What To Do About Your Worst Relationship at Work

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At the beginning of her new book Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People), Amy Gallo writes about a feeling almost all of us shudder to remember:

> "My relationship with my boss had invaded my psyche and, slowly, over time, had become more important—or at least more time-consuming—than my relationships with the people I cared about most."

What Amy means by "important" isn't so much **functional**—the boss's impact on some specific outcome that Amy affirmed to be essential to her life goals—as what we could think of as the "market share of her inner life."

Almost nothing matters as much to our happiness, and few things matter as much to our effectiveness at work, as the questions:

- Who has what market share of my inner life?
- What's going on inside my head (and heart) as I give them our attention?
- How do these patterns inside my head shape my behaviors—and what results are those behaviors achieving?

These three questions help frame why working with a "difficult person"—which I propose to define subjectively as *difficult = difficult for me to handle with equanimity*—presents such a big challenge. When we work with someone who is difficult (for us):

- They take a large market share of our inner lives, stealing share from other people to whom we'd rather give our attention
- When we think about them—often when we don't mean to be, like when we're playing with our children or in the middle of the night—we find ourselves spinning, resentful, stuck in some loop we can't find our way out of
- Despite all this investment of intellectual and emotional energy, we also find ourselves stuck at an outcome level—either doing the same things and getting the same insufficient results or trying various things that don't end up making a difference

So: what do we do about that?

Part of what made Amy such a superb consultant early in her career when we worked together at Katzenbach Partners is her gift for conveying the clear, simple, actionable path through a tangled situation. (Her TED Talk "The Gift of Conflict" begins with the worst mishap of that otherwise stellar chapter in her career. In this story, I'm the unnamed boss who doesn't fire her, but tells her exactly what she doesn't want to hear.) She's continued to build this superpower in the many years since, and has turned this Ray of Clarity powerfully on the dilemmas of working with difficult people. You should productively channel the time and energy you're already going to spend thinking about your Worst Relationship at Work into reading Amy's book—if you're pressed for time, read Chapters 1, 2, 11 and whichever chapter feels most apt as a description of whoever is most currently a thorn in your emotional side. In the meantime, I'll share here the five-minute version of what I take away from the very close reading following my recognition that if the book made *even a little bit of a difference* in how I navigate the relationships I find difficult, my time spent studying would earn easily a ten-fold return.

What I find so important about the book is how powerfully it teaches three lessons—lessons which are easy to become familiar with, but require great focus to internalize fully. As part of my learning process, I've tried to distill the essence of what Amy's teaching in these twenty words:

1. Outer problems require inner work

2. No difficult problem can be solved without understanding its root cause

3. Tactics flow from strategy

In her second chapter, Amy takes us inside her struggle with one of the things I often struggle with—letting an email get under her skin and take over her attention. She writes:

> "When we're interacting with someone challenging, our brain wants to protect us from harm. In the process, however, it often holds us back. I had made the decision to let Brad's email go, to shrug it off and move on. But my brain was hooked on the interaction."

Just as a driver needs to internalize steer into the skid before the skid begins, we cannot hope that a graceful response will arise spontaneously from our moments of preoccupation. We need to ingrain in our calm minds habits of response for our future, disordered selves to grab hold of. Two habits stand out from Amy's chapter on "Your Brain on Conflict": observing our reactions ("the more you can observe your instinctive reactions when your mind senses a threat, the better you will get at separating the stories your brain cooks up from what's actually happening") and reappraising the situation ("reassessing an emotional situation… as a challenge instead of a threat… helps people focus and make more considered decisions about how to respond").

The inner work required to get a better outer result with difficult people is teaching ourselves to pause (observe our reactions), unhook our brains (reappraise) and offer our most intentional response to the situation at hand. Just the unhooking part is sufficient to reclaim a great deal of inner market share for better purposes than reacting to an irritant, and is likely to make us more effective. As Timothy Galway wrote about his experience as a tennis coach in The Inner Game of Work:

> "When my student complained about his faulty backhand, I would tell him that I wanted to postpone fixing it until later. All I wanted him to do now was to observe some detail of the ball. For example, I might ask the student to notice whether the ball was falling, rising, or level at the moment of contact with the racket. I would hasten to say that I wasn't asking him to make any change, but just to observe what was happening…. When I could hear the neutrality of observation in his tone of voice, I knew that his mindset was no longer a judgmental one, at least for the moment. What amazed me at first, but which I later came to expect, was that in this nonjudgmental mode of observation of the ball, many of the technical elements of his swing would change spontaneously!"

Powerful as this is, it isn't sufficient for most of us to address the challenges presented by our Worst Relationship at Work because the particular difficulties of that relationship leave us practically stuck. Even if we can respond intentionally, we're befuddled about what it might work to do.

When taking the actions that come naturally is taking us nowhere good, it's time to remember the adage that there's nothing so practical as a good theory. There's something about the difficult person that doesn't make sense to us, and until we can find the sense in what they're doing, we're likely to keep pushing on a string. To escape this pattern, we need a good theory of why it is they behave in these ways that bedevil us—what is the root cause? A clear view of the root cause enables us to arrive at a reasonable strategy, and the tactics of what we should and absolutely positively should not do right now flow from that strategy.

Let's get specific. Amy dedicates a chapter to each of eight archetypes, one of which is "The Passive-Aggressive Peer." I appreciate directness and like environments in which people have difficult conversations openly. It's no accident that of all the clients I've served, the only one where I spent time in house was Bridgewater, perhaps the most direct and transparent corporate culture on earth. Passive-aggressive behavior often throws me for a loop.

Amy helpfully points out: "People rarely make the conscious decision to behave in a passive-

aggressive way. Rather, it's a reaction, and it's often driven by the fear of failure or rejection, a desire to avoid conflict, or a drive to gain power." Suppose it might indeed be that the root cause of the passive-aggressive behavior your nemesis exhibits is a fear of failure. A strategy needs to respond to what's going on in the situation—the root cause—in a way that yields an outcome above our threshold of success.

Dealing with such an individual, my response (I doubt I'm the only one!) too often careens back and forth between turning up the heat, confronting what I feel is being ducked, and letting the behavior go, not seeing enough to gain (or having the energy) to confront what feels like a minor evasion. If fear of failure is driving passive-aggressive behavior, this seesaw response is likely to make it worse. Confrontation raises the individual's sense of danger. If fear of failure is already eliciting indirectness and avoidance, my provoking anxiety will likely lead to a stronger version of the same. Letting the behavior go provides exactly the space that the passive-aggressive behavior seeks to gain—another positive reinforcement. Bouncing back and forth, each side of the seesaw exacerbates the passive-aggressive behavior that I'm trying to reduce—and my inconsistency creates further noise and reduces the leverage of whatever I might try next.

A better strategy would be to:

- Demonstrate support and appreciation
- Sympathetically draw the individual out, to understand the underlying concerns driving the fear of failure
- All the while, create gentle, consistent pressure by asking for explicit commitments and closing the loop on them—starting with small things and progressing from there

Such a strategy both weakens the impulse that's driving the avoidant behavior and makes the cost of that behavior higher. If I'm able to slow down enough to see how I'm reacting to the irritant of the passive-aggressive behavior, and if I've done the work upfront to formulate this strategy, then in what Viktor Frankl called the pause between stimulus and response, I can find the right tactic that channels my best intention. That might generate positive change in the relationship, but even if it doesn't, I have the positive experience of being purposeful—a far cry from the doom loop of reacting in the moment, getting a frustrating result, and then beating up on myself for handling the situation so badly.

Three years ago, I wrote a post called What a Book About How to Parent Taught Me About How to Lead, inspired by Daniel Siegel and Tina Bryson's No-Drama Discipline. I wrote there:

> I know that when Henry goes limp in the bath, shouting no and refusing to be washed, even though—or probably because—it is a few minutes before eight and we should really be progressing to story time, there must be a good alternative to steady escalation on both sides. But I encounter a kind of flooding and tunnel vision there, in the fog of

> action, that obscures the possibilities of cycling through the ways I might make him laugh, distract him, somehow effect a reset for the thirty seconds needed to get the evening back on track.…

As with most advances, practical progress begins with simple concepts and clear principles. Siegel and Bryson paint a picture: “Instead of being reactive, we want to be responsive to our kids. We want to be intentional and make conscious decisions based on principles we’ve thought about and agreed on beforehand. Being intentional means considering various options and then choosing the one that engages a thoughtful approach toward our intended outcomes.” In other words: “What’s needed is a clear understanding of what you actually want to accomplish when your child misbehaves.”

What this book teaches is very much aligned with the core lessons of Getting Along. What better way could there be to invest the market share of inner life clawed back from “difficult people,” than to focus on being the father I most want to be? And what could be a better gym for strengthening the mental and emotional muscles required to deal gracefully with “difficult people” than the exercise of being present for those we love best, amidst the many small collisions of our daily lives?

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