

## Activists and “difficult people”

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All of us encounter people whose behavior we find difficult, and many of us are difficult ourselves, at least at times! This poses a particular challenge for social activists trying to promote a more egalitarian, just, and decent society. The problem of “difficult people” needs to be recognized and addressed in a way compatible with a vision of a desirable future.

Over the years I’ve participated in many types of organizations, and I’ve spent time talking to people with diverse personal experiences. It seems safe to say that all types of organizations routinely suffer dysfunctional dynamics, such as destructive gossip, undermining, ostracism, cliques, rivalries, discrimination, harassment, bullying, power plays, corruption, set-ups, and purges. This sort of thing occurs in government departments, corporations, churches, labor unions, and large environmental organizations, all of which suffer the pathologies of bureaucracy. Hierarchy provides ample resources for bias, abuse, and other forms of nastiness.

Some people might imagine that there are fewer problems in groups that are concerned with “good causes,” such as feminist, social welfare, or peace organizations, and especially in groups aspiring to nonhierarchical processes and goals. Alas, as participants know only too well, the problems are just as great. (Anarchists too? Surely not!) Indeed, because people who join such groups often have high expectations that a group’s dynamics will reflect its stated ideals, they are often more deeply disillusioned by put-downs, power-mongering, and backstabbing than they would be in a “conventional” organization.

The consequences are enormous. When individuals, keen and committed and putting full trust in other members of a group, are insulted, humiliated, attacked, or betrayed, the experiences may turn them off activism for years or a lifetime. A deeper question is whether activists, who aspire to a better society, can really do any better in working together than typical behaviors in the system they seek to change. Furthermore, “changing the system” does not automatically change interpersonal dynamics: social and personal

Conflict and the expression of emotions such as anger can be a good thing in a group, if used constructively. It’s possible for an individual’s angry outburst about others’ lack of action against injustice to be channeled into renewed commitment by group members. The contrast here is not between harmony and conflict but between effective, supportive organizations and ineffective, damaging ones. All too often, conflict and anger serve to deepen rather than heal emotional wounds.

Although there are significant problems in interpersonal dynamics everywhere, from the biggest companies to small amateur theatre groups, these problems are not often widely discussed outside the organization in which they occur. Infighting in political parties gets some media coverage. Less commonly there will be news stories about nasty power plays involving senior figures in a business, the police force, or a group like Amnesty International. But for insiders, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Go into any organization and listen to people’s stories and a much different and less uplifting picture emerges. (Not much is written about this. An academic example is Kolb and Bartunek (1992). On a lighter note see Levine (1998).)

Members of organizations seldom want to advertise their internal problems. For leaders, their own status depends in part on the reputation of the organization, whether this is Microsoft, the World Bank, or the Defense Department. For people at other levels, exposing dirty linen is a good way to lose a job or fall out with those with influence. Even more seriously, organizational members, especially leaders, may deny there is any problem and be unable to hear negative information.

This is also true of small groups, such as local sporting clubs or self-help groups. Feuding on the inside can be debilitating, but often this is hidden from outsiders. Although group members may be unhappy with each other, they often have some commitment to the organization or the organizational ideal and thus are reluctant to run down the group in public. More deeply, they may be unable to even recognize that there is any problem.