

Techniques for Dealing with Difficult People

During this period of difficult economic times, emotions run high when dealing with sensitive issues. Below are nine points to consider when dealing with people about these issues. These points are routinely used by mediators during financial mediation sessions.

- **Affirm and validate.** Ask the parties how they wish to be addressed. Show the parties you hear them by restating what they say. Let the parties know you appreciate that this conversation may not be easy. Thank the parties for their hard work.
- **Make the parties responsible for their words and actions.** Use open ended questions like, “By difficult you mean....” and “Help me to understand what you mean by.....”. Be aware of non-verbal cues and note any distractions. Point out the “triggers” that are being used to avoid discussing the issue or issues.
- **Be aware of the seating arrangements.** If necessary, change the seating arrangement. Appropriately position any “difficult” persons.
- **Slow down the conversation.** Lower your voice. Slow the cadence of your speech. Relax your body language. Take a break, either at the table or away from the table.
- **Adjust the emotional intensity by reframing the issue.** Move emotions up or down the scale of intensity so that they can be recognized. Encourage everyone to hear each other at the human level.

- **Be silent, do not rush to fill gaps in the conversation.** Encourage “silent” parties to speak. Give the parties time to think.
- **Set limits.** End the discussion if the parties do not demonstrate respect for all involved. Set a time limit for the discussion.
- **Get all important information out for all parties to hear.** Insure all parties have the opportunity to be heard. Look for the hidden agenda.
- **Model good behaviors.** Remain neutral and be an active listener. Show that you are taking the situation seriously. Be committed to the problem solving process.

Using the points above can improve the outcome when dealing with sensitive issues. When working with people to try to reach consensus on sensitive issues, “how” you say something is more important than “what” you say.

Adapted from material prepared by the Iowa Mediation Service Inc.