



# Working with difficult people

# Agenda

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- Why bother?
- What and who makes clients difficult?
- Goals to remember
- Personas
- How about yourself?
- Resources

# Why bother?

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- We need to work effectively with all people in order to have a business.
- Everybody is difficult at one point or another.
- Conventional approach is not working—being right can be wrong.
- Potential for transformation is significant.

# What makes clients “difficult”?

Many possible reasons, often unknown:

- Too much work to do
- Burnout and fatigue
- Cultural or language barriers
- Organizational changes and office politics
- Unhappy in job
- Bad match of skills and position
- Products not ready for the market
- Family problems
- Illness
- Grieving

# Who makes clients difficult?

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- Person's voice, age, habits, work style may clash with yours.
- Client doesn't seem friendly, or much too friendly.
- Person appears arrogant, overbearing, has the wrong opinions.
- You never understand what they say or mean.
- They remind you of somebody.



It's not about you  
or what you like.

# Goals to remember

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- Do excellent work.
- Turn relationships around.
- Create positive visibility.
- Grow professionally.

# Personas

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- Hands-Off Hesione
- Interactive Ichiro
- Striving Stephanie
- Poison Pierre
- Urgent Ulyana
- All-Out Ariadne

# Hands-Off Hesione

## Manifestations:

- Is not responsive after project start
- Slow to review deliverables
- May initiate new requests, but not answer questions
- Cancels meetings or doesn't show
- Projects may never get final
- Not interested in discussing what we can do beyond immediate need

## Advantages:

- Leaves you alone to do the work
- Uses very little of your time
- Can be very helpful if you provide what she needs

# Hands-Off Hesione

## Things to do:

- Be sure to define project and deliverables clearly up front.
- Don't insist on communication channels that don't work.
- Change your own patterns.
- But keep accountability up and signals coming.
- Try to get a personal meeting.
- Maintain good relationships and create positive buzz with other stakeholders and experts.
- Learn what you can about the client as a person.

## Remember:

- Lack of response may be out of client's control and have nothing to do with you or your work.
- She may be reacting to somebody else's requests.

# Interactive Ichiro

## Manifestations:

- Checks in on you often
- Wants ad-hoc updates and regular reports
- Expects fast response
- Schedules frequent calls or meetings
- May be unusually proactive in editing or rewriting
- Moves deadlines forward

## Advantages:

- Seriously invested in project, will work for you
- May well become a promoter or mentor
- Enjoys conversation and professional exchange

# Interactive Ichiro

## Things to do:

- Maintain good personal contact.
- Make sure to invite client's contributions to the project and express your appreciation.
- Once you know when client becomes anxious, schedule updates before that point.
- But don't necessarily feel obliged always to respond instantly.
- Let cool off if requests become too much.

## Remember:

- This client can be your best ally.
- Client needs a sense of control.
- Be ready to explain changes to his words.

# Striving Stephanie

## Manifestations:

- May be new to industry, company, or role
- Limited visibility in own organization
- Makes errors and questionable judgments
- Comments and reviews not always helpful
- Doesn't understand where you're coming from

## Advantages:

- May understand how you can help her, even beyond the current project.
- Client doesn't usually get too worried about details.
- Trust, once built, can be very strong.

# Striving Stephanie

## Things to do:

- Be as friendly as you can and ask client to help you.
- Build good visibility for client and yourself with other people in her organization.
- Offer your organizational insight, as appropriate.
- But always respect client's role.
- Talk client through your process and deliverables.
- Negotiate carefully.

## Remember:

- Client usually knows her shortcomings and appreciates assistance given in a non-patronizing way.
- This client can be risky and may make mistakes that involve you.

# Poison Pierre

## Manifestations:

- Always friendly, praises your work
- But may comment harshly to others
- Difficult reviewer, may be very editorial in an ambivalent way
- Projects threatening to run out of scope
- No clear answers to questions
- Changes direction more than once
- Enjoys negligible support from peers

## Advantages:

- May make occasional referrals and create visibility
- Can be easy to influence or negotiate with

# Poison Pierre

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## Things to do:

- Set expectations as clearly as you can.
- Get to know other people on team.
- Be aware of nuance in communications.
- Don't follow impulse to agree.
- Take time to consider.
- Restrict exposure.

## Remember:

- People may be watching how you deal.
- Client is unpredictable.

# Urgent Ulyana

## Manifestations:

- Everything is urgent and becoming more so
- Project may go out of scope
- Not always available
- Involves many stakeholders and reviewers
- Occasional cost concerns
- Directions often inconclusive

## Advantages:

- May be well connected
- Moves around frequently
- Often forgiving and appreciative
- Insights to share

# Urgent Ulyana

## Things to do:

- Carefully, professionally, learn how to work with this client.
- Maintain high quality, even if it seems nobody else cares.
- Increase client's confidence by making commitments and living up to them.
- Trust stakeholders' and your own good judgment.
- Alert early when project scope changes.
- Be ready to discuss costs, or escalate to project manager.

## Remember:

- Client may show surprising generosity.
- May be completely new in current responsibility.

# All-Out Ariadne

## Manifestations:

- Can be irritated, curt, abrasive—not “nice” person
- Reviews can be harsh
- May violate your professional code
- May challenge your process or qualifications
- Acts from unspoken assumptions
- May be out of reach and communicate through intermediaries.

## Advantages:

- May be your advocate at the same time
- Understands quality
- Provokes you to do your best work

# All-Out Ariadne

## Things to do:

- Be accountable.
- Respond calmly, professionally, and impersonally.
- Don't try humor—generally not appreciated.
- Meet in person, see the face.
- Watch your own conduct.
- Be careful when the mood changes.
- Use project managers and bosses to deflect pressure.

## Remember:

- Possibly had bad experience with vendor.
- With this client, you can learn and grow a lot.

# How about yourself?

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- Are you ever difficult?
- Did you screw up?
- Do you operate from bias?
- Did client touch on a vulnerability or fear?
- What do you say about a client?
- What would clients say about you?
- Where do you take the concern?

# Try...

- ...not to get trapped in your reactions.
- ...encouraging, rewarding, and practicing the client behaviors you like.
- ...disengaging as necessary.
- ...admitting a mistake.
- ...seeking the challenge instead of avoiding the person.
- ...keeping a sense of perspective.
- ...talking to trusted colleague before the client relationship is damaged.
- ...remembering shared goals.

# Working with the team

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- Finding out what's going on
- Getting advice
- Sharing, not venting
- Don't set colleagues or clients up
- Taking on different roles
- Identifying training needs

# Resources

- Books:
  - “Working with You Is Killing Me,” Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster, Warner Business Books 2006
- EAP program:
  - 1 (800) 854-1446
  - [www.lifebalance.net](http://www.lifebalance.net); user ID and password: lifebalance
  - [w4.unumprovident.com/worklifebalance/](http://w4.unumprovident.com/worklifebalance/)
- Account managers
- Conversation open...