

What's Your Mindset Newsletter

from **Helena Radeson - Your Partner to GET YOU WHERE YOU WANT!**



How to stay out of someone else's storm!

Or: Managing difficult clients, people and interactions

When I work with executives and management teams to accelerate growth, my objective number one is to get the individuals and the organization set up for top performance. I want everyone to be playing their A game.

Accelerating growth like that often centres around unblocking three things that are holding us back; limiting beliefs (which are internal), obstacles (which are external), and interpersonal relationships.

These areas often float together and mix and there are no clear cut or easy answers, there's no silver bullet. Sometimes, we have limiting beliefs that were integrated into our personalities early in our lives and they are the reason we feel uneasy with certain people, sometimes it can be external obstacles like scheduling or prioritizing that hold us back from top performance. It is most often a mix and the individual coaching sessions are used to unblock and clarify these aspects from an individual point of view.

With that said, there is one external obstacle in particular that often shows up as a blocker to growth: difficult clients. And more specifically how to manage difficult, even rude, impatient clients, how to behave around them, how to go about having the difficult conversations with them. And yes, you guessed right, this isn't applicable only to clients, it's usable for relationships in general and difficult people in particular. It's a life hack to master.

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To start with: what is a difficult client or person, can we define it?

There are all types of difficult behaviours, I'm sure the list in your head is more exhaustive, but to name some there's the constantly interrupting people, the aggressive ones, those who do not saying anything at all, the not listening, the rude, the shaming and not to forget, the inappropriate. No one client or person is the same but all in all there's a lot of situations and interactions that are just really difficult to handle.

And where does this stem from? What's the reason the client or the person is behaving in a difficult or different way?

I like to categorize the reasons into three areas. Mind you, not mutually exclusive, not exhaustive, but, simple enough to use as a rule of thumb when it gets 'hot':

- Cultural impact

This means that we have different ways in different cultures for what is perceived as ‘normal behaviors’ in interpersonal relationships. With globalization and digitalization, the pace at which we have to learn and adapt to these differences is hugely accelerated.

- Personality traits

Not only are we born with different internal set ups, but everybody also has different personal set of values varying heavily on type of upbringing, experiences in youth plus adult environment. These will inevitably mean we all see things with our own personal goggles, including how to handle relationships.

- Situational circumstances

We are products of what happens in and around us, and as complex human beings it is near impossible for us to emotionally separate different situations from one another. What happened to the person in the previous meeting, last night at the dinner table, last night’s sleep patterns or what was on the news this morning, or loads of other small or big things, we bring stuff with us that may not always be easy. Simply said: The behaviors displayed in the interaction at hand may have absolutely nothing to do with it.

So, what do you do in one of those difficult interactions?

Well, let’s start with the theory.

There’s obviously many schools and ideas on these topics, but summarizing the main ones, these are ten key strategies for dealing with difficult clients / people:

- don't take it personally
- stay calm
- listen more, talk less
- lower your voice
- build rapport through empathy
- respond as if all your customers are listening (to avoid getting personal)
- know when to give in
- remember that you're interacting with a human

What do you think? Do any of the strategies fit to the difficult person scenario you are envisioning?

In my view, they paint a quite nice framework: a general, tactical outlay for smart things to apply when in difficult interactions. In addition, most of them are generically applicable for different means of communication: face-to-face, phone, video, mail, sms. When used in combination with the three reasons for why people behave in ways that may come across as difficult, cultural impact, personality traits and situational circumstances, I see a useful approach emerging.

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But still, in my view there is one major thing missing: HOW?

How do I apply these tactics, these ideas?

I may know them, but how do I use them In Real Life?

I like to think of it as a Pause – Pass – Proceed approach.

This means that when confronted with a difficult client or person I first Pause. Just Pause.

I do this to give myself time to reflect, to remember the strategies and choose which one or multiple to apply, and to reflect over where the behavior might be coming from, is it culturally, personally or situationally driven?

In short, I buy myself time.

And then I Pass.

I Pass the persons invite to jump in there, to reciprocate, to be difficult back. Because that's really what they are doing: throwing in a mine, and their highest wish (at least they think) is

for you to throw the mine back, so the fight can start.

After the Pass I Proceed.

I Proceed to handle the interaction on my terms, and not letting the difficult part affect where I was going with the interaction.

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Excellent, right??!!

Or are you, as I, screaming BUT HOW!!! How do I Pause? How do I not jump into the other persons storm? How do I not throw the mine back? WHAT DO I DO??

Well, these are three hacks I use and teach:

1. Pretend something is happening that gives you a Time Out.

(Bathroom, phone call, your cat barfing, getting in an incoming super important, call, a fly in your eye, whatever, but have one that suits you handy for whenever you might need to throw it in!)

2. Use a physical queue to remind yourself and divert your attention.

(Squeeze your index finger, fiddle with a ring, tap your fingers while using an affirmation eg thumb to index finger: “I”, thumb to middle finger: “Come”, thumb to ring finger: “In, thumb to pinky: “Peace”.)

3. Or as a client came up with – picture them naked!

(Or in the bathroom or whatever makes you smile and see them as totally normal human beings.)

“...BUT HOW!!! How do I Pause? How do I not jump into the other persons storm?

How do I not throw the mine back? WHAT DO I DO??”

In the end the thing is, there will always be difficult clients, difficult people, difficult interactions. And sometimes, that's not even because the counterpart is being so difficult. Because the truth of all of the above applies to ourselves too. We may be the one with a cultural reference that is off, we might be the one that because of our experiences react negatively to a certain type of person, and we may be the one who had a really bad night's sleep.

In individual coaching sessions, these are the typical blockers we would dig into when discussions around handling difficult people come up. What do I, as a complex human being bring into my interactions that make me perceive some people as more difficult than others? And how can I unblock it and improve the ease in my relationships.

As a start though, just decide on what your best way to Pause is, and then: Pause, Pass & Proceed to manage difficult interactions. Because starting is the first step, and without the first step, there can't be a second.

You've got this.

HELENA RADESON

PERFORMANCE COACH & CHANGE CONSULTANT

+41 79 284 25 31 | hallo@helenaradeson.com | www.helenaradeson.com



