

# **Interacting with the Difficult or the Disturbing**

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# Common Interaction Myths

- ◆ All individuals who act with high levels of emotion or have a mental illness are often physically dangerous
- ◆ More detailed explanations are generally better
- ◆ The person will know that when I am working on something in their presence I am working to solve their concern
- ◆ The faster I can give them an answer, the better the interaction
- ◆ Once I hand them off to someone else to deal with the issue, the situation is no longer mine to help manage

# Successful Interaction Management

## ◆ The Goals

- ◆ Understanding the Individual's Current Focus
- ◆ Redirecting the Outcome, if Necessary
  - Decreasing the Level of Emotion Present
  - Agreeing on Appropriate & Safe Options for Resolution
  - Facilitating the Use of Options for Resolution

## ◆ Method

- ◆ Identifying emotions and behavior- theirs and ours
- ◆ Monitoring behavior- theirs and ours
- ◆ Managing emotions- theirs and ours

# Summary

- ◆ If someone is acting in a difficult or disturbing way nothing is more important than paying attention to that individual.
- ◆ Successful management requires assessment of verbal and physical cues, providing appropriate interactive feedback, and monitoring for escalation and de-escalation.
- ◆ Know what your tool box is and who can help you, so that you can provide a concrete answer yourself (solve it), facilitate their contact with someone else (send it), and decide whether you should report it (e.g. Student Affairs, etc.)
- ◆ If certain physical cues are present, it is appropriate to disengage, seek a safe place, and report the interaction immediately

# **Only Two Reasons for Human Actions**

**Seek Stimulation**

**Establish (or Re-establish) Perception of  
Control**

**Violence**



**Individual**

**Target(s)**

**Environment**

# The Methodology

## ◆ Situational Assessment

- ◆ Physical Assessment
- ◆ Verbal Assessment

## ◆ Intervention/Redirection

- ◆ Empathetic Listening
- ◆ Paraphrasing
- ◆ Re-Framing
- ◆ Thorough Knowledge of the Options & Resources Available

# Situational Assessment

- ◆ Physical Assessment
  - ◆ Posture
  - ◆ Stance
  - ◆ Facial Expression
  - ◆ Position of the Hands
  - ◆ Body Movements
    - Voluntary
    - Involuntary



# Situational Assessment

## ◆ Verbal Assessment

- ◆ Tone
- ◆ Volume
- ◆ Cadence
- ◆ Content

## **General Interaction Guidance for Any Form of Difficult or Disturbing Individual**

- ◆ If you get any time to prepare, before you start the interaction
  - ◆ Psychologically and emotionally prepare for disruptive and intrusive acts directed toward you
    - Consciously acknowledge they may be emotionally elevated
    - Remind yourself that they are seeking control
    - Think though some ways that you can give them a sense of control, without giving them control

# General Interaction Guidance for Any Form of Difficult or Disturbing Individual

## ◆ During the interaction

- ◆ Use a body orientation to the party that reduces a sense of confrontation
- ◆ Have a confident, attentive, patient-but not patronizing, manner
- ◆ Use relaxed body language
- ◆ Use a soft, “warm”, round tone; moderate cadence; moderate volume
- ◆ Use a “long” finish on the questions, not clipped
- ◆ Use “active” listening
- ◆ Allow pauses by the party so they can search their memory
- ◆ Avoid interruptions
- ◆ Limit your body movements to essential movements only (i.e. control body shifting, paper shuffling, and note taking in front of parties)

# Interaction Management

## ◆ Additional Elements to Consider

- ◆ Approach behavior
- ◆ Distance
- ◆ Body position
- ◆ Hand position
- ◆ Eye contact
- ◆ Empathetic listening
- ◆ Paraphrasing
- ◆ Re-Framing
- ◆ Thorough knowledge of the options & resources available

# During a difficult or disturbing situation

- ◆ Approach or present to the individual in a calm manner and with the appearance of self control
- ◆ Keep adequate space (4 to 6 feet) between you and the other person. Do not stand over the person or appear intimidating in any way
- ◆ Speak softly and in a non-provocative and non-judgmental manner
- ◆ Listen and try to appear concerned and helpful. Do not try to interrupt or challenge a statement or perception
- ◆ Avoid continuous direct eye contact
- ◆ Keep your hands in front of you at chest level and your fingers bridged

# During a difficult or disturbing situation: continued

- ◆ Do not get caught up in the emotion of the moment-the primary objective is to avoid physical violence
- ◆ Comment in a neutral manner about the obvious - “I feel your anger”
- ◆ Use non-assertive statements, e.g., “How can I be of help to you in solving this problem?” “I heard you say,....”, “What can I do to gain your cooperation?”
- ◆ Do not make any promises you cannot keep
- ◆ Do not bargain with the individual, explain what you can do now, if anything.
- ◆ If necessary, describe the consequences of the behavior, e.g., “If I get hurt, the police will be called, and you will end up in jail.”
- ◆ If you believe a physical assault is imminent, leave the area, if possible; get the help of others; call for emergency help

# Interaction Guidance for Agitated and Actively Angry People

- ◆ Expect chaotic thoughts, high energy, high emotion, and “serious” conversation
- ◆ Be very patient, let them talk, and listen closely to their stories and images, regardless of how “flighty” or “tangential”- it means something to them or they would not be telling you
- ◆ Given them adequate distance and stay in their direct line of sight
- ◆ Never touch them, as touching can easily make them more agitated, not to mention be mis-understood
- ◆ Convey with your manner and verbal cues that you are listening
- ◆ Ask clarifying questions when they pause, but try not to interrupt or control the conversation, this will usually make you unique in their experience

# Interaction Guidance for the Dramatic Personality

- ◆ Expect the need to be the center of attention, drama, enthusiasm, flirtatiousness, seduction, and a strong negative reaction if you are not paying close attention to them
- ◆ They will have many impressions and shallow insights, but little concern for facts or proof
- ◆ They can be easily influenced by authority, so care has to be taken not to provide them with an understanding of what answers will please you
- ◆ Keep a physical distance from them, expect them to try to touch you, but request they don't, if they try
- ◆ Use a business like tone to maintain a professional atmosphere to the interaction
- ◆ Allow them to tell explain their impressions, but be certain to go back and ask for actual details, even though they might not really remember any, as details are not important enough for them to remember
- ◆ Expect them to follow up with you after the interaction and try to be inappropriately personal



## **Interaction Guidance for the Suspicious Personality**

- ◆ Expect suspicion, hostility, withdrawal; flares of anxiety, frustration, or anger; challenges to what you want to your questions or information that you provide; may only cooperate in a limited manner, if at all
- ◆ Offers of hospitality may be viewed suspiciously
- ◆ Non-threatening posture – maintain distance
- ◆ Humor is viewed as a weakness
- ◆ Give opportunity to vent about the situation – don't try to change beliefs (you will not be able to & not an your normal role)
- ◆ Keep focused on circumstances at hand
- ◆ Be open and direct regarding concerns
- ◆ Be careful with tone- firm, direct, matter-of-fact, not judgmental
- ◆ Be as transparent as you can be, recognizing that simple, clear information, even if it is not what they want to hear, will provide the most opportunity for them to act on what you are telling them

## **Interaction Guidance for the Self-Centered and Entitled Personality**

- ◆ Expect arrogance, grandiosity, expectations/demands to be treated with special deference; sense of entitlement; lack of empathy for the needs of others, including you
- ◆ Theme: “It’s all about them.”
- ◆ Cannot understand situation from any perspective other than their own
- ◆ Any behaviors exhibited will be self-serving (i.e. tears, emotional eruptions, etc.)
- ◆ Extremely sensitive to perceived “attack” (i.e. implied criticism, judgmental tone, etc.)
- ◆ Address with a more formal style (i.e. Ms., Mr. etc.)

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- ◆ If certain physical cues are present, it is appropriate to disengage, seek a safe place, and report the interaction immediately

## Resource List

- ◆ *From Difficult to Disturbed: Understanding and Managing Dysfunctional Employees* by Laurence Miller, American Management Association, 2008  
ISBN:0-8144-0922-9
- ◆ Konnikova, M. (2013). *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes*. New York: Viking Adult.  
ISBN: 978-0670026579