When is a Difficult Person not a Difficult Person?
Negotiating Across Worldviews One-on-One[1]
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What is a worldview and how would we know one in ourselves or others?
I define "worldviews" as the values, expectations, beliefs, and motivations that consciously or unconsciously affect behavior. Because it is hard to know exactly how worldviews affect our own behavior, let alone the behavior of others, I discuss here an imperfect proxy that is more accessible: the degree to which we think of another person as a "difficult person" or not.

A few people may believe worldviews are fixed. However, many of us believe that our worldviews are to some extent malleable, changeable, not necessarily in sync with each other, and very much affected by the views of other people. In addition, we know from contemporary neuroscience that our rational ("system two") thinking often comes up with rationalizations for intuitive, infra-conscious, ("system one") feelings and directives for action. Thus, I may intuitively act on the basis of my world views, below my conscious understanding of decision-making—and my system two brain may contribute a rationalization of why I acted as I did. In the same way, if my intuition suggests a *change* in my behavior, my actions may change, and my rationalizations may change also, in order to justify my change in behavior.

Because so much of what goes into a "worldview" happens out of sight, it is not easy to know the worldviews of others. At times I may not be certain about my own worldviews. But what I *am* likely to understand is whether I find it easy to negotiate with another person—or difficult. I came to think about this, early on, in my work at MIT. Here is my story.

"You are a very difficult person!" A distinguished senior officer burst into my waiting room and came right through into my office.[2] He was holding a furled umbrella high over his head shouting angrily, "Where should I go if I want to launch a complaint against *you*?!! You are a very difficult person!!!!!!!"

It was 1973. I had been appointed by the MIT President and Chancellor as an early type of organizational ombudsperson,[3] so my office served as an open door for MIT's nascent "integrated conflict management system." Everyone at MIT was welcome in my office, with any kind of work-related concern or idea.

In "MIT-speak," my office was configured as a "zero-barrier" office attached to the Office of the President. That is, I was expected to be completely confidential; I kept no case records for MIT. I was designated as independent, and impartial—albeit with a special

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[1] This essay owes a great deal to Drs. Chester Pierce, Clarence Williams, Daniel Shapiro, Donna Hicks, Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Robert Cialdini, Robert Fein, Robert McKersie, Roger Fisher, Thomas Kochan, Thomas Zgambo, and Toni Robinson, J.D.

[2] Small details in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality.

[3] For more details, see: https://mitsloan-php.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-faculty/sites/84/2021/11/15212441/FINAL-10-22-2021-Mary-P-Rowe-Research-and-Publications-Biography-1.pdf

concern for gender, race, and religion. I had no management decision-making power or powers of redress. No one could be required to come to my office; using my office was entirely voluntary. Theoretically, the barriers to seeing me were—and were meant to be—as low as possible, to encourage people with concerns or good ideas.

I had kept a low profile for months as I learned about my new job. I was taken aback at this man's anger. I explained that anyone could complain to my two bosses about me. And…I reflected on a "Rule of Naval Psychiatry" as taught by Dr. Chester Pierce—a renowned Black, Harvard Medical School and School of Education professor and psychiatrist at MIT and at Massachusetts General Hospital—namely: "*Never meet hostility with hostility."*

I turned to my visitor with a quiet question, hoping to understand, "Why do you find me '*very difficult*?'"

As it turned out, some of our worldviews and values were different. My visitor had understood (correctly) that I had suggested to other senior officers that women undergraduates might be included in a meeting about the future of the MIT/ Wellesley exchange. The women students had requested that some specific information be gathered before any decision was made. I had therefor pointed out that a particular decision perhaps ought not be made without the women students' input—and in any case, maybe the decision ought not be made immediately. It turned out that I had disagreed with my visitor's point of view. Our worldviews were not the same about who should be allowed a vote or even have a voice about university decision-making.

As it turned out, some of our worldviews and values were much the same. As I remember, we later bonded a bit about issues of race, a bond I was very happy to deepen. I had returned to the US from some years in the Caribbean and in Africa. In WWII he had served with Black servicemen, at times as a lone white officer. Decades later, he was deeply committed to anything and everything MIT could do for people of color and especially for Black students—including listening to Black students. In later discussions about equity, I could always find a "bridge" with him about something, if there were any connection with race and color. He began to send cases to me. Although I think he truly did not accept me, a woman, as an equal, perhaps I was not always a difficult person.

The interaction set me thinking about difficult people. What makes a person seem to me a difficult person? And when is a difficult person *not* a difficult person—or, at least, less difficult? In the terms of the present discussion about negotiation across worldviews… under what circumstances do worldviews appear less different, and a negotiation less difficult?

There was the senior faculty person who, in a first visit, railed angrily at me for perhaps an hour about the Medical Department. (Doctors had not immediately cured the faculty member's painful repetitive strain injuries.) I spoke no more than twice in that hour, unable even to ask a question. However, in many discussions about many topics over the next few years, after the injuries had healed and my visitor was no longer in pain, I

listened, deeply interested, to the same faculty member. This person was now a thoughtful, balanced, generous, hard-working colleague—respectful of me, respectful of others—and, also, respectful of the Medical Department.

Then, there was a time when senior officers consulted me about faculty who had suddenly morphed into "being impossible," as they fought about dropping specific departmental requirements for undergraduates. I listened at length to these faculty—who were polite and friendly with me—and, also, returned to being their collegial selves in the department—when their views about departmental requirements were heard and addressed.

And there was a researcher who at first was distinctively rude and generally self-centered, whom I suddenly found delightful at every subsequent visit. What had changed? The researcher had undertaken to teach me about the culture and history of their academic discipline. I was fascinated and grateful as I learned more about the worldviews in that discipline. That researcher has been, ever after, a kind colleague.

I then began to take notes for my own guidance, for my MIT Sloan students and for other complaint handlers; the reader may add many more ideas. In these days of war, genocide, terrifying hate speech, near-lethal disagreements about vaccines, and "cancel culture," our need to consider the worldviews and values of others appears, anew, at the door with every dawn.

Some of the ideas on this list may at first seem a bit far afield from "differences in worldviews." The concept of a "difficult person" is an imperfect proxy for the concept of a person with different worldviews. Moreover, some worldviews would not yield to any idea on this list. For example, there are people so out-of-touch with reality or cruel that none of these ideas would make a difference. However, each idea on the lists below is an everyday behavioral example of one of the "sources of power and influence"—so dear to negotiation theorists—about why one's own points of view and the points of view of another person may shift.

Ideas to Consider in Dealing with a Difficult Person

Trust builds most quickly outside the stated agenda. With trust I may come to see the other person as less difficult:

- When I perceive the "difficult person" to be "like me," or like someone I love.
- When we share some hobby or skill, or prior experience, or suddenly discover that each of us respects—and is respected by—the same mutual acquaintance or mentor.
- When we laugh at some of the same things and laugh together fairly frequently.

- When we are alone, together, and the person relaxes because there is no audience.
- When *all* the issues at hand have been depersonalized.
- When an important source of stress is suddenly off both of us, or there is another deeply emotional situation like a major loss, and we offer emotional support.
- When I see that "difficultness" is just the person's outward style and learn to trust the integrity and motives of the "real" person.

I may perceive the person as less difficult, depending on the context:

- When my surviving or thriving depends on the person. (The enemy of my enemy is my friend.)
- When this difficult person is less difficult than all the alternative partners or opponents.
- When we all are focused on a common goal and immersed in the work or when we face a common risk or a common enemy.
- When the person suddenly agrees with me about something important, listens to me, or is helping me.
- When it is useful for me for the person to be difficult (e.g., with someone else).
- When someone else can deal with the difficult person: someone who does not find the person difficult and/or whom the difficult person does not find difficult.
- When other people are around and "being observed" constrains the difficult person.
- When the person recognizes superior power and relevant rules, and calms down. (Powerful people are sometimes only constrainable or constrained by other very powerful people.)
- When the person is sanctioned, and their unacceptable behavior is stopped effectively by serious sanctions.

The difficult person may see *me* differently and therefore seem less difficult:

- When their surviving or thriving depends on me or my team.
- When the "difficult person" is well prepared—as compared to their norm of unpreparedness—and is actually competent to make their own decisions.
- When the person recovers from acute illness or injury, fear, rage, bitterness, loneliness, or anxiety.
- When the person has just been widely appreciated/recognized/rewarded for genuine achievements.
- When the person feels no threat or offense from me and the people around me.
- When I remember to "negotiate the negotiation," consistently embodying my commitment to fair processes, and demonstrating appropriate respect for the status and role of the difficult person and their team.
- When the person feels I am acknowledging their present interests—and will hold to my words.
- When I can acknowledge and affirm the rights—and especially the dignity—of the

person and their team.
- When I listen and communicate in the figurative and literal language(s) of the person, including following any cultural norms of offering reciprocity for any accommodations they offer.
- When I have been able to provide to the difficult person an unexpected helping hand, elegant solution, or bit of vital information for some personal or professional issue outside the stated agenda.
- When I have made a genuine apology to the person, or they to me, or we to each other.

Each reader might add more ideas. When thinking about "negotiating across worldviews," a negotiation theorist may mentally recast each sentence above in terms of intangible and tangible interests, sources of intangible and tangible power and influence, and the intangible and tangible realities of context. The intangibles are likely to be at least as important as the tangibles, in dealing with difficult people, as we reflect on the core emotional concerns of our partners and opponents.

Readers may also be thinking about how the ideas above can build on each other to form a virtuous cycle upward. Many ideas are stronger together with others.

There is another possible use for a list like this: teaching us what to avoid. Each idea on the list has a bleak reverse image. Experienced conflict management practitioners and negotiation theorists will also recognize the potential for a different path—of destructive behavior—and the potential for a downward spiral. That is:

• Trust also *dies* most quickly outside the stated agenda, when none of the sentences in the first section is true, and, instead, the opposite is true, for each idea.

• I may come to view the difficult person as ever more difficult, and the difficult person may come to view me as ever more difficult, if the opposite of each sentence in the latter two sections is true.

In conclusion, we may think of each of these ideas as "ideas to consider," both in terms of potential support—and as guidance for errors to avoid—in negotiation across worldviews. And, intangibles are usually at least as important as tangibles.