



Judy Ringer

## Working with Difficult People: 3 Questions to Help You Turn Your Tormentors into Teachers

Kurt Vonnegut uses the phrase “wrang-wrangs” to describe great teachers who are placed in our life disguised as difficult, confrontational, disrespectful, and sometimes horrible people. “Wrang-wrangs” are placed there on purpose and can teach us important lessons, if we’re willing to listen and learn.

### The Dance of Conflict

When faced with the prospect of meeting with a confrontational employee, the project manager of a New Hampshire insurance company heaved a sigh. *Not again*, he thought to himself. *Every conversation with this guy is a struggle.*

He decided to use the meeting as an opportunity to shift perspective and try a new approach. He began by imagining that the employee had good intentions but was a bit rough around the edges. He considered that maybe if he aligned with the employee, he might be better able to direct him. First, he arranged the office chairs so that instead of face to face, they were at oblique angles and generally facing the same direction. Then he took a few deep breaths and opened the door.

The employee began by stating with intensity all that was going wrong with the project. The manager’s initial reaction was to resist the attack, but he refocused his attention on listening and understanding and sat quietly for a while. Instead of coming back with answers or a rebuttal, he found himself asking the employee what he thought the real nature of the problem was and what actions he would suggest to solve it. The confrontational atmosphere diffused and gave way to a sense of collaboration. The two were aligned physically in their chairs and now conceptually in the way they approached the problem. The change the manager made in himself turned out to be very effective, and both manager and employee began to work on solving the issues facing the project.

## From Tormentor to Teacher

It's hard to like everyone. Some colleagues are great partners; we know their style and blend easily with them. We "dance well together." With others we always seem to be out of step. We wonder, *How can they be that way?* or *What makes them tick?* Or worse – we don't care; we just want to be as far away as possible.

The problem is we still have to work with these people, and our reactivity in their presence gives them a kind of power over us. However, by seeking to understand the opponent, we take the initiative. At worst, we learn something. At best, we may turn them into an ally and improve the quality of the work environment.

But how do you turn a tormentor into a teacher? Begin by asking yourself some questions about who they are and why they behave the way they do.

- ◆ **Who is this person away from the workplace?** See the different parts of this person – the parent, grandparent, friend, dancer, skier, singer, or loved one (of someone!). Chances are you're only seeing the annoying part of your tormentor. Widen your perspective.
- ◆ **What is their positive intention?** Underneath the disrespectful behavior, what do they really want? Respect? Independence? Control? Acknowledgement? Attention? You may realize that you have similar goals, though you seek them differently.
- ◆ **Why do you think they behave as they do?** It's useful to adopt the attitude that their actions have little (if anything) to do with you. Most people operate out of habit. Even if they don't get the respect or attention they desire, they can't change because they don't know any other way. Maybe it falls to you to help them find it. Suggest ways they might achieve their aims more effectively. Be *their* teacher.

## True Power

As you read this article, think of someone with whom your "dance" feels like a struggle. Then, instead of wishing *they* would change, start with yourself. It doesn't mean you're wrong, at fault, or need to change your opinion. It means that in order to resolve the conflict it works better to begin with what you can control – you.

Remember that you're doing this for you. You're stuck and you want to get unstuck. Like your tormentor, you've been taking actions that aren't working, so try something new. When your wellbeing depends upon the actions of others, you inadvertently give them power. But with awareness and practice, you can make new choices about how you respond to the difficult people and situations in your life – and take the power back.

Our project manager and his employee will have more opportunities to dance with conflict as their relationship changes and grows. Thanks to the manager's willingness to try something new, they've discovered common ground from which to begin the process. We all have challenging people in our lives. Will they be tormentors or teachers? Our perspective greatly influences our response.

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