comment for this session, and so you'll understand as I ask the rest of the group for any other comments, please."

Another awkward situation is when someone keeps adding to what you say or correcting you. He knows a lot about the material and obviously wants you and everyone else to know that. A metaphor will often help here. Tell it ostensibly to the whole group but gesture nonverbally to the know-it-all as you tell it. Avoid an argument at all costs. If his information contradicts yours, then thank him, point to the mismatch, and restate your position if you are sure of it, or give your references, and say you will check the information. If he is right, thank him. You have learned something. It's OK to be wrong. The only way you will be discredited in the groups' eyes, is if you cling onto being right regardless.

Distracting questions or comments can be dealt with by the relevancy challenge as long as you have set an outcome frame. Some people may intellectualise and overcomplicate questions or comments. You may want to ask them to be more specific, to ask their question simply, or you may need to restate their question for them in a simple way, and check with them that you have it correctly. Some people are very good at spotting possible problems. They will say some variation of, "I think that this bit is wrong.", "I do not agree here." Or, "Don't you think there is a danger of....." They say, "Yes..... but....." in many different forms. You can say that yes, there are an infinite number of ways something can not work, how could they adapt it so it would? You might turn the pattern on itself by asking them to think about the worst problem that looking for problems creates. You can also utilise and schedule their behaviour. Ask them to be the Devil's Advocate in the group, and to wait until you have had a fair exposition before they chip in. Now they are doing it to order. I also like to tell a metaphor. When I was young I was a rather fussy eater. I liked hamburger and chips and not a lot else. My parents started to tempt me onto more exotic foods. I was a match for them though. When confronted

with something new I would ask: "Supposing I don't like it?" I managed to avoid discovering many enjoyable foods and experiences for some time with this question, as my parents could not answer it.

We each have our internal rules of training. One rule many trainers have is: "I have to satisfy each and every person and I have to do it NOW." This is a limiting rule in the context of group training. You can break rapport with one person within the larger frame of group rapport and shared outcomes. Being heckled is a good challenge. Remember that stand up comedians, far from avoiding hecklers, love to interact with them. They utilise what the heckler says and turn it back. You can turn this into a simple exercise:

1. The person acting a trainer sets a training context, e.g. "I'm just in the middle of explaining reflective listening...."
2. Your partner heckles. The trainer's job is to utilise and respond to the heckler.

You can ask hecklers to comment by saying, "If you were me how would you have dealt with that?" You can invite the heckler up to the front onto your territory. It is much easier to heckle from the safety of the audience. Get him to say whatever he wants to say. This usually shuts him up. Then thank him and propel him firmly back into the audience.

Whatever type of training you do, there will be particular kinds of 'difficult' behaviour you encounter. Treat these as invaluable sources of learning by designing and using a range of interventions until you find the most effective. You can do this on your own with the New Behaviour Generator or the Learning from Criticism Strategy. It can be more fun with a partner, and you can test out different responses. Finally, remember that people with difficult behaviour often 'resist' the most, just before they do a 'U' turn and become your biggest fan. There is a wonderful psychological term for this. It is called the Extinction Burst. Would it be useful if you looked on every piece of difficult behaviour as an extinction burst?

Dealing with Difficult People - Summary

Key points

- You learn the most from difficult situations.
- Ask yourself, "How am I maintaining this difficult behaviour?"
- Focus on the behaviour, not the person, and maintain a resourceful state.
- Preventing resistance is easier than dealing with it.
- Respect all points of view and avoid arguments.
- Have a plan prepared for the worst case.
- Stay alert for and address hidden agendas, either overtly or covertly.
- Use the relevancy challenge.
- Simplify over-complex questions or statements.
- The group outcomes are more important than any individual. You do not have to respond.
- Enjoy playing with hecklers, or be so patient that the group controls them.

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