

~~~~~  
Are "difficult people" really difficult?  
~~~~~

Google "working with difficult people," and you'll get about 411,000,000 hits; "difficult people at work," 3,910,000 and just "difficult people," a whopping 298,000,000.

### **They're everywhere**

In most every organization – at work at home, at play - we come face to face with folks who push our buttons, antagonize, frustrate, annoy or otherwise trigger us. They make us make us want to scream, or worse. Usually, we refer to such folks as "difficult people." Some we label simply irritating; others we label rude and there are those we label impossible to work or be with.

### **Difficult is in the eye of the beholder**

Often, the question is not what makes them difficult, but what we tell ourselves about them that makes them difficult. What we tell ourselves that supports our being triggered, our reactivity. We concoct stories about such folks (" S/he is - fill in the blank with your negative judgment, criticism, or descriptor." - that categorizes them as difficult.

### **The truth about difficulty**

When we drill down to the truth of the difficulty characterization, experience suggests that it's not so much that another's behavior is all that egregious, outlandish, off the charts or aberrant. The truth of the difficulty matter is that often the difficulty is not so much the other individual as it is the stories we tell ourselves about that person. What occurs is we have created a story about that person - a story we assume to be real and true.

### **How do we know our story is real?**

So, when we feel the urge to label another as difficult, a first step is to check out the reality of the story, the facts. Here are three self-reflective questions to support your inquiry:

1. What is that person doing/being, that is problematical for me?

What are the observable and measurable behaviors that point to "difficulty?" Often, when caught up in reactivity, or flooded by emotions, we lose sight of the observable facts and simply respond with a knee-jerk judgment along the lines of: "Well, it's nothing specific; he's just being an a—hole..." Because we're so attached to our story, we often fail to grasp the details that indicate the person is, in fact, difficult. So, ask yourself, "If someone gave me the same feedback I'm directing to another person, would I know exactly how to do/be differently? If not, you're telling yourself a story and you'll need to be clear on the facts.

2. Do you allow your story to cloud your view of that person?

When we create stories, we create a subjective, judgmental way we choose to view that person. For example, if I choose to believe another is lazy, then I turn the radio dial in my head to the station that features only laziness tunes and, as such, I'm always on the lookout for, and listening for, ways that person is behaving that I can characterize as lazy, in order to prove the truth of my story.

If I choose to believe my boss is friendlier with a colleague and is ignoring, or rejecting me and my work, then I turn the radio dial to pick up rejection tunes and look for and listen for incidents which allow me to say, "See, there she goes again; she likes that other person and is not concerned with me or my work."

We create distortions that support us to prove we are right, that our story is true. We look to archive lots of evidence to prove our story. We don't stand back and ask ourselves, "Is this the whole story?" "Is my story really the truth?" "Is it possible I'm distorting things just a bit?" "In fact, is this person perhaps, just perhaps, not the ogre I make him or her out to be?" "Could I be mistaken?"

3. Do you behave a certain way toward that person based on your story?

The bottom line is our stories influence our behavior. Our stories (and their attendant beliefs, thoughts, assumptions, preconceptions, misperceptions, etc.) trigger our emotions and feelings and it is our emotions and feelings that drive our behavior (often unconsciously) towards the other.

So, it's important to take steps to become conscious of our stories. Two questions that can help in this vein are: How do I behave toward another based on my story? And, Am I building a case against another, or attempting to solidify a case against another, based on my story?

### **The antidote – curiosity, not judgment**

A next step is to become curious as to whether I am perpetuating another's behavior as a result of my story. Am I contributing to that other persons being difficult through my story and reactivity?

Yes, there are difficult people in the world. The question is whether some of these folks are really difficult, or whether I'm a major contributing factor to their being difficult through my story, and, more sincerely, honestly, and self-responsibly, how do I know the difference.

### **Think first...**

Finally, I invite you to reflect on the following thoughts that could inform your inquiry into difficult people and your stories about them:

(1) Everyone is in chapter three of their life. We often base our criticisms and judgments of another on the assumption we know what went on in chapter one and chapter two. Truth is, we don't know.

(2) Ask yourself: "Why would a rational, decent, fair-minded and well-meaning individual behave like a jerk (or fill in the blank with another difficult descriptor)?" And then perhaps compassionately give them the benefit of the doubt before you make up your story or justify your story as the truth.

(3) No one (read: no one) ever gets up in the morning and says, I'm going to be a jerk today.

### **So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- How do you generally react when you come across a difficult person?

- Do you ever give a difficult person the benefit of the doubt?
- How does labeling someone as "difficult" get you?
- Do you ever make judgments about folks assuming you know all about them (chapters one and two) and what makes them tick?
- Have you ever asked colleagues, bosses, friends, spouse/partner or child(ren) if you're a difficult person? If not, would you? If not, why not?
- Have you even been judged as difficult or been judged harshly or unfairly? How did you feel?
- Have you ever been told you were quick to judge?
- Do you ever make up stories about people? How do your stories make you feel?
- Do you ever feel compassionate towards difficult people? Do you ever defend "difficult" people?
- Do you ever justify your own being difficult while admonishing others for their being difficult? What's the difference?
- When the choice is between seeing another as a human being or a villain (difficult), which do you normally choose? Why?
- What one or two baby steps might you take this week and next to discern the facts about someone you might have labeled as difficult to see if your story is, really, really, the truth?

(c) 2012, Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D. and True North Partnering. All rights in all media reserved.

Peter G. Vajda, Ph.D, C.P.C. is the founder of True North Partnering an Atlanta-based company that supports conscious living through coaching and facilitating. With a practice based on the dynamic intersection of mind, body, emotion and spirit, Peter's approach focuses on personal, business, relational and spiritual coaching. He is a professional speaker and published author. For more information, [www.truenorthpartnering.com](http://www.truenorthpartnering.com), or [pvajda\(at\)truenorthpartnering.com](mailto:pvajda@truenorthpartnering.com), or phone 770.804.9125. You can also follow Peter on Twitter: @petergvajda