

Management Matters



SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

Human Resources

November 2009

Managing Difficult Situations

Greetings!

In this issue of *Management Matters*, we offer some suggestions on how to handle small but difficult situations that come up every now and again. These are manageable but unexpected situations that might cause you to step back for a moment to figure out what to do:

- What words should I use?
- What words should I avoid?
- What do I want to have happen?

Because these small, difficult situations are unique, you can't always rely on your past experience. So, take a deep breath, step back and think before taking action. We hope you will find some helpful examples in this issue.

For big, difficult situations, please call Human Resources to tap into our expertise on how to handle these risks. There are few situations that are new to us and we are able to help you think through each step of what you do and say.

As the holiday season approaches, we extend our warm wishes to all.

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In a typical day, week, or month things may go very smoothly for you: work gets done; people are happy; and you are confident that you are equal to the task of managing others. It would be wonderful if things continued along this smooth path, but that's not likely. The odds are that every so often – when you least expect it – you will find yourself in a **difficult situation** you did not anticipate:

- You may hear a comment that surprises you, or get a question that you are not prepared for.
- You may say or do something you regret
- You could "drop the ball" in some way or another
- Your usual way of handling things may not get the results you want

You can count on one thing: each **difficult situation** you encounter will be unique, hard to anticipate, and hard to prepare for. It could come hurtling toward you, or slowly emerge; it may involve one person or many; it could be over in an instant or have lingering effects. Difficult situations are unpredictable and risky.



What to do?

In a **difficult situation**, our first reaction may be "fight or flight" or brain freeze. None of these responses are helpful. Instead, try one or two of the following strategies:

- » Take an objective look at the situation
- » Verify that your assessment is accurate
- » Confirm that you know the relevant details
- » Clarify the goal or purpose

Let's look at a few examples of how to put this into action:

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Caught Off Guard

You are talking with a member of your team about a task you are delegating. He says, “I’m tired of hearing the same old story about working smart and being more effective. I wish you would stop talking this way.”

Consider: This is a valued employee; his comment is unusual; it’s evident he has lost patience and is feeling frustrated.

Say: “How can I get the results I need and not irritate you?”

Benefits: The quality of the work relationship is maintained and your improvement goals are reinforced.

Beware: Watch your facial expression and tone of voice. People pay closer attention to body language than they do to the words spoken.

You Get Unwelcome News

In a senior staff meeting, your manager says, “I’d like you and Alicia to work together on this priority project for the next three months. I want the two of you to put your past differences aside, share information, and collaborate on decisions and task assignments for this project.”

Consider: Alicia is present in the room; you two have very different work styles; your manager wants a collaborative approach – and a better working relationship between you.

Say: “Can you clarify our primary goal? What will be our criteria for success?”

Benefits: You will have a clearer idea about the fuzzy boundaries of this assignment – and so will Alicia and your manager. This will be helpful for everyone going forward.

Beware: Don’t jump into work tasks without first reaching agreement with Alicia on process issues. Make certain that your process includes the two of you having joint check-in meetings with your manager.

Time Wasted

You spend many hours preparing a detailed report for a University-wide committee you are on. You worked diligently and you’re quite proud of the result. At the committee meeting you are prepared to pass out 15 copies of your multi-page report only to hear the chair of the committee say, “Thanks, but that report isn’t needed any longer. We were able to get the information elsewhere. Didn’t you get an email on this?”

Consider: You have 15 people watching you; some of them may empathize with you, but most won’t; it’s a problem only for you; people will remember if you respond ungraciously.

Say: “No, I didn’t get the email. Let’s make certain all our distribution lists are complete for future emails.”

Benefits: You show up as a competent professional and you chalk it up to a learning experience.

Beware: This is a situation in which your body language could betray you. Stay calm and be understanding.



Switch Channels

When your **difficult situation** resists your usual way of doing things, you may need to shift the energy – at least for a short time – to make forward progress. Stepping outside of long-standing patterns of behavior takes effort, but it may be the only thing that gets the results you are looking for. You could try one of these strategies:

- Change the words you use and the way you use them
- Alter your body language
- Temporarily take on a new role
- Modify your behavior for a period of time

Here are a few examples:

Donna has a tendency to talk a lot. She uses an abundance of words to explain her situation, make a request, or describe a problem. She tells stories and gives details that strengthen her assessment of the situation. In a **difficult situation**, the sheer volume of her words may overwhelm and disengage others.

What can Donna do differently?

- Succinctly state her key message and repeat it when appropriate.
- Pause often to seek comments and questions.
- Share her observations and perspective.
- Respond to body language signals from her discussion partner(s).
- Summarize her understanding and seek confirmation.

People will expect Donna to carry the weight of the conversation. By pausing to listen and draw out other views, Donna changes the energy of the difficult situation and creates space for new information. She is not burying her key message in an avalanche of words.

Drew is a peacemaker. He believes that his paramount responsibility is to maintain harmony as he delicately balances the needs of a broad variety of people in his department. Drew typically finds a middle path of compromise that people will endorse. In a **difficult situation**, Drew may be viewed by others as weak and conciliatory.

What can Drew do differently?

- Clearly state his views and goals for this specific interaction.
- Explain that he will temporarily step outside of his usual role and “wear another hat.”
- Use explicit, specific language throughout the discussion.
- Listen without fixing.
- Work collaboratively toward a solution.

People will expect Drew to continue to play the role of peacemaker. When he is giving negative feedback to someone or enforcing a firm policy, Drew needs to stretch himself in a new direction and communicate with clarity, confidence, and firmness.

Difficult situations call for a new approach. Our examples are simple – and real life is not. The difficult situations you face are more complex. Members of the Human Resources Office are available to talk with you about puzzling situations or dilemmas, or difficulties. Please give us a call.