

Dancing with wolves, swimming with sharks - building a flexible and creative approach to working with those 'difficult' people

In this article, I will first look at why some people are 'difficult' using a different model from the one which labels individuals by their behaviours – 'the troublemaker', 'the know it all', 'the bluffer' and so on. I will suggest that being 'difficult' is actually a clash of cultures, which can be worked through using both needs-based negotiation principles, and high level interactive skills.

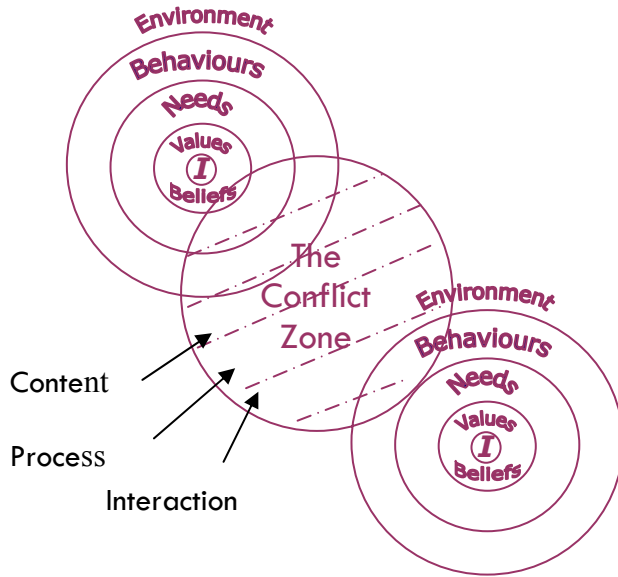
I will then set these in the context of working with learners.

Sometimes, I entertain myself with the question, "would the world be a better place if everyone was like me, or if no one was like me?" If everyone was like me, I'd find it easy to get along with people and I wouldn't find them so difficult. This would be because I would know what they wanted, and appreciate how they express themselves around things they find difficult. I'd know what was important to them and I'd understand that they, like me, found it hard to display certain sides of themselves.

Crucially I'd know that their exterior 'show' does not represent all that they are. I would know that they are not the sum of their behaviours – and give them the same understanding and forgiveness that I give myself.

On the other hand, if no one in the world was like me, my life would be simple too. In that case, I'd know that, unlike me with my layers and complexities, confusions and weaknesses, what you see is what you get. These non-me's don't have tough stuff inside, *they* are congruent and manage themselves perfectly all the time. I'd be the only complex person in the world and everyone else would be saying exactly what they meant, directly and assertively.

I suggest that everyone is the same. And everyone is different and potentially difficult. The old saw about people being made up of layers is true, as even Shrek knows, but what are the layers made of? The diagram on the next page proposes a new model of looking at people and our interactions.



At our centre is the soul, spirit, humanity – call it what you will. Around this we develop needs to nurture and support that core –

physical needs of course, but my interest here is in our emotional needs, which I believe can be summed up as:

HUMAN NEEDS
To be valued
To be listened to (not the same as agreed with)
To love and be loved
To grow
To belong
To find meaning
To be in control of ourselves

We develop or imbibe beliefs and values which, in theory, will enable us to meet our needs. It is our - often unidentified and unexamined - beliefs and values that give our interactions their unique distortion, and form our 'culture'. 'Culture' is what influences our perspective and what allows us to be different from someone else. Our beliefs and values, our culture, set the context and rules within which our interactions with others take place.

Where our beliefs and values collide is in our behaviour and this is where our conflicts and difficulties arise.

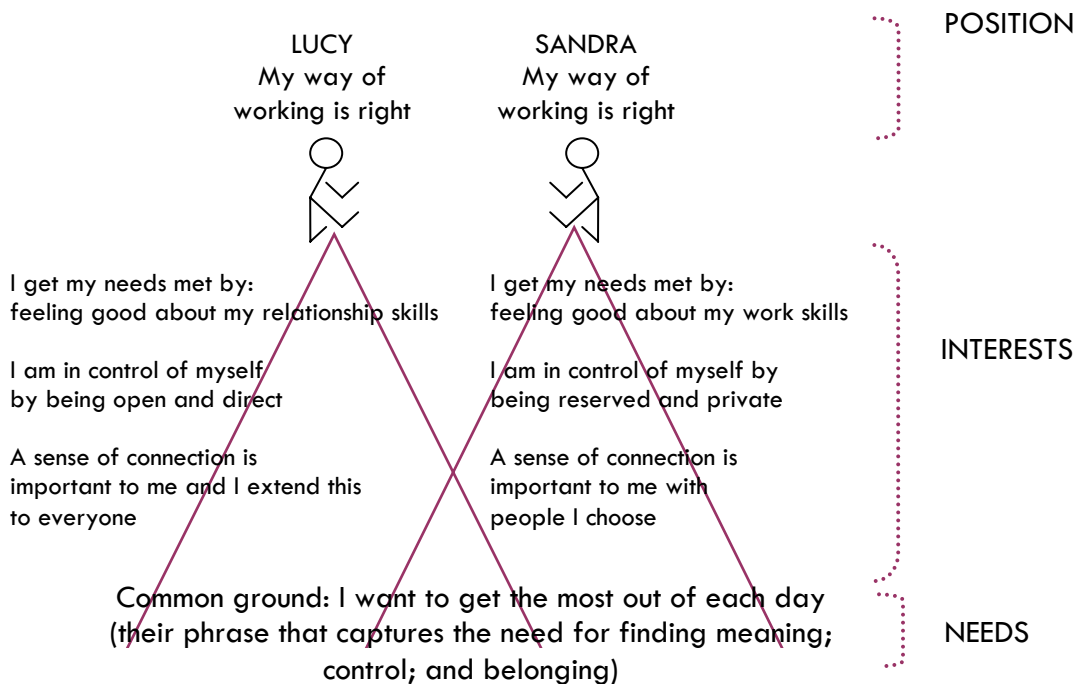
Consider this example. Lucy doesn't like Sandra. She thinks she is boring, standoffish, and stupid. It wouldn't surprise us to learn that Sandra doesn't like Lucy much either, and thinks she is arrogant, lazy

and intrusive. Sandra doesn't like working with that 'difficult' Lucy.

They would both say they are very different from each other. They would both feel affronted if you suggested they had 'common ground'. By talking to Lucy, you might hear that Lucy values being part of a group; she values connection, she believes that 'you only go round once' and wants to get the most out of each day. She is annoyed by much of Sandra's behaviour and is able to denigrate Sandra's 'personality' on the basis that Sandra is 'wrong', and 'stupid'.

If you talk to Sandra, you might hear that she values her independence, her individuality. She believes that being focussed and working hard is the right thing to do, and doing the right thing makes her feel good. She likes to go home having achieved something.

This is illustrated in the figure below.



What they have in common is the need to 'get the most out of each day'. Where they differ is their perspective and interpretation of *how* to get the most from each day. Once they can see their relationship this way, they no longer have to compete for whose behaviour is right, and they can work with each other with genuine tolerance based on understanding, rather than forced tolerance based on a belief that 'tolerance' is a good characteristic that somehow makes them better than the other (which is a version of continuing to fight but in a more subtle way).

When learners are being difficult, it is their behaviours which are challenging. In an unsophisticated response, we are seduced into competing behaviours. We label their behaviours as unacceptable, unprofessional, downright horrible, and then go on from this to label the person – she is lazy, he is stubborn, she's racist. We are now challenging their beliefs and values and shouldn't be surprised when they object and defend themselves in just the same way that we do when we're under attack.

Our own behaviours change too, when we find ourselves in a dance

with someone very different from us. Our ability to communicate shuts down; we stop listening, we stop trying to understand and instead start to engage in evaluating their wrongness over our rightness. We put increasing energy into proving our position, and focus on whatever we can to back our position up.

So, what do we do with the wolves, sharks, rabbits, and ostriches we meet? We can engage in our own shark-like behaviours and attack back; stick our head in the sand and hope they go away; or buddy-up in a phoney, Labrador manner. These are all too common responses when we find ourselves faced with a tricky customer. However, all too commonly, they don't work, and only result in a bigger face-off, or in our not getting our own needs met.

Fighting, avoiding, and compromising don't work. We need to find a way of dancing with them; connecting and sharing the experience.

We can do this by following 6 basic dance steps – which you can vary and adjust according to your dance partner.

Six moves for succesful dancing

Identify what you are feeling and own it

1. Describe in neutral language what you are experiencing
2. Invite clarification so as to build mutual understanding
3. Create a face saving opportunity
4. Move the conversation away from positions and towards interests and needs
5. Reframe the problem as a goal to be achieved jointly rather than a personal difference

I'm going to work through six moves using an example from my own training practice where a participant, Ann, kept interrupting and challenging me, taking the programme off on a tangent, and asking questions that I was going to

cover later in the 6 day course. She was disagreeing with me about subject X and seeking a discussion about our different views. I had to do something or I would end up hooked by her behaviour and entering the conflict zone.

Step 1: Identify what you are feeling and own it

Not owning your own feelings might look like:	Owning your own feelings this could look like:
Can I ask you to limit your interventions for a while please, X isn't something that is on the programme for the day, and with you dominating the session at the moment it's preventing me from pressing on with the programme	I'm starting to worry about how I'm going to cover the programme. How important is it to you that we discuss X now, is it something we can explore together later in the day perhaps?

One of the hardest challenges we face when we find ourselves in a dance with a 'difficult' person, is to know what our feelings are – we often only focus on the feeling of annoyance or frustration that is actually only the signal that your

needs are under pressure. It is often hard to locate our feelings because of three main influences on us.

First, we have grasped the idea that it is good to 'talk about our feelings'. In any situation you can hear people

tossing the phrase 'I feel...' around. This is a clever device, because we have an awareness that we have a right to our feelings, and they cannot be argued with. We believe we are being open about our feelings, making our feelings clear to others and sticking up for our rights. But often we're not – more often than not, we're cheating. We mix up feelings with opinions, views, beliefs, prejudices, positions. So someone who says 'I feel you're unprofessional' is not giving their feeling at all, but a view, indeed an interpretation. If the party on the receiving end says, 'No, I'm not', they appear to be arguing with that other person's feelings – which isn't a good thing to do.

make me feel xxx' is all too common, and the popular yet signally unhelpful question, 'how does that make you feel' is trotted out without thought, reiterating the notion that people and things 'make us' feel in a certain way. When you find yourself saying 'I feel...', make sure you give an emotion which can be felt, rather than a thought! Some discipline in this alone will make all your communications clearer and easier.

Finally, we don't know what we are feeling in the first place. Emotional literacy is all very aspirational, but let's try and create a decent lexicon to start with. Have a go at writing a list of 30 emotions - it's harder than you think.

Second, we make other people "responsible" for our feelings – 'you

Step 2 Describe in neutral language what you are experiencing

<p>Giving an example of her behaviour using interpretation might look like this:</p>	<p>Giving an example of her behaviour using descriptive neutral language might look like this:</p>
<p>This is clearly a major issue for you and something you want to bring to the table today; however you must understand that I have to get through the programme and there are other people to consider here</p>	<p>I can see you have things you want to discuss about X; I have heard you say, that X doesn't relate to Y in your experience. I also notice that for the last several minutes only you and I have been talking and the rest of the group has gone quiet.</p>

When we give interpretive information, it comes from our own internal version of reality, and our own set of values and beliefs. We are working from our assumptions

and presenting them as 'facts', and we are in danger of attacking their own needs, which will only exacerbate the situation.

The problem with taking an interpretive approach rather than a descriptive one, is that we open ourselves to challenge. You know you've spoken for yourself and from your own needs, and this invites a

different type of conversation, a dialogue, rather than an argument about who is 'right and wrong'. It allows for a sharing of information, openly and without blame, and it sets up a dialogue about needs.

Step 3 Invite clarification so as to build mutual understanding

Competing for who is right and wrong might have looked like this	Inviting clarification to build mutual understanding might have looked like this
<p>You've spent the last 10 minutes trying to get me to work through your concern about X, but you must agree that I have to deliver the programme as promised so that the others here get the chance to learn what they came for. If you only want to explore X, then I suggest we take that up outside this session.</p>	<p>I'm not sure that I can find a way to properly spend time discussing X, and make sure that I have covered all the programme at the same time. I am starting to get a sense that perhaps X is the main thing you came here to discuss, and maybe you'd hoped this course could give you an answer on that particular issue. Is that a correct impression, or am I misunderstanding?</p>

The learner has been invited to respond to my feedback, rather than argue with my opinion. I am inviting an ongoing dialogue rather than pushing her into a corner – yes or no, do it my way or not. I am also

sticking to what is important to me rather than using inflammatory phrases like, 'you must agree', which leave her feeling bullied and unable to disagree without sounding unfeeling to the group.

Step 4 Create a face saving opportunity

Pushing her into a win-lose corner might have looked like this	Creating a face-saving opportunity might have looked like this
<p>I'm sure you're a reasonable person and you see that I need to make sure the group is happy</p>	<p>People often find that the programme sparks something for them which they want to explore in depth; I guess this is really important for you</p>

Shame can be a deeply uncomfortable feeling, and if we work towards exposing someone else's error or catch them out in a lie, we risk alienating them. If you want to keep someone dancing close to you then help them towards a

graceful exit or way of moving on. Decide which you want – to keep this relationship working, or to win? If you want to 'win', you may have to do that at the cost of the other person's regard for you; they will leave the dance.

Step 5 Move the conversation away from positions and towards interests and needs

<p>Focussing on positions (behaviours) might have looked like</p>	<p>Moving towards needs might have looked like</p>
<p>I can't spend the time you want on this. I'm sorry you feel like that, I am happy to talk with you during the break about the wider implications of X.</p>	<p>What would be different for you if we were to spend time looking at this</p>

If we engage in positional exchanges, we resort to (subtle) put downs, we claim our power and rights, and shut down communication. Notice the "apology" which will at once be recognised as the verbal trick it is, for positioning ourselves as decent, and 'feeling' people, when in fact the real meaning is 'I'm in control here, if you're upset you've only yourself to

blame, and I will use a 'process' (a side meeting) to resolve this in such a way as meets my need.

Sometimes when we are working at positional levels, trying to dominate the dance so to speak, we might offer a compromise. This often fails, because while it can feel like a 'give' to one person, it doesn't seem like a 'get' to the other.

Step 6 Reframe the problem as a goal to be achieved jointly rather than a personal difference

<p>Keeping the issue as one of personal difference which only one of us can solve might look like this</p>	<p>Reframing the problem as a goal to be achieved jointly rather than a personal difference might look like this</p>
<p>I've made my decision, and we're moving on to the group exercise as planned</p>	<p>Okay, so we need to find a way to make sure we cover the programme fully, discuss X, and involve the group in thinking about that. Any ideas about how we might do that?</p>

In conclusion, having conversations with “difficult people” is about locating our and their needs, rather

than walking away with a confirmed opinion that anyone who is different to us is just plain difficult.

about the author

Katherine Graham has worked in the field of dispute resolution for over 15 years’ as a mediator and trainer. She has mediated on the BBC Learning Zone and has given keynote speeches on conflict management at The MOD’s Equal Opportunities Conference, Women in Business Annual conference and Getting Beyond Conflict, a national conference on workplace dispute resolution. Katherine joined Conflict Management Plus in 1992 and was made a director in the company in 1998. Prior to this she managed teams in publishing and communications departments for major national charities including The Work Foundation, the RNID and the King’s Fund. She was the inaugural Chair of the Institute of Conflict Management.

Publications

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