

# When Colleagues Are Brats

By *Jacqueline Waggoner, Ed.D.*

Does it seem like there is someone in your work environment who has a chronically poor attitude?

Professors enter higher education with baggage from their childhood, just as people do in other professions. Some may not be a delight to be around, are impulsive, and have difficulty delaying having their needs met. Others behave like the school bully, have tantrums and can be verbally cruel when angry. A third group may exhibit much excuse-making and avoidant behaviors, and seldom complete work in a timely manner. They tend to be off-task, late to meetings, unprepared, or forgetful of the meeting's agenda.

Challenging adults can be characterized as follows:

- Bully – sarcastic, aggressive, rude, hostile, mean-spirited
- Mime – passive, limited response to suggestions, seldom contributes
- Pouter – takes things personally, withdraws, sulks, suffers in silence
- Victim – expects criticism, agrees then complains, “poor me” persona
- Chicken Little – deflates optimism; says, “It won’t work”; “Yes, but...”
- Scrooge – surly, quick to anger, volatile, cranky

Here are several tips you can try.

## **Tip One: Stop the name-calling.**

The more you think of the person in terms of a negative label, the more you'll observe behaviors that confirm your negative characterization of the individual. You may become less annoyed and more compassionate toward the individual if you “think differently” about him or her.

## **Tip Two: Use rational detachment.**

The Crisis Prevention Institute defines “rational detachment: as “the ability to stay calm and in control – to maintain your professionalism – even in a crisis moment. It means not taking things personally – even button-pushing comments that attack your appearance, race, gender, or competence.” Remain rationally detached from the situation as though you are a third party observing the meeting.

## **Tip Three: Use cognitive restructuring.**

Since your colleagues have had a number of years to become the way they are, it's unlikely you will effect a huge change in their behaviors. Your reaction to a colleague is influenced by positive or negative thoughts. If you tell yourself that your colleagues truly believe that their proposals are motivated by what's best for students, you may listen more attentively to find the jewel behind the suggestion.

**Tip Four: Choose your battles.**

You can decide during each and every interaction whether the issue is important enough to go to battle over at this very moment – or at all. In the grand scheme of things, is this a truly important decision with huge consequences? Maybe a cooling-off period will help everyone approach the decision differently.

**Tip Five: Smile and laugh.**

It's amazing how a "group laugh" will help you move past some difficult sticking spot in your negotiations.

**Tip Six: Celebrate your successes.**

When you have a successful meeting or interaction, acknowledge it, and use it as an opportunity to build some positive relations to help out when the next difficult situation occurs. Use every possible opportunity to build positive relations with the most difficult colleague in the room. Remember, people's negative behavior really isn't about you; it's about them.

Academic Calendar. August 2005. Volume 21, number 8, pages 3 & 5.