



Handling Difficult People

Murali Chemuturi

Are there any easy people to handle? In software project management, we interact with superiors, subordinates, peers and customers. Some of them are easy but most are difficult to handle. This article attempts to classify difficult people into categories and suggests ways to handle them

Software Project Management, Resource Handling, People, difficult people

Introduction

As a software project manager, you need to handle various people ranging from your team members, peers, superiors and customers. One thing typical for software project manager is that all these persons are well educated and highly intelligent. Most of the people are good and perform what is expected of them. But few are difficult – would few really matter? George Bernard Shaw once said, “Most people in the world adjust their way to the ways of the world. Only a few would want the world to adjust to their ways. Therefore all progress depends on them”. Remember the dictum “Insignificant majority and significant minority” – this is used in many places ABC (Always Better Control) Analysis, VED (Vital Essential and Desirable) analysis and so on. Hence this article trying to forewarn you of this significant minority so that you can effectively handle all your people.

I am reminded of an anecdote.

A psychiatry Professor was giving lecture to the students about the behavior of the abnormal man – for five days in a row. When the Professor started to continue the lecture on the sixth day – a student got up and asked “Professor, when will you start telling us about the behavior of the normal man”? “When we find him”, the professor replied, “We cure him”.

Are there any people who are easy to handle?

Some people may be to easy to handle but for only some time. Who are these people who are easy to handle for some time?

1. Trainees – till their training is completed and are confirmed on the permanent rolls of the company
2. New employees till their probation period is successfully completed
3. Employees that are expecting their promotion and wish to get it
4. Employees that are low on performance but high on pleasing the boss and thus survive
5. Eager-beavers – who always want to please the boss just for the sake of pleasing – their density in the employee population is very thin
6. Wise men – who understand their role as well as yours and perform their duties diligently irrespective of your provocation – their percentage is miniscule in the organizations



Chemuturi Consultants – Do it well or not at all

Rest all, are to a degree, difficult to handle. Here I attempt to profile the difficult people and give you some cues to handle them.

Why should we handle these people – because we cannot avoid dealing with them. They are part of every organization and who knows, we ourselves could be difficult for others.

Classification of Difficult People

We can classify difficult people into the following categories -

1. Two-timer
2. Backstabber
3. First Chapter Expert
4. The Martyr
5. Prima Donna
6. Manipulator
7. The Gossip
8. Breather-down-the neck
9. Buck-Stopper
10. No-Man
11. Mr. Justice
12. The Courier Pigeon

Where do you find these people – in your subordinates, your peers and in your superiors.

Two-Timer

Here is a person whose stand depends on the situation and people involved. He puts on “public smile and private snarl”. What he says in public differs from what he says in private. This person is completely undependable.

We can spot him the first time we are two-timed – do not treat the first one as coincidence. No one two-times unintentionally. These people could be found in your subordinates, peers as well as superiors.

How do we handle this person?

When he makes a private commitment to you, do not depend on it unless you get it in some form of writing such as email and if he chats on a messenger, save the conversation. Try to have witnesses when you deal with him. Maintain minutes of meeting whenever you meet him.

Backstabber

Backstabbers betray confidence, especially if it can get them some positive points with the upper echelon. They are not your enemies but your friends. Very difficult to spot these people or prove that they backstabbed you.



Chemuturi Consultants – Do it well or not at all

We can spot these persons only thru secondary sources. When a boss-type person is exhibiting animosity towards you for no apparent reason, realize that somebody backstabbed you. And that somebody is suddenly friendly with this boss-type person. These people could be found in your peers and subordinates and rarely in superiors.

Backstabbers obtain the info that assists them to backstab you, from you – using charm, encouragement and sympathy to egg you on to criticize senior persons. Remember, “Loose lips sink ships”. In your workplace, never offer criticism, in the presence of others, of a senior person who is especially powerful.

Backstabbers can backstab you only when your back is turned towards them – so never show your back to any one including the most charming friend of yours.

First Chapter Expert

This person knows something about every scenario, technology and person in the organization. He never allows anyone to get into details because his knowledge is limited to the introductory first chapter of a book on the subject at hand. He uses this limited knowledge to shoot down any positive proposal by picking holes, which are plugged in the later chapters of the book. It is extremely difficult to argue with a chap who has half-baked knowledge on the subject.

It is easy to spot this person – you can't miss him as he is often found discussing new topics all over the place and disappear as soon as someone gets into detail. These people could be found mostly in your peers.

How to deal with this person? Get into the details first and give the guy some credit saying something like “As our John probably can explain to you / knows ...”. This normally shuts him up.

The Martyr

Often, people who are overlooked for promotions become martyrs. Especially those people who have a long tenure in the organization and whose academic credentials prevent them from reaching the top echelons or those persons that are not on the fast track of career progression, exhibit the attributes of a martyr. Martyrs give a negative spin on everything – especially in private. They do not do so in public as they get fired from the organization.

It is easy to spot them - when something goes wrong they come to you and say, “I told you so”. Whenever there is a new initiative, they would tell you in private, that it is going to fail. They are harmless except that they discourage you from coming out with new initiatives or take up something challenging. These people could be found in your superiors and peers.

Indulge him, but never take his discouragement seriously. He is also a great source to point the other side of your proposals – so use him as your Quality Assurance person for your proposals and initiatives.



Chemuturi Consultants – Do it well or not at all

Prima Donna

These are sticklers for rules, regulations, conventions, practices and so on. They are normally petty minded people and could be found in parking attendants, security department, secretaries to bosses, auditors and so on.

Have you ever had experience with the parking attendant who waits until you park your vehicle, lock and ready to go, he ambles slowly to tell you that you parked wrongly / in the wrong place and force you to park where he orders. You feel “Why didn’t he tell me before I parked”? He is a Prima Donna.

You visit a client and his secretary tells you to wait. You see her polishing her nails but not making any attempt to communicate your arrival with her boss. You try to remind her and you get reprimanded. She is a Prima Donna.

These people have limited power – just to annoy you - and they use it to its full extent.

How do you handle them? Say “Hi” to the parking attendant when entering the parking lot. Put on your charm and best manners with the secretary.

The trick is to give them an impression that you respect their position and power and you can get along well with them

The Manipulator

Manipulators feign to be very busy to either avoid work or to pass it on to you. They always look haggard and under pressure. They are either slow workers or do something else during working hours. They come to you with something like this “I am very busy right now, can you help me and do this”?

Or they tell the boss that even though it is his (manipulator’s) job, you are the best person in view of your past experience or special skills (real or imagined) or that you “seem” to be free of any work on hand.

These people could be found mostly in your peers.

When you detect this “always busy-as-a-bee” person, try and put on that haggardly look yourself and approach him to see if he is free to help you out. Am I telling you to become a manipulator yourself? You bet I am – there is no medicine that is better suited to a manipulator than a dose of his-own medicine.

The Gossip

The problem with Gossips is that they pick up loud thinking or parts of conversation, then put two and two together to make it eight and pass it off as fact. If they do not find any thing worth circulating, they invent juicy info. They sow distrust, prejudice and suspicion among people. They also waste time – yours and theirs.



Chemuturi Consultants – Do it well or not at all

They normally have spare time and also very good conversationalists. They narrate with great skill and hold your interest. They make you ask for more. They are addictive. These people could be found in your subordinates and peers.

The best way to handle them is to avoid them or avoid being drawn into a gossip session. Remember, if they are spreading false info about someone else with you, they surely do the same about you too, with others when you are not there.

Breather-down-the neck

He is an uneasy-delegator. He is usually in the position of a boss and perhaps due to some past bad experiences with his subordinates, he is not comfortable delegating work. He is also insecure about his position. When a person who normally does work by himself gets promoted to the position of a boss, that person also becomes a breather-down-the-neck till he matures. He prefers to do the work himself. Sometimes bosses with few subordinates also resort to breathing down the necks of their subordinates as they have nothing better to do.

Understand that he is growing up and maturing to be a boss, give him space. One thing that gets him off your back is to meet the deadline the first time and a few times so that he becomes confident of your commitment. Then he would not be so overbearing. The trick is to give him confidence about your commitments.

Buck-stopper

Any thing that goes to the buck-stopper – stays there. It never comes out. If you want that the buck be moved, you need to chase him. This person never says no – but he never gives a commitment nor does he actually respond. His desk is a bottomless pit – you can put in anything but getting something out is very difficult.

He generally dodges all your queries about committing a date for any action expected of him. You can find these people in service departments handling grievances or complaints.

These people could be found in your peers especially in service departments.

Their philosophy is “If it is really necessary or urgent, someone will come in-person”. So get things done by such persons, be informed that you need to push the buck – pay a visit to him and get him to move it.

No-man

These persons are capable of saying “No” to each and anything that you would say. They have excellent logic to deny your proposal or request. You say “The Sun rises in the east” and these persons say “No the Sun does not rise in the east”. If you press on with your argument, they would argue that east itself is ill-defined, physical north pole and magnetic north pole are not the same, that earth itself is slanted and so on.

It is easy to spot them – the most frequent word spoken by him is either “no” or “not”. These people could be found in your peers especially in service departments.



Chemuturi Consultants – Do it well or not at all

While so, these people would be ready to put forward proposals – so if you want to get him to say “yes” or something similar, you have to make him put up your proposals on your behalf. Instead of telling him what needs to be done, consult him and give him suggestions and make him feel that your proposal becomes his.

Mr. Justice

These persons are brought up on the stories of class-struggle. They divide the world (organization) into haves (of power or management) and have-nots (staff, workers, professional workers and so on). They see injustice in every action of the management. They never look at the benefits but always, look at the side effects.

You will more often than not find them active directly or indirectly, in trade unions and such other associations. You will also find them opposing recognizing merit in persons and advocate seniority for awards and rewards. Consequently, you would also find them low on performance – they would be hovering around penalty-avoidance level of performance themselves. These could be mostly found in your subordinates and rarely in peers.

Confrontational-counseling, using quantitative data is the best way to bring them inline. And this is a continuous and periodic chore. They will revert to trade union jargon, if you miss one confrontational-counseling session.

The Courier Pigeon

The bearer of good news always gets the reward. You would have seen this in movies, the heroin hugs and / or kisses the postman bringing a letter from her distant lover or from an agency informing her of some good news! So, some in the organization take on this postman role – wherever something gets done, these persons go and inform the boss before the actual performer has a chance to get to the boss. They always keep their antennae up, scanning the horizon for newsworthy items to carry to the boss. While this is harmless, your punch is gone. Your success is already old hat.

You can spot them by observing for those who poke their nose into other’s affairs. When something important is going on in the organization, these persons would be present irrespective of whether they are involved. You will find them at places where they are not needed. These people could be found in your peers mostly.

Obviously, these people have the ear of the boss. So be careful what you say to them. They not only carry good news but also carry tales – if you criticize boss in this person’s presence – be sure that it would be carried. So discretion is your safeguard. Do not reveal if you are on the verge of some success. Keep your calm and show your excitement only in the presence of your boss.

Conclusion

Human beings are difficult to handle, as they are unpredictable. Their response is not commensurate with your stimulus, most of the times. People also change their personality attributes over a period of time – it is not necessary that the dictum “once a

