



Can You Hear Me Now? Decoding Difficult Behaviors

As a leadership coach, my clients often talk about “difficult” coworkers or customers. Perhaps you have those people in your life too? When I ask clients what makes the situation difficult, they say it’s the frustration of not getting the information, reaction or action they are looking for. Notice that I ask about the situation, not the person. I suggest they separate the person from the behavior. We are not talking about a person being difficult, but their interactions with us. Depersonalizing the situation makes it easier to step back and analyze what might not be working.

Many times when we don’t get what we want from others, we repeat our same behavior, and maybe more forcefully. We might get louder or repeat what we said more slowly, as if the person didn’t hear us the first time. We do this because we may not know any other way to be. Of course we make sense, don’t we?

People show us all the time how to communicate with them—if we just know what to look for.

Consider treating the situation as a foreign land to explore. Like a wise traveler to a place we’ve never been, we learn about their culture and a few words in their language. Presenting ourselves this way breaks the tension that being unfamiliar with each other brings. Someone from another culture doesn’t hear us or see the world as we do and expecting them to respond or look or act as we do can earn us the title, “Ugly American.” You know, those travelers abroad accused of arrogant, ignorant and ethnocentric behavior.

People show us all the time how to communicate with them—if we just know what to look for. Understanding personality styles is like having a decoder ring to behavior. Any number of assessments (DiSC, Social Styles, Insights Colors) can provide clues to figuring out a better way of communicating with others. Personality styles are a great decoder because they represent the unique pattern of behaviors that have been observed through the ages, such as the Greek physician, Hippocrates, who wrote about four “humors” that evolved into theories about psychological temperament. When we understand these patterns, we can choose a different approach that connects with our colleague.



So how do you break the code? What do you observe in that person? Behavior gives us clues to what others need. Our inner world of thoughts, feelings, experiences and values drives what the outer world sees. Notice body language, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and pace of speech—even word choice. Flexing your behavior to adapt to the way they express themselves is like extending a handshake of introduction. For example, are they speaking rapidly with enthusiasm and gesturing with their hands? It might not be your normal style, but stepping out of our comfort zone makes a positive impact. Pump up your delivery. Show some energy, even it doesn’t fully match their exuberance. They will see that you are trying to “speak” their language and create a comfortable space for them to interact with you.

Got a difficult interaction ahead? Get out your styles decoder for the well-known models mentioned above and start reading the clues. They are not as undercover as you think! ■

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