

Working with Difficult People and Maintaining Professionalism

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Hello, everybody and welcome to today's webinar, Working with Difficult People and Maintaining Professionalism. I'm Susannah Gynther from Wolters Kluwer CCH Learning and I will be your moderator for today.

I have a few quick pointers before we get started. If you're having sound problems and can actually hear me, please toggle between audio and phone. Hopefully, you can see this instruction on the screen. If you are looking for your PowerPoint for today's session, it's saved in the Handout section on your GoToWebinar panel. And just a reminder that shortly after the session, you will receive an email letting you know the e-learning recording is ready to be viewed.

You can ask questions at any point during the presentation by sending them through the questions box. I will collect those questions and ask them at the Q&A towards the end of today's presentation. CCH Learning also offers a subscription service, which many people have termed Netflix for Professionals. It provides members with access to our entire library of recordings as well as live webinars for a competitive flat fee. That's for over 500 hours of content. For CPD purposes, your viewing is logged automatically.

Your presenter today is Deborah Assheton, who is the owner and director of The Amplify Group, a business that uses best practise frameworks to deliver very practical, high-impact leadership change and interpersonal skill building workshops, coaching and leadership programmes. Deb's passion is to help professionals deepen their self-awareness and embed behaviour that creates new levels of performance, engagement and results for them.

Deb offers executive coaching, leadership development programmes, short and public workshops. Deb has over 20 years' experience in executive leadership positions where she has managed very large teams of more than 3,000 people for some of Australia's best known and highly regarded companies, including Vodafone, Bupa and OPSM.

Deb holds a BA in Psychology and a master's of Organisational Coaching from Sydney University. Deb's client span the retail and wholesale property management, banking, legal, technology, transport and motoring, and telecommunications industries. I'll now pass you over to Deb to commence today's presentation.

Deborah Assheton:

Thanks very much, Susannah. Welcome, everyone. I'm just going to get set up here. So Susannah, just confirming you can see my screen and that it's up.

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Yep. They're perfect.

Deborah Assheton:

Awesome. Well, I know we've got a lot of people joining us today and I know that this is a very important and very hot, timely topic. As Susannah said, what we're talking about today is how do we work with difficult people and maintain some professionalism? In other words, how do we work with difficult people and not lose it while we do?

We are going to have a little bit of fun with this topic, and at the same time what I'm aiming to do is to provide you with the start of some really practical things that you can do to maintain professionalism around difficult people. We're assuming difficult people in the workplace for the purposes of this webinar, and the goal is going to be not to change the difficult people but to have strategies and ways, behavioural ways that you can maintain professionalism in the face of the difficulty.

What we're going to be talking about today is what makes a person difficult and why is it so hard to deal with them? How do we respond to difficulty? And then I want to spend the bulk of the time talking about ways that we can stay constructive, professional, healthy, and emotionally intelligent in the face of difficult people because that's really the challenge here.

We're going to look at some research and what I want to do with the research is just take you through a couple of pieces of research here. There's actually quite a lot of research about the characteristics and character traits that make somebody difficult, and there's a few reasons for that. One is unfortunately, difficult people are kind of everywhere. It doesn't mean everyone's difficult. That's not the case.

But we are seeing and research is showing that across multiple areas of society, difficult people are being more readily reported. We're seeing a lot more difficulty in managing employees. We're seeing difficulty with customers in the general public. We're seeing difficulty and a whole range of difficulties increase across the board.

Difficult people are out there and they're in many areas of society and certainly in many workplaces. This piece of research found that the most common characteristics of difficult people are these and that many difficult people will have not just one, but three or more up to seven of these characteristics. And this is a really depressing list.

A difficult person generally is going to be delivering poor job performance. They don't work well with others, they don't respond to coaching. They're resistant to change. There's often a negative attitude which is about things that aren't working, won't work, that the glass is half empty, that there's nothing that can be done. There's really defeatist negative attitude.

There's often a very poor work ethic. When we talk about a poor work ethic, it's different to job performance. Somebody who's difficult will have a work ethic that's very, very self-interested. They've got a lot of rules around what they won't do. They don't think about the team or the greater good or what will work for others. It's me, me, me, me, me typically and how do I get away with the minimum? So that's the psyche, very difficult.

They often display arrogant behaviours. There's very poor communication skills. We often see a lot of passive-aggressive behaviour or avoidant behaviour generally. There's not a lot of maturity in the communication skills. There's not the ability to balance multiple perspectives. It's usually one, which is about me.

There's often a mismatch of skills and there's often a yes-but kind of mentality, which is yes, but it wasn't me. Yes, but I didn't have what I needed. Yes, but it was too hard. Yes, but there wasn't enough time. So it's this kind of excuse almost, if I put it bluntly, a bit of a victim mentality. As you can see from this list, very, very difficult.

Other research shows that the character traits that underpin the behaviour also share some common themes and a lot of the research on difficult people shares these things. We see this level of behaviour. So that earlier research was from the Centre for Creative Leadership, and then we see character traits that are also quite common. This research is from the University of Georgia.

Callousness, grandiosity. Grandiosity is an aspect of narcissism. "I'm better than everyone else. My needs are more important. I need to be considered first. I'm special." Aggressiveness, which can be that kind of passive-aggressive or it can be just outright aggressive behaviour in the workplace. We don't often see violent behaviour but we can see desk slamming or we can see a fist in there or we can see finger pointing. We can see these aggressive behaviours.

Suspiciousness, manipulation, domineering, defensiveness and risk-taking. And the risk-taking is not healthy considered risk-taking. It's about getting away with things. It's about cutting corners, it's about subversive behaviour. It's that kind of subversive, immature risk-taking that we see in difficult people. When you look at this list, it is extremely difficult to work with people who display these character traits and the subsequent characteristic behaviours.

So I want to ask you, what are some of the impacts that you feel when you're working with a difficult person? The way I've worded this question, it's a free text poll. So Susannah, if you could open it up please. I'd love to know, I'd love to understand the impact on you. How does working with a difficult person affect you?

Do you feel depleted, frustrated, exhausted? Do you feel like you have this murderous rage? Do you feel like you want to just throw your hands up in the air? What is the impact on you? I think this is a really important question, because there will no doubt be an impact on you because you are not a difficult person. I'm going to assume that you don't walk around with the character traits and the characteristics that we just talked about, or certainly not as part of your everyday personality.

If you are a constructive person... Sorry, Susannah?

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I was just going to say if people could put the answer, just their thoughts into the questions box would be easiest. Just if they can put a few of their words into their questions box and we'll take them from there. Thank you.

Deborah Assheton:

Terrific. Thanks. If you are a constructive person, and by that which we're going to talk about more in a moment, you're a constructive person, so you want to do a good job. You want to work well with others. You generally like the people you work with. You have goals. You want to achieve for your clients and your customers. Then working with someone who is kind of the antithesis of that and of those things is very, very difficult.

There's not just a disconnect, but it's almost like a tug of war when we're working with someone who's the antithesis of wanting to do good work with other people. So Susannah, maybe if you could read out some of the words that are in there, that'd be great, please.

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Yes, certainly. We've got quite a few here. Just hold on. I'm just trying to make it a little bigger so I can see them all. So Andre says belittled, disempowered, frustrated like you are hitting your head against a brick wall. Kalia says inferior. Annie says annoyed, like I want to avoid them. Emily mentions decreased effectiveness and performance.

Lauren says defeated, irritated, infuriated. Allison says feeling unapproachable, creates frustration, nervous, panicky. Lots of people say frustrated. Melissa says, also manipulated. Jaslyn mentions opinions are not being heard.

Deborah Assheton:

I want to say wonderful list. It's a very extensive list. And look, it's very difficult working with... I mean, they're difficult because it is very difficult to work with them. And all of the things that you've talked about in terms of the impact on you are again what the research shows.

Research on problem employees, which is really difficult people shows that for leaders, if you've got a difficult person in your team who's not addressed, not dealt with, there are enormous impacts. There's reduced leadership effectiveness. There's reputational damage for you as the leader. There's reduced desire to stay in the department.

The people leave the team because there's a difficult person in the team. So that wanting to get away from the difficult person is the most natural kind of experience in the world. People leave organisations to get away from difficult people, and you also as a leader seems less capable. You're less likely to be promoted if there's a difficult person running wild in your team.

For the individuals who work with difficult people, there are also impacts, which is what many of you have just called out. The environment is very much a lower trust when there's even just one difficult person in the team. If there's more than one, that's generally what creates a toxic environment, what we call toxic environment where everything about it is struggling.

There's reduced innovation. There's definitely reduced output. There's disrupted decision-making or very little decision-making. There's reputational damage for the team because we become associated with the difficult person. We're kind of guilty by association. And there's also over time, there's an enormous buildup of conflict.

Difficult people tend to go hand in hand with unexpressed conflict because we feel exasperated, exhausted, frustrated, belittled, all of the things that you just said. That creates internal conflict and conflict between us, between you and the difficult person. And obviously that can build.

Working with difficult people is really tough, really, really tough. And you know how we normally say, "It's not you, it's me." I want to reassure you in this webinar and say, "It's not you, it's them. It's not you." Actually how you feel is a result of the person that you are working with. It's them.

And so let's have a look at what this means for us. I want to talk about some truths and then we'll talk about some opportunities. The truth is that you cannot change a difficult person. You were born with many, many powers and you are amazing, powerful human being, but you don't have the power to change another person, let alone a difficult one. It's just not in your repertoire.

And wishing them away, which is often what we do. We say, oh, let's say I'm a difficult person. We say, "Oh, I do hope that Deb's sick and not able to come to work today. Or I hope that Deb gets another job, or I hope that somebody fires Deb. Surely she's got to be fired soon. Or I hope that Deb wins lotto so that she doesn't need to work anymore and she just resigns," right?

We wish them away. Now that is harmful for you for a couple of reasons. One is you are telling yourself that you need to be rescued from the difficult person and they may get fired, they may win lotto. But if you wait for that, you can be waiting years. You can give up years in this wishful thinking. We need to arrest that pattern.

Number three, you're not powerless. You have options and choices. You don't need to be rescued from a difficult person. And number four, where you exercise choice and you decide to get better at responding to a difficult person, you actually build robust skills that benefit your entire life.

The truth is you have no capacity to change a difficult person. You may have the power to fire them, you may. But in order to be able to effectively fire someone who's difficult, you've still got to get better at responding to them. We can't respond from a place of depletion, frustration, intimidation, feeling smaller. We have to be in a robust place to effectively deal with a difficult person.

There's some truths that we have to accept, and then we can look at the opportunities, which is where I want to focus on today. Opportunity number one is that the difficult person really tests and strengthens you. It's not a pleasant test. It's not one that you probably woke up this morning and thought, "I really want to be tested by that person."

But the truth is we are tested with our capacity to respond is tested, our capacity for frustration and tolerance is tested, and there's an opportunity for us to get better at those things. When I say get better at tolerating, I don't mean tolerating wrong behaviour or difficult behaviour. Get better at responding to it. That's where we can be strengthened.

Number two, we learn how to manage our boundaries. Now, I'm going to spend a bit of time talking about boundaries, but fundamentally, the reason why we feel so angry and so frustrated and so fed up with difficult people is because they cross our boundaries. It is not okay to belittle you. It is not okay to have a poor work ethic. It is not okay to be aggressive in the workplace. It is not okay to be passive-aggressive.

Those behaviours are when we say something's not okay, they are crossing a boundary. And so when we work with a difficult person, they can often be crossing our boundaries and we're just left a bit gobsmacked and a bit shell-shocked by dealing with them because they're just constantly overriding boundaries.

Part of what I want to talk to you about today is how do you get better at managing your boundaries so that you're less likely to be steamrolled and pushed to the point where you become difficult yourself, where you behave in a way that you don't like and you later regret.

Number three, what we want to do is exercise clear choice over our environment and our life. We do live in a democracy. We can change our situation if we want to. I agree, you're probably thinking, "I shouldn't have to, Deb. I like everything else about where I work." At the same time I agree with that. And at the same time, if your capacity to manage a difficult person and respond to them is limited or they're your boss for example, then actually leaving the organisation may be the best decision you can make. So, we'll talk about that.

And what we ultimately want to get to, given that difficult people unfortunately do span every area of society. We want to be able to respond to them in ways where they have less impact on us. We can see the difficulty, we can see the difficult person, we get it, but they don't derail us. And we can actually make a choice about where and how we want to respond to them without being depleted, exhausted, the little smashed around by their behaviour.

These are the four opportunities I want to talk about today, and I'm going to sort of go around in a few circles because all of the opportunities kind of blend together. There's a lot of crossover between them. Suffice to say, I guess the takeout here is what you cannot change.

We have to accept we cannot change them, is that we need to accept where we have our power and where we have the capacity to create change and that's in ourselves. We need to take responsibility for getting better at responding to difficult people if we want to maintain professionalism. We can't let them drag us down.

Let's have a look. I'm going to start with some aspects of self-awareness, and those of you that have attended my workshops before will probably have seen this model, which is called Above and Below the Line. It's a great model for looking at where you are, and it's very pertinent for dealing with difficult people. I want to talk about that. Then we're going to talk about boundaries and making choices about where you respond from.

Now obviously this is a really big topic, so I can't cover everything in an hour, but we do have another workshop in July, which is sort of how to have conversations with difficult people, a bit more advanced than this one. We'll be addressing conversations with them in that one. But this one is about the fundamentals, the foundations of making yourself more robust in the face of difficult people.

Let's have a look at this model. This model is called Above and Below the Line. It's not my model, it's not a new model. You can Google it and there's a few videos on it around, but it's an excellent model for understanding whether we are in a constructive space or whether we're in a defensive/difficult space.

This model asks us to imagine that we each have a line and the line, we can be thinking or behaving below the line, or we could be thinking and behaving above the line. We could also be thinking below the line, but behaving above the line. I'll talk about that.

This is a model that's about us. When we are below the line, we are behaving defensively. We are demonstrating often the characteristics of a difficult person. We are blaming, we are justifying, we are manipulating, we are defending. We are not in a great place and we are not behaving well.

Now most of you will be below the line only a very small percentage of the time. A constructive person lives most of their life above the line where you are learning, you're taking responsibility, you are taking accountability, you're reflecting on your behaviour, you are trying to get better at what you do and better at working with others.

And you demonstrate awareness and vulnerability and not vulnerability as in, I often say as in a crying puddle on the floor. That not that kind of vulnerability, but the vulnerability to say, "I don't know what to do here, or I made a mistake, or I'm not sure how we should progress, or I'm finding this situation really difficult." It's that kind of open honesty.

When we're below the line, we are avoiding any responsibility. We are blaming others. We are stuck in a space of it's not me for these reasons. And of course, we've got lots of different ways that we demonstrate defensiveness.

When we're above the line, we are seeing ourselves in the story, we are taking responsibility. We're saying, "I need to do this differently, or we could have done that differently or we need to change what we're doing." You're active in the space when you're above the line, and this is you at your best.

And for everybody on this call, you probably live the bulk of your life above the line, but you probably have moments where you go below it, and most of us do. And this frankly is a, I've been doing this work for 20 years and I have moments where I'm below the line and I know it. 20 years down the track, you could still be working on this. It's life skills.

When we're below the line, we're often in a space of reactivity. We get stuck in the drama. It over time can make us very sick and we don't grow. People who spend a lot of time below the line are really immature because there's no learning, there's no responsibilities, there's no growth. When we're above the line, we're growing, we're challenged. It can often create anxiety and it can be difficult, but we've got these great goals that we're chasing.

Below the line is defensive and above the line is constructive. Now if you think about the character traits of people who are difficult, they are all below the line, every single one, both at the characteristics behaviour level and then also at the trait character level. Narcissism, grandiosity, self-interest, manipulation, aggression. These are all below the line behaviours.

Difficult people are below the line most, if not all the time. The hallmark of a difficult person is that everything they say and do will come back to self-interest. And that's really tough, really tough. The hallmark of somebody above the line is that they are in the story, they're trying to get better, they're working with others. There's a positive, powerful energy from somebody who's above the line. And there is a self-interested, really anchored energy that's hard to move when you're dealing with someone who's below the line.

Difficult people are almost always below the line and below the line pretty constantly. And these are some of the behaviours that means that you see in the workplace. They defend their opinion, they gossip, they manipulate the politics, they operate in a silo, they make things personal. This is a poll that I use when I do this workshop in organisations and I talk about when people are below the line, how do they behave? And many people will tick all these boxes and they'll say, "But that's how I get things done."

And often, invariably, they're the difficult people. The constructive people will say, "Well, I do these things sometimes and I know they're not right. So how do I get myself out of these patterns of behaviours and how do I make myself more effective?"

Difficult people do come to their job doing these things a lot. And what we need to make sure of is that you don't go below the line in response to them, which is typically how it works. When you are somebody who's constructive and you're positive and you're doing good work and you're in the face, you're working with someone who's very difficult, often what happens is we start to feel frustrated. We start to feel exhausted and depleted, and we go below the line in response to them.

We see them behaving below the line and we get angry, we get frustrated, we get emotional, we get fed up, we're just seething and we are below the line. And then of course, if we're both below the line, the difficult person wins the day because they will no doubt be better at being below the line than you are. We don't want to go below the line.

Let's have a look at you. When you have moments where you're below the line, what are some of the ways that you behave? Again, this is a free text response. If you could just put the answers in the same question box that you did before, that would be great. When I'm below the line, some of the ways that I behave is I get quite narky and aggressive. I become very direct in the way that I communicate.

I experience extreme levels of frustration. I want to explode and I get very short with my family. I tend to find it really hard to calm down. Something that happened a day and a half ago, I'll still be in it in my body even though it happened 36 hours ago.

When I'm below the line, there's some of the behaviours that I exhibit and things that I feel. I'd love to know how you behave when you are below the line. And this is a really important part of getting better at responding to difficult people is knowing how you go below the line and starting to really own that yourself.

I might open that up, Susannah, if you could just read some of the responses, that'd be great.

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Certainly. We've got Melissa says that she's defensive and keeps arguing. Lisa mentions they can be combative and aggressive. Peter says I tend to get easily upset and remember things. Andre says, they bottle it all up and ignore the difficult person. Dave says, they become disengaged. Annie mentions reactive, defensive, stay angry, that sort of passive-aggressive and Lauren mentions lacking patience. And Emily says express moral outrage excessively and retreat.

Deborah Assheton:

I love it, Emily. Look, I can resonate with every single response and I'm sure you all can too. It is really hard. I think it's one of life's great challenges is how do I stay above the line in the face of behaviour that's below it? And that can be from an individual, that can be from a team, it can be from a leader, it can be from an organisation. It could certainly happen in politics, but we have people who are below the line and therefore difficult and self-interested in every area of society.

And one of the great challenges is developing the thinking and the behavioural skills and then the conversation skills to stay above the line in the face of it. You see, if we are all below the line, if we go below the line in response, then there is no constructive person in the room and the difficult person wins because we have been dragged down to their level.

That's the risk. On top of all the other risks that the research talked about that we talked about 20 minutes ago, the risk is that you get dragged below the line and your behaviour changes.

This model is great in that you can think about where am I? Right now when I'm seething and I'm expressing moral outrage and I'm bottling it all up and I'm doing all these things, I'm actually below the line. And in my thinking, I'm below the line, not necessarily in my behaviour, right? They're two separate things.

I can be thinking below the line about somebody, but I can develop the capacity to not act on that. At the moment, you might be acting on it, I don't know. But we are going to talk about how do we do this.

When we're above the line, we are confronting the unacceptable behaviour from above the line. We are setting explicit standards. We are exercising choice over our environment. We are giving ourselves space. We're giving ourselves the capacity to relax, exercise, energetically disconnecting from the difficult person. We're bolstering our boundaries and recovery. We are demonstrating true leadership of ourselves and others. When we're above the line, the difficult person does not drag us down. They have no power over us.

When we're below the line in response to a difficult person, we often, and this is some of the things you talked about, we get progressively angry, angrier, more frustrated and agitated. We start wishing the person away. We imagine things might happen to them that take them out of our environment. We manipulate situations to make the person look bad. We start gossiping about them incessantly.

And some of you might've had the experience. I know I have once had the experience where I worked with a leader who was in a very powerful position, who was a very difficult person, and I became obsessed with him. I just never stopped talking about him. I was so outraged by his behaviour, I couldn't put it down, I couldn't let it go. And the next thing I knew, I was just thinking about him all the time. It was horrible.

We can become obsessed and then we start to avoid the person completely. And so there's a public rift which starts to affect our reputation. We start complaining to all of our family and friends about this person, and we start to blame the person for everything that's going wrong.

And so we can get quite out of line ourselves. And we don't want to be here because when we are in this space and we are feeling this way, we start to make very poor decisions about our behaviour. Our level of what's acceptable starts to drop. We become exhausted and sick. It's a very unhealthy, uncomfortable way to be. This is not where we want to stay, and it is certainly not where we want to respond from.

What I recommend that you do as an activity is you can just get a blank piece of paper, and you can draw a line and you can write down where the ways, all the ways that you are below the line about a difficult person. Just get it out of your system and write it down. Use your swear words. You're not sharing it with anyone. It's for you and it's about getting it out of your head and onto a piece of paper.

Now, if your difficult person is a true nightmare, you might need an A3 piece of paper and you draw the line at the top so that you've got the whole piece of paper to just get it out. Consider it like a bit of an energetic, emotional, intellectual purge onto a piece of paper and you write down everything that is difficult about this person and how you feel. You've got to start to release this, which is what we're going to talk about now.

And you can talk about all the ways that you are below the line in response to them. The most important starting point here is recognising that because you can't change them, you have to get better at responding. And the foundation of that, of anything beyond that point is you staying above the line. You can't manage out a difficult person if you are below the line. You end up making mistakes and you are the one that ends up with reputational damage or warnings or whatever it might be. You can't manage your health and wellbeing if you're below the line on this person. You end up obsessed like I did, and then I started behaving really badly in that example.

And so everything about you responding better and maintaining your professionalism starts with you staying above the line. And that is where you have your power. You are powerless below the line because you're stuck. When you're above the line, this is where we find our power. The goal is to stay out of the shark tank. It's to stay away energetically, emotionally. And from your thinking point of view, stay out of the difficult behaviour and sphere.

This is a skill set. It's difficult to learn. It takes time. And what I want to do is talk about some basics that you can start using five minutes after you get off this call. And when you next deal with your difficult person or difficult people, straight away, you have some tactics and strategies that can help you think better and start to behave better. The goal is to stay above the line. It is not to change your difficult person.

Now the capacity to stay above the line requires that you can self-regulate. You have to be able to regulate your frustration, your moral outrage, your anger, your exhaustion, your fed-upness, all of those things that it's quite right to feel because boundaries have been crossed. But you cannot let any of those be in the driver's seat of how you behave. You have to be able to feel them and think them not have them drive your behaviour.

And that capacity is an aspect of emotional intelligence. It's called self-regulate. And aside from self-awareness is the foundation of all emotional intelligence. If you can't regulate your behaviour, you end up becoming a difficult person. We don't want that.

Let's have a look at self-regulation. And I have found personally that this work is really good well beyond dealing with difficult people, but to actually understand how I exercise, how I eat, how I take on big goals. There's a lot of really great nuggets in this content generally.

Self-regulation is actually the capacity. It's kind of the combination of two capacities, self-control and self-discipline. Now we often use these terms interchangeably, but they're very different skill sets. Self-control is our ability to resist impulse, whereas self-discipline is our ability to repeat desired behaviour.

Now let me talk about the difference. If your difficult person has a jibe at you in a meeting that is unfair, unwarranted, below the line, horrible, you are exercising self-control to not respond in that moment. So the impulse to go, "How dare you..." That's an aspect of self-control. If you lack self-control, then the difficult person can always bring you down to their level because you just have to respond.

You cannot resist the impulse to have a dig. You cannot resist the impulse to gossip about them. You cannot resist the impulse to start to undermine them when they're not in the room because you're so angry and you're so frustrated your impulse control goes down. We have to be able to manage the impulse.

Inside our head, in our thinking, we might be thinking, I would love to rip into you right now verbally and challenge that because you are full of it. But actually, the capacity to think that but not do it is self-control. Self-discipline is our ability to repeat desired behaviour. It is our ability to go to the gym for three or four times a week.

It is our ability to take ourselves off for a walk when we are fired up. It is our ability to prepare for encounters with a difficult person so that we are at our best. These are aspects of discipline. We can be very high in control, very low in discipline, or we can be high in discipline, low in control. For me personally, I find discipline easier than I do impulse control.

Actually we need both to be able to respond to a difficult person. And where these are low... Well, sorry, let me take a step back. Difficult people tend to erode these. What was once easy, over months of working with a difficult person, it becomes a lot harder to exercise control and discipline. They erode it.

And we unfortunately through lack of awareness or because we don't have the skillset, we let it build up. Our self-control and our self-discipline slowly diminishes inch by inch, millimetre by millimetre after months of working with a difficult person or years. And then we have an emotional outburst or we have some kind of emotional reaction, which is the result of an enormous but unseen buildup.

Let me talk to you about how that works and then I'll come back and we'll pull it all together. Our capacity to process difficult emotions is a really important part of how we respond to difficult people. Because they're crossing boundaries and they're behaving in ways that we find unacceptable, but a thousand different reasons unacceptable, we are constantly absorbing not only their behaviour, but our reaction to it. We get angry. We get upset by their behaviour. We think it's wrong, so we are ethical, unethical. There's a whole heap of judgements that come up.

Now when it comes to responding to difficult emotions, we really only have four options or four categories of option. And I want to talk about them now and I'm going to ask you a poll. There's really only four buckets that you can use to process difficult emotions. You can repress like this little person here. You can shove it all, push it all down, ignore it, ignore it, ignore it, push it in the closet, and then eventually end up like this person here trying to keep the closet door closed.

And I know a couple of you said that that's what you do. You can let it build up and then explode. Explosion is where we get angry. We lose it, we get aggressive ourselves, we find ourselves raising our voice and behaving in ways that are not normal for us. Our frustration levels are up here and we're steaming and we take it out on the dog or a family or whatever.

These are examples of exploding. And actually they're both, there's kind of health issues that are associated with these emotional patterns as well that go with these. These are very physical reactions. They're not just happening in our mind.

The other two are the healthy options. We can express how we're feeling and we can experience the feeling. Now I've got little meditating person here. It's not the only way to experience. I'm going to talk more about that now. And expressing is about verbalising and sharing so that we are processing in ways that are healthy, so we're not at any time ignoring.

I'm going to talk more about this, but I'd love to know what's your go-to behaviour? And again, you can just respond. Susannah will open the poll. You can just choose one, so just choose the big one.

For me, historically, my go-to behaviour would be, explode. I'm not really a repressor. I kind of have a short fuse, so I'm an exploder unfortunately. But now after doing this work for a long time, I am firmly in the space of express and experience and it's very, very rare for me to explode. And I can feel a pattern of explosion happening and I just move into express and experience as I need to.

And so we can exercise control over these responses or options in the way that we process difficult emotions, because obviously A and D are not good for us. And there are actually both below the line.

Susannah, if you could share...

CCH Learning:

Yeah.

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah, if you could share what the responses are, that'd be great. I'm just going to write this down.

CCH Learning:

No, that's okay. We've got a few people just still voting, so I just thought I'd give them a few more seconds to get their votes in. Okay, so what I'm going to do is I'm going to close it and let's have a little look and we'll share that behaviour. So 46% say that they repress, 31% say that they explode, 15% say they express, and 8% say they experience.

And a couple of people made a few comments, they just said they repress until they explode, or they explode but they're learning to express at a later time when they're more in control of their emotions.

Deborah Assheton:

Perfect, perfect. Yes. Thank you, Susannah. Thanks, everyone. Yes, okay, let me talk about it. Thank you very much for being honest. This is great. For those who repress, it's part of a cycle where we repress, repress, repress, repress, repress, repress, and then often we either get very sick or we explode. And then the explode, the person

is like, "Ooh, that wasn't good. That cost me friends, or it cost my job, or it cost me that. So now I'm going to go back into a repressed cycle." All right?

And so you can end up in this repress-explode, repress-explode or explode-repress, explode-repress, explode-repress, same cycle, just a different starting point. There's no learning in those cycles. And actually there's only pain and it's a very difficult cycle for us physically and emotionally and energetically, and it basically keeps us below the line.

What we're not doing there is actually processing the emotions. We are blocking them out using anger or using denial. Denial is what we do to repress, anger and frustration is what we do to explode. They're not actually being processed, they're being held at bay and it doesn't work.

When we talk about processing, when we talk about self-awareness, when we talk about emotional intelligence, we are talking about actually processing the emotion, having it work through your body and work through your intellect in a way that means you come out the other side of it. You're not thinking about it six months after it happened, it's not running the show, and you are able to learn from it.

Expressing an experience are where the learning happens and they are where the skill set happens. When we're talking about expressing, I'm just going to go back a slide. When we're talking about expressing, we're talking about things like sharing with a friend. We're talking about things like therapy or having a confidant.

We are talking about having a conversation with the difficult person if you've got the skill set to do that. Actively managing the difficult person, setting expectations, setting new boundaries, saying that's actually not okay. That's not a way that we work here. You are expressing in a way that is constructive, healthy, and in your power.

When we're talking about experiencing, we've got the meditating person here. I just like the levitation of this picture really appeals to me. Meditation is part of it, but what we are doing we are experiencing the difficult emotion. If you're feeling frustrated, you are sitting there and you are feeling that frustration and letting it flow through, you're not trying to block it.

Now, that's actually not something that we're often taught, but it is actually a very healthy process. Where you feel frustrated, you can take yourself out of the situation, so you can wait until you get home. Or if you're at home, you can just take yourself offline for a while. You can sit in the car, not while you're driving, but you can find a private space. You can sit down and you can say, "Okay, I'm going to feel this frustration."

And you feel it burning. It's literally called a burn, burning through your upper chest, your sternum. It's often in your shoulders. Sometimes if you're really upset and you're morally outraged, it is in your heart and you feel it.

Now what happens when we do that is that it might go for three or four minutes. It might go for a little bit longer. It might burn out in 30 seconds, but it moves through your body and then it goes. I do mean it goes. I'm hoping that some of you have had this experience previously.

The word emotion means energy in motion. That's what it means. And the energy is the frustration, the anger, the moral outrage, the sadness, the energies. What we want to do is experience them and then let them go rather than block them.

You can experience by going for a walk, preferably a walk in nature. You can go put those boxing gloves on and you can hit the punching bag. You can experience and go and yell in the car. The car's great for yelling, no one can hear you. Just start yelling in the car and let it out.

You can experience the emotion and let it go. And then you are able to say, "Okay, how am I going to respond? My boundary has been crossed. How am I going to respond?" Or you can express with a confidant or somebody who is mature or a therapist or whoever it might be, and you can say, "Okay, now I've talked about it and I've entered and this is how I'm feeling and I'm really frustrated." You're kind of below the line, but that's okay. Now what am I going to do about it?

Processing is about shifting rather than blocking. And when you shift your emotions in healthy ways, it's better for your heart, it's better for your mind, it's better for your body. And you can then reclaim your boundaries in a way that is above the line and you can start to manage the boundaries more effectively, generally, so there's less crossing of them.

Let's talk a little bit about boundaries now. Boundaries are a space and boundaries are being sorely tested by work from home. And they were very tested in COVID because our environment changed. And so a lot of people struggled to manage the new boundary of work life. And it's a dynamic piece, this.

When we're talking about boundaries, actually I'll just put this up so you can see the whole thing. When we're talking about our personal boundaries, what we're talking about is what's okay with us and what's not okay with us and everything in between.

Now, somebody who has healthy boundaries, you have boundaries everywhere in your life. You have boundaries around your fitness level. You have boundaries around what you will and won't eat. You have boundaries around how work works for you. You have boundaries around family members. You have boundaries around and you should have boundaries around difficult people.

And boundaries are a part protection, part power, part effectiveness, and they are a space. Healthy boundaries are not rigid. I'm going to talk more about that in just a second. Where we have... What's inside our boundary is what's okay with us. That's okay with me. We can do that day in, day out. That's fine, that works.

Then we've got things that are sometimes okay, and then we've got things that are never okay, they're not okay. And often the difficult person is in the not okay with me basket all the time, and sometimes all the time. They're actually never in your okay with me space. They just don't connect. What's happening when you're working with somebody really difficult is they're just permanently in a space that is uncomfortable for you or outside of what you would consider acceptable, and therefore it's a boundary cross.

Now what's important for you is to understand how you want to respond in the sometimes and the not okay. And again, we're not often taught these skills. And the last thing we want to do is become really rigid ourselves because that's actually part of what makes somebody difficult is they've got super rigid boundaries.

Now you need some rigidity in the not okay. If it's not okay, it's not okay and it's never okay. There's some rigidity there, but the okay with me sometimes, that should be a little bit fluid because sometimes means maybe today but not tomorrow, or maybe tomorrow but not today, or maybe you but not him or him but not her. So, there's some fluidity here. And what we don't want to do is move and become somebody who's just got okay and not okay.

We're responsible for setting and maintaining our boundaries and for managing them. And healthy boundaries are part of what we need to grow in order to deal with difficult people. And poor boundaries show up in two ways. One is very rigid boundaries and the other is very collapsed boundaries.

And often when we are working with a difficult person, we find ourselves collapsing and then we become really rigid and then we collapse and we become rigid. And it's part of the same cycle that we talked about before of exploding repressing. Collapsing is what happens to people who repress. Exploding tends to generate rigid boundaries. We actually want to stay out of this space and be in a healthy space around our boundaries. And to do that, we need to be able to witness our thoughts.

I'm going to do this really quickly, but if you guys all close your eyes, obviously I can't see you, but just close your eyes for me and think the word wolf as in the wild animal wolf, W-O-L-F. And hopefully you've all heard yourselves, you hear the thought wolf in your head.

Now that capacity is your ability to witness your thoughts. And to witness your thoughts means that you can have a look and see where you are, so you can see whether you're responding in a fright, flight, or freeze way. "I hate this person, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So the fight way or I've got to get myself out of the situation, kind of freeze-flight way. Or whether you're in a reasonable space of actually I know that's unacceptable, I really need to think about how I'm going to respond from above the line.

You could be witnessing your thoughts, and that capacity to witness is what helps you stay above the line. You can say to yourself like I do a lot, "Well, look at me. I'm so below the line right now. Look at my thinking, Deb, check it out." I'm like, "I'm so below the line, it's not funny." So this capacity to witness your thoughts is what helps you respond.

And then you can get into the actions and the actions for responding to a person who's below the line. There's two here, and I'll just talk about them for a couple of minutes. They happen in your body and in your thinking. You don't need to go to university to do this. You don't need to do courses, you don't need to read endless books, although there are some that I'm going to suggest for you. It is about building your awareness and your capacity for control and discipline to respond.

What I suggest you do with a difficult person is that you practise getting better at responding to them. You know when you're going to run into them often, they're in your world. And what you can do is set yourself up for success here.

There's a wonderful practise here called a three word practise, which I use a lot of. I do a lot of work with dysfunctional teams and there's difficult people in there. The three word practise is where you ahead of time set three words for how you're going to behave. It might be calm, professional, mature.

It might be clear, powerful, calm. It might be calm, calm, calm. But you are setting your three words and they're always above the line. So they're not about the other person, they're about you and how you are going to stay above the line.

And then you manage your breathing and your posture in line with that. We don't sit there like this with a difficult person. We have our shoulders back, we adopt a bit of a power pose, not a scary power pose but just a, "I'm breathing well, I'm calm, I've got my three words, I'm okay, I'm here and I'm going to have this conversation and this person's not going to get in the driver's seat of my behaviour."

And you can move from, "I have to deal with this person today. They're so horrible, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," into, "I get to practise these skills. Thanks to that difficult person, I get to practise these skills." And what's great about this work is you walk out of your next meeting and you go, "Actually, that was a whole lot better. I feel better, I behaved better and they didn't hit me as hard." This is the skill set that makes you more robust or round.

Longer term, we need to focus on whether we want to be in this situation and whether we can get our needs met with this difficult person in our world. We want to see ourselves in the story and say, "Okay, do I want to stay? Do I want to go? Do I want to move teams? Where are my choices and options? And if I decide to stay, then I do that from above the line and this person no longer drives me."

It's about reclaiming our power and it's incredibly wonderful process that difficult people can force you to do. And so you can walk away from these people and these situations over time and say, "Actually, it was horrible. I hated every minute of it, but I'm so much better off for it." This is where the saying, you might've heard the saying that comes along every now and then that says the most difficult people are your greatest teachers.

Now I personally hate that saying, it makes me feel like screaming, but it's true. This is where we can learn to become more robust, to maintain our professionalism and our equilibrium and the best aspects of ourselves in the face of really difficult people.

That's it from me today. There's a couple of really good resources here for you. As I said earlier, you can also Google above and below the line. There's a lot in this topic. My details are in the deck if you want to contact me to do more work on this. We've got another workshop in July talking about conversation skills for difficult people, so you're welcome to attend that. But thank you very much for your time today. Back to you, Susannah.

CCH Learning:

Thank you very much for all of that, Deb. That was a great presentation. I'll just take that back. Hopefully, I'm going to show the right screen. Yes, excellent. Yes, so if you do have any questions, please put them into the questions pane and we'll get to those very shortly. Just to give you some time to type those up, I'll just mention some of our upcoming webinars.

Coming up with looking at property and income tax on the 10th of April, we're going to be looking at, show me the money with the superannuation withdrawals. On the 11th, we will be discussing the end of financial year tax planning. On the 18th of April, we'll be looking at what to do if your client is suspected of an ATO tax crime and what you are to do there. On the 23rd of April, we'll have our usual tax technical update. And we'll also be looking at the end of the month, we are looking at understanding the downsizing decisions your older clients need to make.

Let's have a little look at our questions. I had a question, Deb, from Ashish. Ashish was asking, "Are powerful people by nature below the line?"

Deborah Assheton:

No. Powerful people, when we talk about power, we're talking about above the line. When we're talking about forceful people who use force and everything that comes with that, that is below the line. Powerful people, genuinely powerful people often share power and they create more power. People who use force might use positional power to force you into compliance, or they create a fear-oriented environment, that's the below-the-line behaviour. Genuine power is always above the line. Bit of a misconception actually.

CCH Learning:

Yeah. Thank you for that, Deb. I hope that helps clear that up for you, Ashish. Melissa asks, "Can you please provide a bit of a list of three words to use?"

Deborah Assheton:

Well, I personally find calm very good because I have a tendency to explode. But for those of you that repress, things like confident, powerful, clear, clarity, they're really good words. Other words are humorous, joyful, light. For those of you that tend to get a bit heavy, light, just keep it light. Questions is another word that's great for your three words. So questions, it could be open-mindedness. And the other word that is really good is breathe and stay above the line can be your three words. I use that with my teenagers all the time.

CCH Learning:

Thank you very much for that, Deb. I hope that helps you there, Melissa, with a couple of words there. Melissa says thanks. Okay, I also have a question from Sarah. Sarah was asking, "At what point should I leave a workplace because of one difficult person?"

Deborah Assheton:

Yeah, it's a really good question, Sarah, and I often get asked it. I think it should be your last resort. And I think if you're going to leave a workplace, you should also be looking for the other benefits in leaving it as well. You might think, "Well, it's time for a change anyway and this is just kind of the impetus for it."

If your person is really, really genuinely difficult and you've done everything you can and you're still feeling like it's harmful for you, then you should get out. It's really whether it's you feel like it's harmful for you and often it is where that person's in a position of positional power. If they're the CEO, if they're the executive team member and it's really hurting you, you just got to get out.

And then when you decide to go, you want to get yourself above the line about where you're going and why. You don't want to leave when you are below the line in a really negative mindset. You don't tend to make good decisions. You want to think about the benefits of leaving and how do I do this in a way that's really above the line and energising and powerful so that I set myself up for the next step in my career rather than, "I've got to get away from Deb. I'll take anything." That's not the right attitude.

Yeah, I think I'm a big fan of if you've done everything and it's not working, get out, leave. You only get one life, so you don't want to hang around too long.

CCH Learning:

Thank you for that, Deb. I hope that helps you there, Sarah. Well, that does bring us to the end of our questions for today, but if you do have any further questions, Deb's details are there on the screen. And as Deb mentioned which she does have the other webinar up in July, so please, if you are interested in more on this topic, please have a look at that one and see if it might be right for you.

In terms of next steps, I would like to remind you all to please take a moment to complete your feedback when exiting. We've asked you a couple of questions about today's webinar, so it's really important for us to hear your opinions. It's also a reminder that shortly after today's session you will be emailed when you've been enrolled into the e-learning recording, which can be watched multiple times. And we'll give you access to the PowerPoint transcript and of course your CPD certificate.

I would very much like to thank Deb for the session today, and to you, the audience for joining us. We do hope to see you back online for another CCH Learning webinar very soon. Please enjoy the rest of your day. Thank you very much.