

THE MANAGING DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS POCKETBOOK

By John Townsend

Drawings by Phil Hailstone

“All the challengers I have met with are in here - and so are articulate, well-practised and pragmatic replies.”

Peter Thomas, Manager, UKBS Career Development and Training

“I loved the book. It shows such a great variety of ways to deal with challengers that everyone will find approaches which will fit their style.”

Dr. Martin Gillo, Director, Human Resources, Europe, Advanced Micro Devices

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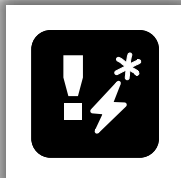
Aggressive/defensive, dinosaur, doodler, eager beaver, exhibitionist, expert, griper, hijacker, joker, mutineers, part-timer, referee/pedant, rivals, show-off, shy violet, silent cynic, slowcoach, speedy Gonzalez, starmaker, trapper, trouble-maker, whisperer, woolly thinker, yawner/sleeper



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Action reply, agree/disagree/deflect, blockbusting, building, confrontation, naming, non-verbal, psychological judo, receipt, reflect/deflect, refocus, reframing, self-revelation, 3rd person persuasion, you and me



THE CHALLENGERS

On the next 48 pages you will find descriptions of 24 different kinds of challenging participant, along with several suggestions about how to handle them. Each challenger is allocated two pages which are divided as follows:

- 1) **NAME OF CHALLENGER**
- 2) ● Characteristics, symptoms, behaviours
- 3) **Suggested Intervention Technique/Tactics**

A full description of each of the techniques is contained in the final chapter.

CHALLENGERS

AGGRESSIVE/DEFENSIVE



Profile

- Interprets every new idea as a personal attack on his/her present behaviour or lack of knowledge
- Questions all assignments as to their usefulness and applicability
- Refuses to participate in role plays or exercises (especially video)

Naming

Paradoxically, naming sensitive people in examples to some extent allays their fears. When you are introducing a new system and say something like: 'Let's imagine that Janet has just started using the new system in her department and has a problem with', you pre-empt Janet's own reservations. She won't have to protest how unfair or difficult the new system is going to be for her - you protested for her!



CHALLENGERS

AGGRESSIVE/DEFENSIVE



Psychological Judo

Hypersensitive participants are easy to identify quickly. Think ahead to assignments such as role plays and prepare for a possible refusal with some psychological judo. For instance: 'This afternoon we'll be doing some simple role plays (explain the details). We've obviously done these exercises many times before, but if there's anyone who feels they cannot help their colleagues in this way and does not wish to participate, please let me know during the break, we will fully understand.' When approached by the hypersensitive one, emphasise the safe nature of the exercise but encourage them not to participate. Human nature is such that they'll probably change their mind during lunch.

NB Your own sensitivity is vital here. Some people are indeed so sensitive that any up-front performance can mortify them and paralyse learning. Act accordingly and protect them in the most appropriate way.

CHALLENGERS

THE DINOSAUR



Profile

- Demonstrates an unwillingness to question own beliefs
- Makes 'black and white', 'right and wrong' statements
- Displays clear prejudices and rigid opinions
- Voices discomfort with abstract and/or 'new age' thinking

Agree/Disagree/Deflect

Find something about their intervention with which to agree but then gently disagree on the main issues. Example: 'I agree...but I'm not sure I can agree with you on XYZ.' Then deflect: 'How do the rest of you feel about this?'

Reflect/Deflect

Say something like: 'So you're really saying that there's nothing wrong with the old way of doing things?' Depending on their rephrasing of their intervention, deflect to the group or an individual for comment.



CHALLENGERS

THE DINOSAUR



Confrontation Show respect for and accept their feelings and value system but make it clear that the purpose of the course is to challenge the present way of thinking. Ask permission to allow 'crazier' participants to say their piece.

3rd Person Persuasion Find or invent an appropriate anecdote, metaphor or parable about a person (or perhaps a dinosaur!) who didn't want to change and the consequences. This technique is most powerful when used in a non-specific way. In other words, choose an appropriate moment (like the beginning or the end of a session) and address all the participants - don't pick on the dinosaur. Let the message get to each of them in its own way.

Reframe (Helicopter) Listen carefully to their interventions. Say something like: 'I can understand how it looks from your point of view. Let me just tell you how it looks from my point of view - then perhaps we can agree to disagree.'

Psychological Judo Ask them to be the 'protector of the faith' and to interrupt whenever they feel you are going too far and misleading the other participants with unrealistic or unethical suggestions.

CHALLENGERS

THE DOODLER



Profile

- Makes more or less elaborate drawings on notepaper while you are talking

Ignore!

It's probably a sign of concentration. Doodlers can often listen much more attentively when not distracted by the body language of the trainer. The doodle is an unconscious representation of their thought processes as they listen and absorb.



CHALLENGERS

THE DOODLER



Naming

If the doodling bothers you try using the doodler's name in an example, or ask them an open question to get involvement. This will allow you to check whether they are following. If so, ignore doodling!

Refocus

Use an overhead transparency or the flip chart to divert their attention away from the doodling.

Psychological Judo

In a meeting you could ask the doodler to capture the essence of each module or agenda item as a concise drawing on an overhead transparency to be shown at the end of the meeting.

CHALLENGERS

THE EAGER BEAVER

Profile

- Keeps trying to help but interventions do more harm than good
- Nods and smiles but is an 'own goal scorer' whose contributions miss the point
- Embarrasses team members by gleefully interrupting trainer with interpretations of their discussions

Reframe (Relevance)

Ask them (nicely!) to explain the relevance of their remarks. Say something like: 'Sorry, but help me to see how this fits in with what we've been discussing.' Try and channel the response back to the subject, with thanks. If this doesn't work



CHALLENGERS

THE EAGER BEAVER



Reframe (Helicopter)

Say something like: 'I can see how you experienced XYZ from the perspective of an ABC, but let's ask someone else to what extent they also see it from that angle.'

Then:

Deflect

To group or individual: 'Anyone?' 'Bridget?' If the eager beaver keeps causing a problem try

You and Me

- Make it clear verbally or non-verbally that you know that they are trying to help, but that you want to hear from the others
- Speak to them during a break and ask for their help in letting the others express themselves

CHALLENGERS

THE EXHIBITIONIST



Profile

- Asks embarrassing questions about his/her personal situation
- Embarrasses others with his/her candour
- Indulges in extreme self-revelation
- Washes dirty linen in public
- Always ready with: 'I remember once when I'

Action Reply

Use the interventions as instant case study opportunities for other participants to discuss their opinions on a course-related subject and then refocus.

Example:

During an in-company training course on assertiveness a female 'exhibitionist' asks the following question: 'You know there's this man in the office - I can't tell you who it is obviously - who keeps pestering me to go out with him. Actually he's quite sexy so I wouldn't mind but, well.... I mean, how can I say 'no' and still stay, you know, good friends?'



CHALLENGERS

THE EXHIBITIONIST



What the trainer could do is to say:

'Thanks for your candour. Let's not go into too many details here but you've raised a very powerful question. How can we say 'no' to people without losing their esteem. John, how could you say 'no' to your boss on some unwanted overtime?'

Refocus

Another way would be to refocus by asking the group: 'How would this personal experience fit in with the theory we were discussing earlier?'

Confrontation

Point out sincerely and in a straightforward way that their behaviour is out of order. Explain that the course was not designed as a personal therapy and/or exorcism session. Try and do this with humour!

About the Author

John Townsend, BA MA MCIPD

John has built a reputation internationally as a leading trainer of trainers. He is the founder of the highly-regarded Master Trainer Institute, a total learning facility located just outside Geneva which draws trainers and facilitators from around the world. He set up the Institute after 30 years' experience in international consulting and human resource management positions in the UK, France, the United States and Switzerland – notably as European Director of Executive Development with GTE in Geneva where he had training responsibility for over 800 managers in 15 countries. John has published a number of management and professional guides and regularly contributes articles to leading management and training journals.



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