



Dealing with Difficult People Situations

When we regularly deal with the public we can have a range of experiences from the very lovely to the not so pleasant. There can be occasions where the situation becomes difficult and conflict arises. Obviously no written material can replace commonsense and experience when it comes to dealing with these encounters. But we include some tips here for you to consider.

- **Be prepared to 'let it go'.**

For all of us there are some issues that cannot be compromised. There are times when you must decide to make 'a stand' and in being firm but not aggressive you put your message across to another. There are other times, however, when you can 'let it go'. It may be more productive to ignore their behaviour or even back down. Every difficult situation is different so it's good to choose when to make a stand and when to withdraw.

- **Try to get 'into the head' of the other.**

Whenever you are dealing with difficult behaviour it is important to attempt to understand where it may be coming from. As complicated as this can be (especially in the heat of the moment) trying to understand why they might be acting and behaving in such a manner provides clues about how you can respond. It also helps later as you try to forgive with Christian love what may have been unpleasant or intimidating.

- **Focus on the behaviour not the person.**

It's important that you do focus on the difficult behaviour that you are dealing with rather than the person. You cannot change another, especially when things are conflictual. But you can focus on what the other is doing that is creating the problem. It's easier to ask someone to change how they are acting than to tell them to make a change in who they are or what they believe. You can point towards the consequences of that way of acting. "When I am shouted at I feel like shouting back" is a lot more effective than "You're ridiculous and should grow up!"

- **Respond rather than React**

This might seem a fine distinction but it is an important principle when dealing with the behaviour of another that disturbs. What is meant here is that it's best to respond thoughtfully to the behaviour rather than reacting to whatever pushes your buttons. A knee jerk reaction which is defensive or aggressive puts you out of control and can heighten tension and conflict. As difficult as it may become, remaining calm, cool and collected gives you more control of the situation. One way to be more responsive is to listen more than you speak and act. Then you hear the other person's perspective and have some time to consider an appropriate response.

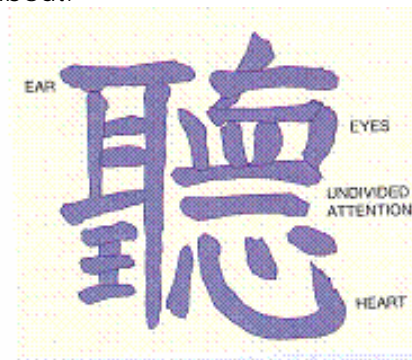
Listening is a dynamic activity and one approach to this is called "Active Listening". It can take some practise to feel comfortable with this way of dialoguing with others but it is worth the effort. Active Listening involves:

- Attending Skills -A posture of involvement, Eye contact, Non-distracting environment
- Following Skills - Conversational door openers, Minimal encouragers, Infrequent questions, Attentive silence
- Reflecting Skills - Paraphrasing/mirroring, Reflecting feelings (relational), Reflecting meaning (content), Summarizing

The aim of active listening is to

- 1) To understand what another person is saying and thinking - from his or her point of view; and to
- 2) Communicate back and check that understanding with the person doing the talking

The following Chinese character for the verb "to listen" and is a neat summary of what Active Listening is all about:



- **Be calm**

In conflict it's normal for our body to go into 'flight or fight' mode. In a difficult situation this can lead to increased levels of anger or anxiety. As much as possible, remain calm (or at least present yourself that way!). Breathe slowly and deeply. Try to be still and look for a good outcome. If it is possible ask for time out, that is "Can we take a moment and think about this?" Whatever will help you stay in charge of the situation.

- **Safety first**

Generally speaking you should never work with the public on your own. It is far better to ensure that two or more people are present during opening hours and that a phone of some sort is easy to get to. If a situation ever gets out of control - safety first. Leave the area - your well being is the top priority.

- **Spend time reflecting after a difficult encounter.**

Debriefing is crucial and is best done with a sympathetic listener who can walk through the experience with you and help add perspective to it. Reflecting on what can be learnt from the encounter, about yourself and the way you deal with others can be invaluable, not just for difficult situations but as a way to grow in your own maturity and experience. Then pray - for each other and also the person you encountered.