

Dealing with Difficult Clients

The starting point is to delete this terminology from our vocabulary! How do you define a difficult person? Most of us use this term to describe someone we find challenging. We all have plenty of experience “dealing” with those we call difficult. Let’s narrow the field a little for the sake of ministry. Here are some characteristics we often would label as difficult:

- Defensive
- Bent on making strife
 - Insulting
 - Uncooperative
 - Agitated



Examine your typical analysis of a difficult client. Much of your success in reaching this person depends on how you see them. What box do you put them

in?

Out to get me

Mental case

Scum of the earth

Impossible



How you view the person greatly affects how you will relate to that person. Are you really in need of suggestions of how to “deal” with them or do we need to figure out how to minister to them? What was Jesus’ training on this?

Matthew 5:43-48 (NKJV) “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.’ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more *than others?*”

We could say that seems impossible, but we can easily see that Jesus practiced what He preached.

Think of all the difficult people in His life!

Often it would seem that the difficult clients bother us because they distract us from getting the job done. So what do we think our “job” is? Sometimes their actions seem so disrespectful. And we have to admit that they seem to wear us out.

Rather than look at these folks as difficult, let's discuss clients who are exhibiting a difficult attitude. Rather than labeling them in such a way that we excuse ourselves from reaching out, let's look at difficult attitudes that can be addressed. Here are a few:

1. self-righteous
2. impatient
3. fault-finding
4. self-focused
5. cynical



Next we look at the possible conditions of the client who is exhibiting the difficult attitude. Compassion comes when we see his or her need and know we can do something about it. Many times the client:

- Feels threatened?
- Is disappointed?
- Has a good dose of entitlement thinking?
- Is immature in actions, thinking, communication skills?
- Has unrealistic expectations of self or others?

What can we do about any of these? How do we redirect folks to give them a better chance of success? As we have concluded many times, you cannot teach what you do not model. I remember struggling one day to find a way to be thankful for a particularly difficult client. This person pestered me many times a day with little attention-getting questions. The conversation with the Lord ended up something like, "Thank you for providing another opportunity to acquire patience!"

Along with mentoring and providing a living example, some of the needs that we can address in the right setting, through counseling or life-skill classes, include:

- ❖ Spiritual bankruptcy
- ❖ No reality-thinking
- ❖ Lack of gratitude
- ❖ No confidence
- ❖ Lack of positive response to life's challenges
- ❖ No past modeling or mentoring, no training

Guidelines for Working with Difficult Clients

1. Put problem-people in perspective. Don't take their speech and actions personally. Be ready to consider the cause for their current mixed-up thinking.
2. Learn to listen. Then be ready to respond in an assertive way. Don't expect the client to read your mind. "The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered" (Proverbs 17:27(NIV)).
3. Sometimes you ignore outbursts: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him" (Proverbs 26:4(NIV)). However, sometimes you reprove to keep them from progressing in their foolishness: "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (Proverbs 26:5 (NIV)).

4. Keep boundaries in a healthy way. “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered” (Proverbs 22:24(NIV)).
5. Let the client know when you’re annoyed, upset or disappointed, but give this information in a dispassionate matter-of-fact way. You are training them that emotions are normal and can be expressed in a healthy way.
6. If you are more than irritated, go somewhere to cool off. Explain you are taking an adult time-out. You can’t concentrate on constructive, creative alternatives while you’re wrestling with anger. “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty” (Proverbs 22:3 (NIV)).
7. Give and request frequent feedback. Don’t stew over what a client may be thinking. Ask: “You seem really teed off, what’s going on?”
8. Know the applicable policies. No matter how angry you may be with someone’s behavior, don’t say or do anything until you know you’re on safe ground policy-wise.
9. Deal directly and discreetly. Choose face-to-face talks in private to discuss a client’s attitude or behavior.
10. Always document. Keep a record of all communications to prevent lies or faulty recollections from taking over later. The next shift will be interacting with this person.
11. Be straightforward. The more you remain matter-of-fact, the less you encourage a client to play games.
12. Be gracious. Someone’s rudeness doesn’t give you the right to respond in kind.

Perhaps the best advice for this responsibility is Philippians 2:3 (NIV), “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.”

After all, we know Scripture makes the promise in Proverbs 16:7, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”