



Episode 18: How to Manage Challenging People

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's talk about how to handle the challenging people in your life. We all have people in our lives who we wish were just a little bit easier. We all have people who we appreciate, and yet, they drain our energy and tire us out.

When we work with people like this, it can be challenging. We might want them to do certain things or respond in a different way. We think we might be trying everything to change them or get them to do something, and it often seems like whatever we do or try isn't working.

If you lead or work with people who challenge you, you might think, if only I were a better leader, they'd be different. Or if only I had more strategies, I would be handling this better.

I can help you feel calmer, clearer, and more confident for these challenging interactions. Today, I am going to share an easy 2-step approach that you can use with challenging people and in challenging situations, that will help you feel more in control and leave the interaction with more of your body budget and confidence intact.

Let me start by telling you a story. This is a story that a friend of mine, whom I'll call Angela, shared about a situation at her work.

Angela supervises a person at work whom she has labeled difficult. This person – I'll call him Ted -- has been there for about a year, and while she had high hopes for Ted, she's noticed that things have been slowly worsening during the past few months. Ted is young and relatively inexperienced in the professional world. While Angela is fine with that, what's she's not fine with is that he makes a lot of excuses when he doesn't do things. His reasons are often inconsistent, which makes Angela feel like he's lying to her. The dishonesty she perceives upsets her and she's wondering how much she can trust him. Most upsetting to Angela is that Ted doesn't seem to follow through on agreed upon tasks.

The last straw happened when Angela returned a few weeks after vacation and checked in with Ted to hear about his progress. And he had very little progress to report. When Angela asked him what kept him from working on the project, Ted stormed out of the office.

Angela didn't quite know what to do. Her personal values of education and mentoring others were colliding with her other core values of productivity and responsiveness. She felt like her caring leadership approach was at odds with her pent up frustration. Clearly something needed to change.

Angela called me and said, I need help.

Here are the steps I shared with her to immediately feel calmer and clearer, that would help her know what to do next and why.

First, let's ground this in our brain's thinking. We need to remember that when we are stressed, we are not doing our most effective thinking. The first step when we are frustrated is always, always, always, to calm the body down. Calming our body helps relax our brain, which is like a mini reset and reboot for the brain. Calming down the body and brain ensures that any subsequent thinking we do will be more effective thinking.

My go to way to calm the body and brain down is with deep belly breathing. When we do deep belly breathing, we inhale and let our belly get really big, and then we exhale and pull our belly all the way back in. We keep our upper chest and shoulders completely still, and move only our belly. This type of breathing immediately lowers our blood pressure and slows our heart rate, because it engages the vagus nerve and the parasympathetic nervous system, which is our rest and digest nervous system.

I asked Angela to take a few deep belly breaths, and I asked her to imagine what it was she was breathing out. She shared that she was breathing out anger. Then I asked her what she wanted to breathe in, and she said that she wanted to breathe in peace. She felt calmer within 30 seconds of breathing. It takes only a few deep belly breaths to calm our bodies down, and when we do, then we're in a much better place to think through situations instead of reacting.

Step 1: We need to calm our body and brain, because when we're stressed, we're not helpful to ourselves or anyone else.

Step 2 is all about clarity and choices. As I always say, if you're not clear in your head, you're not clear out in the world.

In this case, clarity involves getting clear about all of your choices in a situation. Identifying a whole range of choices reminds you that you have agency and power. For Angela, clarity was about reflecting on all of the potential choices that were available to her about her next steps with Ted.

When I asked her, what are all of your high-level choices, she identified 4 to start. Choice 1: she could keep doing the same thing with Ted. Same old, same old. Choice 2 was that she could give him an ultimatum. Shape up or ship out type of thing. Choice 3 was that she could create a type of performance plan, with clear expectations and how he could achieve those expectations in a certain time frame. Choice 4 was that she could enlist help from other leaders that Ted works with.

Now, some of those were obviously unlikely choices....AND...it is important to give yourself permission to include all of your choices before you say yay or nay. The reason for this comes back to the brain. When you are doing step 2 and making choices, you are engaging the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that lets us do our higher-level thinking. Choosing one of the choices then continues to engage our higher-level effective thinking.

Angela decided that she was going to ask her colleague for help. She knew that Ted had an easier relationship with another leader, and she was going to start by having a conversation with that colleague.

Angela made a choice and acted on it. And just like with Angela, when we think effectively and make a choice, we often know exactly what to do next. By the end of our conversation, Angela was excited to try this experiment, gather data, and see what happened.

One other idea that Angela and I discussed is a helpful one, especially when you work with people whom you realize you might need to let go.

Please remember that not every person is the right fit for every situation. There are going to be times when, despite everyone's best efforts, a person doesn't fit in a certain work situation at that time. It might not be an opportunity for their best and highest use; it might not be a fit for their purpose or values; or they might not be a fit with the environment. It does not mean that they are good or bad, or that you are right or wrong. Please remember that in this lifetime, there are lots of situations and experiences, and different people are best suited for different experiences at different times.

For example, with Ted, it might be that with a little guidance, he'll thrive. Or, it might be that it's not the right fit at this time. Either way, I reminded Angela, you're OK, he's OK, and it's going to be OK.

Tapping into a big picture perspective calms us down and gives us a more empowered way to see a situation.

So, let's bring this to you.

In the next few weeks, when you have a difficult person encounter, please practice these 2 steps.

First, find your calm. Take a few deep belly breaths so you can help yourself and others.

Second, find your clarity. List all of the choices you have. All of them, even the unlikely ones. This will let you identify your choices, so that you can choose one and move forward.

Lastly, try seeing the situation from a big picture, 30,000 foot view perspective to see if that helps.

As you practice these tools, you'll build your calm, clarity, and confidence. And if you role model these strategies for those around you, you'll help them build their calm and clarity, too.

Thank you so much for being part of my community. If my podcast topics are helpful to you, I invite you to sign up for my monthly newsletter, which has similar types of tips and ideas. You can sign up for my newsletter on my website www.debelbaum.com.

So, keep exhaling, keep breathing deeply, and please keep remembering that in every situation, you always have choices. Until next time!