

Maryland 4-H Animal Science Program Guidebook

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Dealing with Difficult People

Sometimes in our work in 4-H we find ourselves in situations where we must deal with people who have different goals or feelings about the purpose or ways the program and its activities are conducted. It is helpful to have a basic understanding about the ways in which people in our program may behave and different methods to help us work more effectively with individuals we might feel are “difficult”.

The following information is based on the presentation given by Kirk Astroth and Cody Stone entitled “Bullies, Tattletales & Nimrods: Dealing with Conflict in 4-H Programs.”

Identifying Difficult Types of People

We all know people who are more difficult to deal with than others. These people typically fall into one of seven categories. Knowing a little about these categories may help us to work more effectively with them in the future.

- ◆ **Hostile Aggressives**—include those bullies who prefer to attack and intimidate; those who like to make snide remarks; and those who explode when they feel helpless or out of control. Deal with these types when no one else is around. Ask them if their intentions were really to come across as they did. Establish a code of conduct on how to relate to one another.
- ◆ **Complainers**—these are the whiners who think they have little control, but like to tell you what’s wrong. Work with these people by asking for complaints in writing and involving them in the group planning process.
- ◆ **Clams**—are the silent, unresponsive types. They may withhold information so they can use it to sabotage things later. Start a conversation with the clams with some chit-chat and end with a specific time to revisit the situation. Ask lots of open-ended questions to encourage their input.
- ◆ **Super-Agreeables**—are nice, outgoing people, but ones who let you down with lots of excuses; they work extremely hard at being liked by others. Encourage these individuals to develop a reasonable course of action and to be honest about what they can accomplish.

◆ **Negativists**—are pessimistic about everything; seek to make everyone else as miserable as they are. When working with these people, help them to focus on problem-solving mode. Ask them to describe both the best and worst things that can happen as a result.

◆ **Experts—Know It Alls**—include those who always have THE right answer (if they are challenged, they consider it a personal insult); and those who become instant experts with little research. Help these people to consider alternative views, but don't challenge them. Ask questions of their facts to help them discover their own errors.

◆ **Indecisive—Stallers**—are those who cannot make a decision until it is made for them. These difficult people need help telling you what's really on their minds. Encourage them to give you both positive and negative feedback, but don't pressure them too hard.

Guidelines for Heading Off Conflict

Here are some tips for preventing conflict from happening in the first place.

1. **Set expectations early.** Establish clear expectations for everyone in the working environment. Be clear that people are to respect each other and no bullying or abusive behavior will be tolerated.
2. **Look for warning signs.** Be aware of your own personal strengths and weaknesses, beliefs, and perceptions. These will shape your response in a situation.
3. **Stay in control.** Not everyone will always live up to the expectations that have been set, which can create stressful situations. Keep your composure and ask questions instead of giving ultimatums. Don't fire back at someone if they take a shot at you. Return to the expectations that have been set for how to work together.
4. **Keep a positive outlook.** Expect good things to happen, and they will! Your attitude often directs your response.
5. **Maintain a sense of humor.** Learn to laugh. Remember how upset people can get and how comical it can be. Don't let your behavior provide comic relief for someone else!
6. **Establish ground rules.** When conflict happens, set goals for how to resolve it. Identify what a successful resolution to the situation will look like (and what would happen if it is not resolved).
7. **Drill down to the roots.** What is the real cause of the problem? Why are people reacting as they are? Each person needs to agree on the definition of the problem before it can be solved.

8. **Think win-win.** One party does not have to win and the other lose. Disagreements can lead to a solution that is beneficial to all involved. Each side may need to give a little, or at least share a little more about each other to identify a workable solution for all.

9. **Eliminate emotions.** This is difficult, but separate feelings from the problem. Emotions cloud the perceptions and rational thinking that is needed to arrive at a solution. Focus on the values that everyone can embrace.

10. **Brainstorm.** Challenge everyone involved to think through a number of possible positive outcomes. Be creative about the possibilities available.

11. **Concentrate on what you can control.** Focus attention and activities on the areas in which you can make a difference. Let go of the areas you cannot control. External assistance may be needed for these areas.

12. **Take action.** Once you've arrived at a win-win solution, implement it. Write down steps that each person has agreed to take and follow-up with them to ensure they follow through with their responsibilities.

Conflict Styles

We conclude with a series related to dealing with difficult people by looking at a variety of conflict management styles. Each may be appropriate given a certain situation. The key is to learn when to use which style and to use it effectively!

- **Directing**—sees conflict as a battle to be won. Bargaining is not used. Use this response when a safety issue is at stake and quick action is required.
- **Collaborating**—discuss all options and work toward a win/win agreement. Utilize all parties as partners that have important contributions to find a solution. This method may require a significant amount of time.
- **Compromising**—look for a middle ground where all sides give a little bit to resolve the conflict as quickly as possible.
- **Accommodating**—deny your own needs so that the relationship may be smoothed and to quiet strong feelings. Look to win another time.
- **Avoiding**—pretend that the conflict is not there in hopes that it will go away. Can also be used to gather information needed to make a decision or to allow one or more parties involved time to cool off.
- **Appealing to an Outside Party**—use rules, laws, and experts to help resolve the problem. Look to those who have more authority, skills, or influence to determine what is right and fair.

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