

Argumentative, Critical or Just Plain Impossible!

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Many authors have written about people who are argumentative, critical or simply impossible. These people will always challenge what is said or what is done. Christiansen, Cochran, and Corkery (2000, p. 30) use the descriptive terms “Sherman Tank” or an “Exploder” to categorise these people. Brinkman and Kirschner (2002, p. 4, p. 5) describe the “Grenade” or the “Sniper,” while Wilde (2003, p. 49, p. 52, p. 79) talks about “Angry Agnes,” “Know-It-All Ned” and “Argumentative Al.” Just as labelling a dog “dominant” with all of its implications can be the cause of relationship problems between dog and guardian, so too can labelling people inhibit one’s interactions with them. Recognising critical, argumentative or impossible people and knowing how to react and respond is more important than tagging them. After all, a “difficult” person may just be having a bad day and not be a truly critical, argumentative or impossible person at all, despite the outward appearance (Wilde, 2003, p. 47).

Why are People Critical, Argumentative or Impossible?

Linaman (n.d.) says that, whether consciously or unconsciously, we critique things going on around us every day. The problem, he says, is that some people “...verbalize the thoughts many of us have learned to keep to ourselves” (Linaman, n.d.). Just as happy people feel better being around like souls, so too do difficult people. Hence it is important that we ensure that any “difficult” traits that we have are under control before attempting to contend with someone who wishes to be critical, argumentative, or even impossible, with us (Linaman, n.d.).

The reasons people are difficult are many and varied. Brinkman and Kirschner (2002, p. 80) suggest that these behaviours can be caused by anger, holding a grudge, a wish to undermine or even a cry for attention. Linaman (n.d.) suggests that “...when things don’t go our way or we’re in a bad mood, it is easy to become critical.” Some people attack an individual because they see that person as part of a greater problem (Brinkman & Kirschner, 2002, p. 68). Others who feel thwarted or threatened can suffer stress, with which they do not cope. One way of releasing that stress is to intimidate, in order to gain more control (Christiansen et al., 2000, p. 30). Linaman (n.d.) suggests that some people are motivated to criticise because they have been criticised themselves and do not have the sense of security and “healthy identity” that can come from a positive environment. “Critics are often motivated by the need to feel better about themselves by putting other people down” (Linaman, n.d.). Whatever the cause of a difficult nature, if faced with this type of person either in class or in a private training session, trainers have several things to consider.

Managing Critical Clients

If criticism happens during a private consultation, each attack can be addressed as necessary, provided that this can be done privately. In a class situation, it may be necessary to ensure that you speak quietly to the critical person and suggest that a chat after class to discuss the problems would be appropriate. This acknowledges the critic’s point but allows for continuation of the class. Some points to keep in mind while addressing an issue with a critical person are as follows:

- Although one may not want to hear what the critical person is saying, it should be remembered that there could be valuable information held within that attack (Linaman, n.d.). By listening to the client, you acknowledge that they have a complaint (real or imagined) and/or a point of view. One should not become defensive by countering point for point what is being said by the critic. Neither should one become argumentative or try to cut the critic down to size (Christiansen et al., 2000, p. 33; Wilde, 2003, p. 46). Try not to reinforce the criticism with defensiveness. Use it to your advantage by hearing the meaning behind the abrasiveness. It may be justified! Being friendly, positive and open to discussion will help to disarm the critic (Christiansen et al., 2000, p. 33; Wilde, 2003, p. 46). However, if something is said that is non-negotiable or offensive beyond toleration, this should be pointed out clearly and, if need be, the trainer/client relationship must end (Wilde, 2003, p. 80). Critical behaviour is encouraged if the person criticised reacts with anger or hurt, or is intimidated. Triggering these kinds of emotions strengthens the critic's motivation. A critic is more likely to move on to another target if you do not overreact (Linaman, n.d.).
- In between the mild criticism that you are able to extinguish and the intolerable that you terminate, the middle-level criticism needs to be stopped if it is nonconstructive. These critics must be made aware that their criticism is unacceptable and that there will be consequences for recurrences of this behaviour (J. O'Heare, personal communication, 2008).
- A trainer needs to be able to work comfortably with clients. If pushed hard, usually it is necessary to confront the critic (not in public, but at an opportune time where one's discussion cannot be overheard), to let the client know how you feel about the criticism. This may not lead to a change in the critical client's approach but will decrease the chance of one feeling bitter about what has been said and decrease the chance of one saying something that may later be regretted (Linaman, n.d.).
- Allowing a critic to spontaneously wind down after voicing an opinion fails to reinforce the behaviour (Christiansen et al., 2000, p. 33). However, should the criticism continue, an interruption may be necessary, followed by an invitation either to move to a more private setting or to arrange a time for continuing the discussion (Christiansen et al., 2000, p. 33).
- Limiting the amount of time spent with a critic can be difficult in a client/trainer situation. However, pointing out to the critic that "...your level of interaction with them will be based, in part, on their willingness to communicate with you in a constructive and appropriate manner" (Linaman, n.d.) may be in the better interest of both parties.
- Demonstration of care and concern, or a sincere, timely and heartfelt "congratulations" can boost the emotional wellbeing of the critical person. People who feel good about themselves are less likely to want to criticise (Linaman, n.d.). As has been said by Wilde (2003, p. 46) and O'Heare (personal communication, 2008), treating clients like dogs (i.e., by reinforcing desired behaviour and ignoring poor behaviour) can culminate in better behaviour, not only for dogs but also for the critical guardian. If true, a sincerely worded statement such as "I really take seriously what you have to say and I would like to work with you on this" can show the critic that you are prepared to listen and can disarm the anger some critical people feel. In other words, meet abrasion with empathy.
- Critical people are often "fact challenged." If the criticism has little or no basis in fact, don't take it as a personal slight. Move on ("How to Deal," n.d.) or, if possible, try to educate the client. However, what is sheer folly should not be treated as a valid argument (J. O'Heare, personal communication, 2008).
- It is unrealistic to expect the critical client to change overnight. It should also be remembered that, particularly under stress, the critical client may slip back into old habits. By maintaining realistic expectations, the trainer can better tolerate and assist the critic (Linaman, n.d.).

Managing Argumentative Clients

Many of the points listed above are also relevant to the argumentative client (and vice versa). However, this type of client requires some further thought.

- Most important of all, don't argue back. It is impossible to have a one-sided argument. Be a good listener, and let the client feel free to speak. At a more appropriate time, the story can be set straight (Wilde, 2003, p. 45).
- Alternatively, tell the client that you respect the offered point of view, that you disagree, that you don't like to argue, but that you would be delighted to discuss the point at issue at the end of class or at an alternative time (Hogan, n.d.).
- Argumentative clients often speak rapidly, in raised tones and at a higher pitch than normal. Speaking slowly, and maintaining your normal pitch and speed of speech can have a calming effect on others (Wilde, 2003, p. 45).
- Be aware of your body language and that of the argumentative client. If one is trying to maintain one's cool and appear to be coping, while at the same time taking backward steps, the argumentative client will have won the day. However, if you "...wear your good attitude like armor" (Crowe, cited in Wilde, 2003, p. 46), a positive demeanor will be maintained.
- When a situation arises where the argumentative client is not argumentative, reward that behaviour with a kind word or a compliment to the client's dog. In other words, reinforce good behaviour (Wilde, 2003, p. 46).
- Wilde (2003, p. 47) suggests that if you have difficulty handling a situation, you should imagine you are a person you know who would be able to handle the situation really well and then handle the situation as if you were that person. It is a methodology that could work, but could also backfire if you lost confidence part-way through.
- Maintaining one's empathy with clients, despite having to face some difficult people, will enable the trainer to continue to help

dogs and their guardians as well as helping the trainer to grow as a person (Wilde, 2003, p. 48).

- It is not the job of the trainer to try to change the client's argumentative behaviour (only the behaviour of the dog). By failing to argue with a client, the trainer may, however, influence the client to be a little better behaved (Wilde, 2003, p. 44). The people in our environment influence us. If we are given understanding, we tend to give understanding in return. It may not always work, but it is possible that with this attitude the trainer will be able to reach the argumentative client ("How to Deal," n.d.).
- If a client feels that the trainer is argumentative, a useful question for the trainer to ask is "How can I present counter examples and other points of view to you so that you are not offended and your feelings are not hurt?" (Hogan, n.d.)
- If argument turns to abuse, a trainer is not obliged to take that abuse. It would be better to terminate the relationship with the client and to suggest that the client may be better off working with a trainer whose personality may be more suitable to that client (Wilde, 2003, p. 48).
- If a trainer argues with several clients, introspection may be called for on the part of the trainer. It may be that the argumentative communicator is the trainer (Hogan, n.d.). If this is the case, it is advisable to "...determine why you need to be 'right' or make someone else 'wrong' in heated communication" (Hogan, n.d.) and then to "...reconsider your approach to communication so that you are perceived as less abrasive" (Hogan, n.d.).

What About the Purely Impossible?

Most clients are sane, rational people who do not go out of their way to be impossible. In these circumstances, resolution of any conflict can usually be achieved mutually. Some clients make issues that are challenging, time consuming and at times annoying and complicated. However, with most people, there is usually enough give and take to achieve

common ground and resolution of conflict (Shapiro, Jankowski, & Dale, 2005).

Occasionally, there is a client who lacks the social graces of nicety. This is the client who seems not to care what others think—the client who is not reasonable or rational. This is the client who is purely impossible. This client make you want to “...run for cover, close your eyes and wait until it’s over” (Shapiro et al., 2005). We can make choices about how to deal with the impossible client. Shapiro et al. (2005) entertainingly suggest running up the white flag of surrender or running for cover as possible solutions. They also suggest that, in choosing to turn the other cheek, it may well “get clobbered.” Becoming more irrational, nasty and difficult than the “impossible” you are facing are also options, but these are options best avoided (Shapiro et al., 2005).

Managing Impossible People

Tempting though it may be to walk away from the impossible person, there are times when, as trainers, we have limited choice and must work with them—at least initially. As an employee or as a business owner, we are under an obligation to help those from whom we have taken money for service or, in a voluntary capacity, we have agreed to help.

The following may assist when working with an impossible client:

- Recognise that there are impossible people in this world. They may not be impossible to others, but there is something that makes a certain person impossible for you. Learn to acknowledge this and, after appropriate attempts at resolution, walk away with dignity (“How to Deal,” n.d.).
- Accept that the impossible person is this way because of upbringing, environment, experiences or any combination of these things. It is not your fault (“How to Deal,” n.d.).
- Shapiro et al. (2005) suggest that “...you should neutralize your emotions.” They claim that, if one is emotional, one’s behaviour is less rational than usual. It is understandable then that, if one’s emotions

are in check, the ability to reason will greatly assist resolution of the problem. Staying calm can diffuse the impossible person as there will be nobody for their venom to strike. Staying calm prevents you from sinking to the level of the impossible person (“How to Deal,” n.d.).

- A culture of blame can exist around impossible people. The impossible person may blame you for everything that goes wrong. Do not wear that blame unless you are really responsible (“How to Deal,” n.d.). If the impossible person is “fact challenged,” do not defend yourself vocally to this person as it may provoke another abusive tirade. Unlike the purely argumentative, the impossible person is unlikely to listen to any attempt to educate. (“How to Deal,” n.d.)
- Impossible people are so called because “...you cannot beat these kinds of people; they’re called impossible for a reason” (“How to Deal,” n.d.). Nothing you can say or do will be of any consequence to them; you will not win; nothing will be good enough, so protect your self worth by terminating the agreement with the client (“How to Deal,” n.d.).
- Manage the situation until such time as you can terminate it. Silence is a good management tool under these circumstances, until you are able to unemotionally end the relationship (“How to Deal,” n.d.).
- Be a “possible” person. Use “...tolerance, patience, humility and even some kindness (as difficult as that may be)—because these are all the things that the impossible person is not...” (“How to Deal,” n.d.). Leading by example may help alter the impossible.

Summary

Many of the points above are common to the management of argumentative, critical and/or impossible people. However, care must be taken to ensure that each situation is taken on its own set of circumstances and that the points applied to that situation are appropriate to that situation. Generalising approaches to critical, argumentative or impossible clients aids in the knowledge of how to handle these people, but

the skill in successful relationships with these people is in the application of the appropriate approach(es) taken with the individual client.

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