

## THE 10 MOST DIFFICULT PEOPLE ON YOUR COMMITTEE

by Patty Wells

This particular version of defining difficult types is adapted from Muriel Solomon's excellent book, *Working with Difficult People*. To me her model seems the most practical in describing types found on your typical concomm. It also differs from most books of its ilk in recommending more concrete tactical suggestions for working effectively with difficult people. It is also realistic enough to recognize that you communicate in different ways with your staff, your peers and your boss. If this model doesn't work for you there are other books that approach the subject in a slightly different way. Suzette Haden Elgin's work on "verbal self defense" is also useful.

You may ask why you need to go to such efforts to get someone to get work done. Remember, none of us are getting paid for this. At some level we expect consideration and some special handling for the job we're doing. Most of us are hard to replace.

**SILENT SCREW-UPS** — the person who tells you the progress report is going just fine, but somehow you never see the mock-ups. You hit the deadline and find out the PR is barely begun. This person usually has too much pride to admit that they didn't understand what all was needed in a PR, and felt too stupid to ask.

**STRATEGY** — the goal is to bolster the Silent Screw-up's self concept, so that he will ask for help ASAP, not way past deadlines. He needs to see some success via your direction. So, be clear about your expectations, but offer the help and support he needs. Give clear instructions, as detailed as necessary to get the job done. Then see that he understands that the outcome is his responsibility. Offer reassurance that asking for help is OK and preferable to running late. Set clear deadlines and follow-up on them before the actual deadline.

**PRIMA DONNAS** — the temperamental person demanding special attention. They can wear down your resistance with their moods and the intimation that your committee can't survive without them.

**STRATEGY** — the goal is to maintain control by guiding the Prima Donna to act more responsibly. Reinforce to everyone that procedures are important. See if you can get the prima donna's support in being a good example because of their importance. Use peer pressure from others on your committee. If that doesn't work, you have to evaluate whether he or she is irreplaceable. If she can be replaced you may need to call her bluff. Sometimes in a volunteer organization the person is, at least for that year, irreplaceable. Then you get as much compliance as possible, so that you have the least harm to the team spirit of the rest of the committee.

**STIFF NECKS** — the "we always did it this way and we always will" type with an unbending desire to maintain the status quo.

**STRATEGY** — don't automatically discount their opinion. Keep the discussion to issues and let the Stiff Neck salvage their pride by asking their suggestions on how to compromise between the "old" and "new" ways. The Stiff Neck feels most secure with the status quo, so they need to feel that you respect their opinion and give them a part in the decision.

**CLANSMEN** — the clique who tries to subvert the chain of command with the power they perceive they wield as a group.

**STRATEGY** — your goal is to maintain control of your convention. A frontal attack on the Clansmen will only solidify their opposition. Win over the ringleader if possible. If she has your support she may not need the clique so much. The same goes for co-opting other members of the group, perhaps by offering them another position that requires their special skills. A few judicious moves can help reduce the pressure.

**TIME BOMBS** — this is the person who deals with feeling threatened by screaming, usually in public. They unnerve everyone, including your attendees.

**STRATEGY** — your immediate aim is to defuse him. Talk patiently, repeating the person's name in a friendly tone

to get their attention. Suggest you move to a private spot as soon as is feasible. Start talking tactfully as he calms down; express some understanding of the issue's importance to him. You can't deal with the issue at all until the Time Bomb is temporarily defused.

**WITHHOLDERS** — perhaps the only person who understands your accounting system, or your only hotel liaison. They withhold the information needed for someone else to do the job so that they feel valued, and in control. They're essentially sulkers.

**STRATEGY** — soothe the withholder's ego with understanding of their work's value. Gradually get the information with small or indirect requests.

**TONGUE-TIEDS** — these are usually the new people on a committee, who are too embarrassed, or unsure of the group to speak out.

**STRATEGY** — your goal is to make them more comfortable with the group so that they become a more functional part of it. Talk with them privately about their position, offering support and reassurance that they are doing fine. Ask them direct questions at the meetings, again offering praise where appropriate. Have them work in small groups so they get to know the committee in small bunches, rather than as a horde.

**SUPER SENSITIVES** — this person takes every comment as a personal criticism; they're tense, touchy and uptight.

**STRATEGY** — your goal is to reduce the resentment by acknowledging their work, getting to the point without lengthy prologue. (Remember, this person is expecting the worst from you, don't make them wait.) Keep the discussion to issues, not personalities. Ask them questions to get at problems. Agree on a set plan with them.

**MARTYRS** — are upset by the sacrifices you've never asked them to make. In fact, you wish they hadn't made it; they might have worked more effectively if they had worked smarter. They never see this as a fault.

**STRATEGY** — Acknowledge their contribution, set an objective system of distributing the work so that they don't have so much to do. Then say no when they start volunteering for more. Stick to getting them enough help.

**IMPOSERS** — this is more likely a guest, artist or dealer. This is the person who calls you more than anyone else. They often have just one more thing they need, or they don't understand procedures until you end up doing the work for them.

**STRATEGY** — the goal is to learn how to enforce limits effectively. Remember, you don't need an excuse to refuse a request. Practice doing so politely. Help the imposer find other avenues of assistance.

Remember, most of the difficult people you deal with are not out to get you. You are merely in their way as they act out their own agendas. Perhaps that helps in not taking their actions personally. Nor do they perceive themselves as being especially difficult. The more effective you are in communicating the less stress you'll cause for yourself.