



## Working with Difficult & Resistant Staff

By John F. Eller & Sheila A. Eller (Solution Tree Press, 2011)

### S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)

#### *The main idea of the book:*

~ This book helps principals develop a repertoire of skills to confront and manage difficult staff members.

#### *Why I chose this book:*

All schools have difficult staff members. Principals often lose countless hours dealing with these employees and then find nothing has improved. I think principals will find it liberating to learn that they *can* make headway in turning around resistant staff.

Previously, I thought difficult staff members were just plain difficult. However, this book shows that there are actually eight different types of difficult staff members. Principals will find it insightful to understand these different types of resistant people and what causes them to act in a difficult or resistant way.

### The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

#### √ *The typical behaviors of eight different types of difficult staff members*

The following types of difficult staff are described in the book: the Underminers, the Contrarians, the Recruiters, the Challenged, the On-the-Job Retirees, the Resident Experts, the Unelected Representatives, and the Whiners and Complainers.

#### √ *Strategies to confront difficult behaviors when they arise*

The book provides concrete strategies – including specific words and gestures that convey authority – that can help you confront resisters in a productive way.

#### √ *Proactive suggestions for preventing negative staff behaviors from developing in the first place*

In addition to *confronting* difficult staff members, this book helps you think about structures you should put in place to avoid those behaviors to begin with.

#### √ *How principals often unwittingly contribute to the development of staff members' difficult behaviors*

It is crucial to learn what you, as the principal, might be doing to encourage negative behaviors. For example, by neglecting to explain the rationale behind a new initiative, you may be fostering resistant behavior. Some resistant staff members are made, not born!

## **Introduction: How Did They Get This Way?**

At a time when school improvement was optional, leaders could mostly ignore people who were resistant or difficult to deal with. Now with increased accountability, we need to deal more directly with these difficult staff members. Because supervising challenging staff can take up endless hours and energy, leaders are often hungry for solutions for dealing with these difficult behaviors.

In a typical scenario, the principal introduces a new initiative and a staff member opposes the changes (either openly or behind the principal's back) and bullies other staff members into opposing the ideas as well. If the principal can understand how the resistant staff member got that way, then he or she will have a better idea how to respond. In fact, all staff members have a specific outlook on life – or frame of reference – that is shaped by their unique experiences. When new information clashes with a currently held frame of reference, staff can become resistant. Not only do staff members have a certain frame of reference, but leaders have one as well and this can shape the way they deal with staff members. For example, leaders might:

- Hang on to preconceived thoughts about staff members based on their past issues or behaviors
- Attach negative thoughts to a staff member because of his or her association with other negative staff
- Develop an opinion about a staff member's attitude or competency based on his or her background

Because of this, leaders not only need to understand their staff members' frames of reference, but they need to understand that their own experiences shape their thought patterns. They need to work to keep an open mind about their staff members.

In general, when people are introduced to new ideas or changes they are more likely to respond in a difficult or resistant way. Below are some common times when difficult behaviors often surface:

*Chaos:* Unpredictability is a natural part of life and it often accompanies new changes. It can come with a new job assignment, new curriculum, or it may accompany moving to a new location or facing the death of a family member. However, while some people accept chaos and are less affected by it, others feel their entire world is turned upside down and experience intense emotions. It is best to address feelings of chaos by holding regular staff meetings to communicate about changes as well as conduct meetings with individual staff members.

*Conflict:* There are two types of conflict in schools. The first, *substantive conflict*, occurs when people differ in opinion about issues related to philosophy, values, or beliefs. These conflicts can be good and healthy for the school. However, if there are no structures in place to discuss and understand the opinions of others, the conflict can deteriorate into *affective conflict*. With *affective conflict* staff attack each other personally rather than hold a healthy debate over the issues. Leaders must be able to distinguish between these two types of conflict and set up meeting structures to enable staff to engage in productive debate over the issues.

*Winners and Losers:* With any change, some staff will “win” (benefit professionally or personally from the change) and some will “lose” (have a decrease in the quality of their personal or professional life). It is important for the leader to map out the names of staff who will most likely “win” and “lose” with any new change in order to intervene preventatively with those who stand to lose the most. There is a template with a T-Chart you can use to map out the winners and losers. This, and all templates mentioned in the book, are available for free online at: [go.solution-tree.com/leadership](http://go.solution-tree.com/leadership).

*Poorly Managed Transitions:* Staff can become difficult when they don't have enough information about the change or if the transition from the existing state to the future one is not handled well. Leaders need to make sure to be clear about new changes and guide their staff carefully through the transition.

Understanding the factors listed above that cause people to react in a difficult or resistant way is a useful foundation to have as a leader. However, it is even more useful to understand the eight different types of difficult people and develop a repertoire of strategies to deal with them. The following chapters will focus on these eight types of difficult people:

- |                            |                         |                                  |                                |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. The Underminers         | 2. The Contrarians      | 3. The Recruiters                | 4. The Challenged              |
| 5. The On-the-Job Retirees | 6. The Resident Experts | 7. The Unelected Representatives | 8. The Whiners and Complainers |

## **Chapter 1: The Underminers**

### **A. Behaviors of Underminers**

In one middle school, the principal, Scott, announces that despite the school's best efforts the latest student achievement results have been poor. He presents a proposal for remedying the situation. When he asks if anyone has comments or questions a few staff members say they support the initiative. After the meeting, Scott sees groups of teachers in the parking lot sharing their real feelings about the situation. Over the next few days, Scott begins to hear that three to four teachers are complaining about his plan and leadership. This short scenario describes typical “underminers.” They agree with you or sit silently in your presence, but engage in negative conversations behind your back. They fail to follow through on a new initiative or work actively to sabotage the effort by stirring up negative feelings among other staff. They undermine your power by recruiting other staff members against the initiative and evoking fear in those who support the change.

## **B. Strategies for Handling Underminers**

In the scenario described above, Scott needs to find a way to confront the negativity and provide an opportunity for staff to express their feelings. He could call a follow-up meeting, let people know that he understands his previous announcement took people by surprise, and ask people to meet in small groups to discuss their concerns. During this time he could circulate and listen to these concerns to help him plan his next step. If he feels the sentiments are too negative, he could have staff write down their concerns or conduct more informal, individual conversations with members of the staff instead. Below are some additional ideas leaders can use to deal directly with Underminers and to develop a culture of open communication:

- *Stand up to Underminers.* Meet individually with the Underminer, share your evidence of the undermining, listen to the person's side of the story, give a directive to stop the undermining, and propose an alternative way for the person to share concerns with you.
- *Model appropriate behaviors.* Staff note what you *do* as well as what you say. Model integrity, openness, and listening. Share your concerns about a staff member with that person rather than secretly telling others. To get people to share their concerns show that you value those opinions. In addition to modeling integrity, make sure to openly discuss the type of undermining behavior that is destructive. Although it may seem obvious, some staff may not recognize the negative behavior of their colleagues. Teach staff to resist this destructive behavior by confronting or ignoring the Underminer's behavior.
- *Develop trust with staff members.* If you want staff to feel comfortable sharing their concerns with you, develop trust by meeting individually with them to hear their concerns, listen to them, write down their ideas, and thank them for sharing.
- *Develop group norms or ground rules* – To help staff feel comfortable speaking honestly discussing sensitive issues, ask the group to establish group norms to guide the discussion. If staff can develop their own norms for how they will operate, they will most likely follow them. Help staff to develop a group norm that will prevent undermining. If they are unable to do this, you may want to develop a *ground rule* that prohibits undermining. Samples include: *We will be tactful but share our concerns honestly.* And also *Staff members will communicate their concerns directly with the source of the concern before talking to anyone else.*
- *Provide opportunities for staff to voice their opinions.* Allow people to share their opinions without retribution. Below are some structured ways to do this. Strategies for developing healthy communication will help counter the work of Underminers.
  1. **Private Concerns** – Since some people have trouble expressing their honest concerns, have a suggestion box to allow staff to share their concerns anonymously.
  2. **Pro-Con Conversation** – Set aside 30 to 45 minutes on a staff meeting agenda to discuss the pros and cons of a new initiative. First create a large chart with one column labeled “Pros” and one labeled “Cons.” Make sure to discuss the specifics of what staff understand about the new initiative, the positive aspects of it, the challenges and concerns of the new initiative, and what the staff can do to overcome these obstacles. Post the results in the staff lounge.

## **C. The Principal's Role in Creating Underminers**

It is important to note that sometimes principals unwittingly contribute to the creation of Underminers – these resistant staff members are sometimes made, not born! The most common ways principals do this is by doing the following:

- Leading in an autocratic way. If principals do not accept input, and in fact punish staff who question or disagree with them, then staff take their concerns underground.
- Failing to explain the rationale behind change initiatives. If staff do not understand why certain changes are taking place, they will question those decisions and talk among their peers.
- Giving negative staff members positive reinforcement. At times principals try to reduce negativity by giving difficult staff members additional attention or opportunities. This has the opposite effect because it leads to the discontent of other staff.

# **Chapter 2: The Contrarians**

## **A. Behaviors of Contrarians**

Matt, a first-year principal, explains some of the new procedures that will be initiated under his leadership. Tammy, one of the teachers, stands up to voice her concerns while Matt is still in the middle of explaining. He asks her to meet with him later. Throughout this private meeting Tammy raises her voice and tries to intimidate him. Tammy's behavior could be described as that of a “Contrarian.” Contrarians are openly aggressive, ready to fight, profess to know a lot about the topic at hand, and are able to ignore the opinions of others. They actually get energized from fighting so the intensity of the argument may increase during a confrontation.

## **B. Strategies for Handling Contrarians**

- *Agree to disagree.* Since Contrarians like to argue and are good at it, don't give them an audience in the middle of a staff meeting. Instead, say something like this: *“We aren't going to solve this now. Let's talk after the meeting.”* Or, *“You and I are not on the same page here. Rather than taking everyone's time, we need to schedule a meeting to figure this out later.”*
- *Confirm that you heard their message.* Contrarians need to know that they have been heard, so confirming you have heard them can help lower their energy level. Repeat back what you heard them say: *“So you think that...”* *“So you feel that...”*
- *Use framing to constrain a conversation.* Framing is a technique to establish boundaries to prevent Contrarians from disrupting a meeting. Below are some examples of framing to keep a meeting on track:
  - ⇒ *“Today, we will look at only the first part of [name topic]. In future meetings, we will look at their other parts of [topic].”*
  - ⇒ *“As we talk today, I will share with you the details of [name topic]. Then I will share the potential impacts of [the topic]. Finally, you will meet in small groups and generate your thoughts and ideas about [the topic].”*

• *Confront the Contrarian in a private meeting.* Because Contrarians are skilled in arguing, you need to be prepared for a meeting with them. Below are some steps to follow to plan for the meeting:

- ⇒ Write an introductory statement to set the tone for the meeting.
- ⇒ Outline exactly what will be talked about at the meeting and the role you want the Contrarian to play (e.g., “*You will be able to share your perspective after I introduce my concern... Then together we will come up with a plan...*”)
- ⇒ Share your concern and how it is negatively impacting the school.
- ⇒ Be clear about the behavior that needs to stop and provide a timeline for when it needs to stop.
- ⇒ Make sure the Contrarian understands the directive. Let the Contrarian know you will be checking on the issue.

During the meeting make sure to use the following strategies:

- ⇒ **Eye contact** – Looking the Contrarian in the eye will convey confidence and authority.
  - ⇒ **Specificity** – Supervisors often beat around the bush, but this conveys a lack of confidence. Address the situation by explaining your concerns clearly and concisely. A leader must label inappropriate behaviors and convey clear expectations.
  - ⇒ **Pausing** – Framing statements (see above) will have more force if you include pauses like in the following example:  
“*In our time today, I want to address the problems with your behavior at last week’s staff meeting. [Pause.] I want to give you a few minutes to share your thoughts. [Pause.] Then, I plan to share how I want you to change your behavior.*”
  - ⇒ **Authority voice** – The literature shows that effective leaders lower the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement to signify authority. If you lower your chin slightly at the end of a sentence it causes your vocal chords to produce a lower pitch.
- *Document the Contrarian’s behavior.* This is necessary for any further disciplinary action and this is the case for any type of resister.
- *Group norms and ground rules* – Like with the Underminers, it is helpful to create group norms and ground rules to ensure that staff can openly communicate with each other. A group norm and ground rule designed to prevent Contrarian behavior would be:  
*When questioning a person’s ideas, we will use positive processes that maintain the dignity of the person suggesting them. No one will confront a person making suggestions or sharing ideas in a public meeting or forum.*
- *Problem-Solving Process* – If two staff members have a conflict, especially if one is a Contrarian, you can use the following problem-solving process to help them work through their issues:

1. Establish ground rules for the conversation such as:
  - ✓ All parties will keep their voices at a conversational level.
  - ✓ When one person speaks everyone else listens. There will be time for clarification.
  - ✓ The speaker can only share the situation from his/her perspective. There will be no accusations or assumptions.
2. Let the non-Contrarian speak first. Allow this person to present the issue.
3. Ask the other person if s/he needs anything clarified.
4. Allow the Contrarian to share his/her perspective and leave time for clarifications after.
5. After both have spoken, ask if anyone needs clarification. Then ask what each would be willing to do to move forward.
6. If you are satisfied with the resolution, create a plan, and thank both parties. Check in with both parties in a few days.

### **C. The Principal’s Role in Creating Contrarians**

Principals may unwittingly reinforce the behavior of Contrarians by acting in the following ways:

- If the principal is too receptive to negative comments or does not provide a solid structure for disagreement, he or she may appear weak as a leader.
- If a principal appears tentative in introducing an idea because he or she has not carefully thought through it, Contrarians may pounce on this opportunity to attack the idea.
- If a principal is not careful to notice Contrarian behavior in a potential hire, he or she may hire a Contrarian. Make sure not to hire someone who is too confident or speaks negatively about a boss or work environment.

## **Chapter 3: The Recruiters**

### **A. Behaviors of Recruiters**

Recruiters don’t feel comfortable sharing their complaints on their own so they find other staff members to share their opinions. This leads to the development of cliques and undermines both the confidence of staff members and the power of the principal. Left unchecked, these behaviors can have a negative impact on the school.

### **B. Strategies for Handling Recruiters**

- *Arrange a meeting with the Recruiter.* Address the problem head on by reminding the Recruiter that there is an official process in place for resolving issues rather than recruiting others to the cause. Find out why the person is recruiting others and let the person know it is not appropriate to stir things up.
- *Make sure to respond to the “recruited group” as well.* Be professional, but make sure to tell this group that resolving issues in this manner is not appropriate, provide an alternative approach for them to share their concerns, and let them know you still value them.
- *Be proactive in order to prevent recruiting behaviors.* Develop a culture in which open conversation is supported and problems are addressed through planning and discussion. When a staff member has a concern, show the person that you are interested in addressing it. As soon as someone seems to be engaging in recruiting, nip it in the bud by having a meeting with that person. Below are other suggestions for preventing recruiting behaviors.

- *Establish group norms or ground rules.* Below are examples of group norms and ground rules that address recruiting:  
*We agree we need to respect diverse opinions in decision-making situations. We will not try to recruit others or develop coalitions to force opinions on others. Our decision-making process will use consensus rather than voting or other power techniques.*
- *Develop a clear Problem-Solving Process.* If there is an official process to handle issues, there will be less of a chance staff will resort to recruiting behaviors when they have concerns with each other. Create a clear process in which the aggrieved person first speaks directing to the staff member causing the concern and then an administrator who can help mediate a conversation between the two parties.
- *Introduce the “Ripple Effects” activity.* The authors state that this is one of the most beneficial activities they have introduced to school leaders and school improvement teams. The goal is to analyze a proposed plan to look for potential unanticipated effects. Failing to plan for these unforeseen ripple effects fuels recruiting behavior among staff. By completing the following activity you will decrease the likelihood of recruiting behavior. Below is a description of the activity:
  1. Post a large sheet of paper with the name of a new program or change in the center.
  2. Give staff four to five sticky notes each, and have them write down as many impacts of implementation (or “ripple effects”) as they can in two to three minutes. They should write each effect on one sticky note.
  3. Have them place the sticky notes with impacts that may happen *sooner* closer to the center of the poster and those that may happen later *farther* from the center. In addition, *positive* impacts should be placed on the left side of the chart and *negative* ones on the right.
  4. Then have the group discuss the potential impacts of the change – both positive and negative as well as sooner and later.

### **C. The Principal’s Role in Creating Recruiters**

Without knowing it, the principal may be creating some of the conditions that allow Recruiters to thrive. Try to avoid the following:

- Neglecting to listen to staff members when they come to you with their concerns. If you discourage them from sharing their concerns with you, they will share their concerns elsewhere.
- Not having a formal process to resolve concerns. Without this, staff members often turn to Recruiters to fill this gap.
- Failing to realize that staff members often do not have the confidence to speak up on their own. You need to help staff members learn skills that help them communicate their concerns in a productive way.

## **Chapter 4: The Challenged**

### **A. Behaviors of The Challenged**

Sometimes staff members who do *not* have the skills to implement a new initiative conceal this fact by acting resistant. They may have developed this resistance because they did not receive adequate support or training to implement the new changes and they have a fear of failure. It is easier for them to cover up their lack of ability by discounting the new ideas. The good news is that of all the different types of difficult staff presented in this book, you have the greatest likelihood of improving the behavior of the Challenged.

### **B. Strategies for Handling The Challenged**

- *Arrange a meeting.* Meet with the teacher who feels challenged and tell her specifically what she needs to do to improve. Offer support yourself or through a mentor or a peer coach to help her build the necessary skills. Set up a meeting for the three of you to lay out your expectations. Develop a plan that includes a clear objective, timeline to learn the missing skills, and times to check in with the teacher to see how things are going.
- *Offer informal help.* Because the teacher is trying to conceal areas of weakness, offer to meet with him to provide help *informally* outside of the regular evaluation process to help alleviate his fears. Let him know that you know he is unsure how to implement the new initiative. Offer this help in exchange for him improving his behavior and attitude in staff meetings and when talking to staff.
- *Be responsive.* Be responsive when a staff member has questions and calls out for help. This staff member may end up resisting the new program if you do not catch these signs early.

To prevent the behaviors of the Challenged from surfacing, try the following *preventative* actions when introducing something new:

- *Skills Analysis Template.* Make sure *you* know what skills are required to implement a new initiative. You can use the template online called the Skills Analysis Template (which can be downloaded for free at: [go.solution-tree/leadership](http://go.solution-tree/leadership)) to help you take some time so you are clear about the skills the initiative requires. The template has you break down the needed skills like this:

Specific skill 1: Subskill: Subskill: Subskill: Specific skill 2: Subskill: Etc.
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- *Hold enough information sessions with all staff members.* This way they can better understand the details of the new program.

- *Hold optional sharing and problem-solving sessions.* Teachers can share how they are implementing the new program by bringing examples of lesson plans, assessments, and student work and also discuss their challenges and questions as well. Small groups can be organized around common concerns with implementation.
- *Conduct check-ins.* Check in with staff members *individually* to see if there are any gaps in their understanding.
- *Observe lessons.* At the beginning of implementation, specifically observe lessons with the goal of watching for deficiencies in skill so you can address these deficits immediately.

### **C. The Principal’s Role in Creating The Challenged**

You may inadvertently reinforce the behaviors of The Challenged. In order to avoid this, think about the following:

- Many principals do not take the time to clearly communicate their expectations to staff. Provide a “picture” of how things will look and spell out what you intend staff and students to learn. You can even provide a simple chart like the following:

At the end of the <i>semester</i> , this is what we will be able to see in our classrooms if we are successful in implementing this project:		At the end of the <i>year</i> , this is what we will be able to see in our classrooms if we are successful in implementing this project:	
Student Learning	Teaching Methods	Student Learning	Teaching Methods

- When you introduce a new initiative, make sure you build in time for staff to learn the skills necessary to implement the changes. This includes not only the initial professional development, but follow-up coaching and support as well.
- Punishing teachers for trying new ideas and failing will increase fear of failure and lead some staff to become resistant. Let people know you do not expect immediate mastery and you will support them during a trial-and-error period.

## **Chapter 5: The On-the-Job Retirees**

### **A. Behaviors of On-the-Job Retirees**

Some staff want to do as little as possible and just coast until retirement. They have a poor work ethic, arrive at the last possible minute, and leave as soon as the workday has ended. Because they may openly speak about their desire to coast until retirement, this has the potential to bring down other faculty. It may also add to your workload in dealing with students and parents who complain about these staff members.

### **B. Strategies for Handling On-the-Job Retirees**

- *Appeal to their pride.* To keep On-the-Job Retirees on track, appeal to their sense of pride. You can make comments like “*I know you have a legacy here. You don’t want to go out leaving people with the impression that you are not dedicated.*” Consider giving the staff member an important task or job that utilizes the person’s skills or expertise. Perhaps the On-the-Job Retiree can mentor one of your younger teachers. One final way to appeal to the person’s pride is to have him or her complete the “What Will Be Your Legacy” worksheet (available at [go.solution-tree.com/leadership](http://go.solution-tree.com/leadership)). The sheet contains some powerful questions to get the person near retirement to consider his or her potential impact on others. Below is an excerpt:

#### ***What Will Be Your Legacy?***

As you think about leaving the profession, consider what you will leave behind.

1. What have you learned or gained over your years in the profession?
2. Project yourself into the future. What would not be the same or as positive if it weren’t for you and your efforts?
3. What is the legacy that you want to leave here and have others remember you by after you leave?

- *Clarify expectations.* Make sure you are clear about expectations for the employee with statements like this: “*I know you only have seven months left here, but during that time I expect you will fully participate in all school programs.*” If a new initiative is particularly challenging for this person, consider allowing the person to implement only *part* of it. It is important to follow up to let the person know you are invested in his or her success and will be watching.
- *Suggest a tradeoff.* Because you don’t want this staff member to bring others down, consider offering a tradeoff – the person’s continued engagement in exchange for a reduction of some other responsibility.

### **C. The Principal’s Role in Creating On-the-Job Retirees**

Be careful not to unwittingly create On-the-Job Retirees with your comments and actions. Below are some suggestions to avoid this:

- Make sure you don’t alienate your older staff members by giving them less attention or responsibility. Recognize the unique value and perspectives they bring to the school. It is easy to forget this and give more attention to newer staff members who may be easier to work with due to their energy and enthusiasm.
- On the other hand, don’t give your most experienced staff an unfair burden – the most difficult duties and students.

## Chapter 6: The Resident Experts

### A. Behaviors of Resident Experts

These are the staff members who appear to be knowledgeable on every topic. When you introduce a new initiative, before you can explain it in its entirety, the Resident Experts claim that they know exactly what to do. Then, because they haven't listened to all of the details and key information, they end up doing things incorrectly. Furthermore, they do not take responsibility for implementing strategies incorrectly. This can cause problems because it interferes with the new program.

### B. Strategies for Handling Resident Experts

- *Set up a meeting.* Once you realize a staff member who claims she knows what to do is implementing an initiative incorrectly, meet with that person. Before you do, it is helpful to picture in your mind what you want the completed task to look like so you can describe it. Break down the specific steps you want implemented. Make sure you create a written list of the steps to follow and verify that the staff member understands what to do. Offer support from another staff member and identify a date early on in the implementation to check in about progress.

- *Grab their attention.* Resident Experts usually do *not* like to be given direction because they feel they already know everything. Because of this, you will need to communicate with them in a way that will get their attention. Below are some suggestions:

- To prevent them from interrupting you, you need to insist they listen with framing statements like these:

- “I know this may seem like a repeat of what you already know, but I want you to listen through my entire idea before interjecting any of your thoughts” or “You may think that you already know this, but I have a new twist on the situation that you need to listen carefully to. After I finish, I will ask for your thoughts.”

- Use framing to keep the Resident Expert on track (see p.2 of the summary for sample framing statements.)

- Use reinforcing nonverbal gestures to give your words more authority and power. Below are some suggestions for gestures. When you perform each one, hold it in place a few seconds and be sure to look at the person.

Gesture	Effect
Hold out one hand in a “stop” fashion.	Communicates you want the person to stop talking or to avoid a particular topic.
Hold out hands with palms facing inward.	Communicates the boundaries of the conversation.
Hold up fingers to designate “first, second, third” and so on.	Communicates the agenda for the meeting.

- *Use directives and consequences.* As with any of the strategies for working with resistant staff, if interventions don't work, then you need to issue directives and give warnings of consequences.

### C. The Principal's Role in Creating Resident Experts

Resident Experts may develop their behaviors on their own, but at times, the principal contributes to these behaviors in these ways:

- By failing to demonstrate a strong and knowledgeable approach to new initiatives. When the principal is tentative in explaining a new program, Resident Experts may jump in. Be sure to be well informed before introducing anything new.
- By giving too much attention to Resident Experts because they appear to have good knowledge. Principals often make the mistake of elevating Resident Experts to leadership positions before verifying their expertise.
- By failing to confront Resident Experts. It can be difficult to ask Resident Experts about their knowledge, but it is important to appropriately challenge them to provide more details.

## Chapter 7: The Unelected Representatives

### A. Behaviors of Unelected Representatives

The Unelected Representatives take it upon themselves to speak for others, “I don't agree with this idea and I know there are many other staff members who agree with me.” If left unchecked, they can become official spokespersons and stir up negative sentiment. These are often the staff members who express anti-administration views and insist if they don't speak for others, no one will.

### B. Strategies for Handling Unelected Representatives

- *Verify statements.* To start, the most important thing is to identify potential Unelected Representatives. They often make vague statements such as: “Many on our staff feel this way but have asked me to address the situation” or “Many of us on the staff are wondering why this initiative went forward without more discussion.” You need to be aware that you are being manipulated. You can confirm this by checking with other staff to find out if their feelings match those of the Unelected Representatives. There may be some truth to the complaint, but usually most staff do not agree with it.

- *Meet with the Unelected Representatives.* They usually count on leaders not following up or not checking the veracity of their statements. Inform them that they cannot speak for others on the staff, only themselves.

- *Teach communication skills.* If you find you have Unelected Representatives on staff, you can address this by teaching *all* staff to be more confident in their communication. You can couch this as a form of professional development for addressing disagreeable parents or enhancing communication. This will help your staff become less susceptible to the Unelected Representatives.

- *Be proactive.* Provide opportunities for staff to voice concerns so the Unelected Representatives cannot say that others have been silenced. Make sure you have structures for staff to have their concerns heard and resolved. Consider installing a suggestion box.
- *Develop a set of norms together with your staff.* These will help to develop a more positive culture and prevent the creation of Unelected Representatives. At a staff meeting, divide staff into groups and have each group record answers to the questions: *What do we expect from our leader? What do we expect from our faculty members? What do we expect from ourselves as individuals?* Then come together to create one list of norms that reflects the whole group's expectations.

### **C. The Principal's Role in Creating Unelected Representatives**

To avoid inadvertently reinforcing the behavior of Unelected Representatives, make sure you do *not* do the following:

- Listen to the concerns of Unelected Representatives without checking the veracity of their statements.
- Fail to listen to all concerns and not plan for discussion before implementing a new initiative.
- Act as an autocratic leader who squelches conversations and ideas.

## **Chapter 8: The Whiners and Complainers**

### **A. Behaviors of Whiners and Complainers**

The Whiners and Complainers find fault with everything. They focus on what won't work in a new idea and they often blame their issues on other staff members or the leader. They tend to bring up issues from the past or issues outside of your control.

### **B. Strategies for Handling Whiners and Complainers**

- *Have staff solve dilemmas.* Because Whiners and Complainers often encourage other staff members to focus on what is wrong, try to steer all staff into solving dilemmas rather than complaining about them. For example, if some staff start complaining about an advisee program, consider having groups of staff discuss what is working well with the program, what is not working well, and how everyone could work together to improve it. This will prevent your staff from becoming overwhelmed by the challenges of any program.
- *Try to connect with the Whiners and Complainers.* First make a point to listen to them (they may be used to being ignored). After they have shared their concerns, try to get them to give more specifics about their concerns with questions such as, *"What specific evidence have you seen that helped you determine that this was true?"* or *"How did you determine that this was happening?"*
- *Check the veracity of their complaints.* If you determine that their complaint is unfounded, let them know you disagree.
- *Help Whiners and Complainers see the issue from a different perspective.* You might ask them to look at what will happen over the long term, *"How do you see your issue impacting the school five years from now?"* Or perhaps help them see the larger context, *"At this point you've identified an issue that applies to this graduating class, how do you see it impacting the rest of the school?"*
- *Use framing statements.* You might frame the conversation by saying, *"As we work together in generating ideas to address your concerns, we need to stay away from things we cannot control like the backgrounds of your students"* or *"I'll listen to what you think is wrong, but I won't listen to any negative comments about your colleagues."*
- *Use reframing.* This is another way to change the focus of Whiners and Complainers. Here are some examples of reframing:
  - "You've mentioned the weakness of the program. What strengths do you see in the program that can help us as a school?"*
  - "If you were able to eliminate your concerns, how do you see the program moving forward?"*
  - "If you were to look at this from the perspective of a parent, what differences would you see?"*
- *Sweet and Sour Memories.* Sometimes Whiners and Complainers develop these behaviors because they are asked to move forward before they are able to let go of a previous practice. One way to address this is through the "Sweet and Sour Memories" activity. With this activity, ask staff to list both the "sweet" and the "sour" memories they have about a program that will be terminated. Then have them brainstorm ways the school can replace the good attributes of the terminated program once it is gone.

### **C. The Principal's Role in Creating Whiners and Complainers**

In order not to unwittingly reinforce the behavior of Whiners and Complainers, avoid the following:

- Responding immediately to Whiners and Complainers. Try to resist the urge to address their needs and instead redirect them back to the source of their complaint. This makes them think through issues rather than immediately resort to venting.
- Allowing Whiners and Complainers to monopolize staff meeting time. Limit their speaking and redirect staff to the agenda.
- Allowing Whiners and Complainers to present complaints that are unsubstantiated. Always ask for evidence or specifics.
- Not providing feedback to Whiners and Complainers about their negative impact on others. You may need to have an honest conversation about ways to get their ideas across without being perceived as a Whiner or a Complainer.

## **Chapter 9: Defending Yourself and Next Steps**

Up until now, the book has described *specific* types of difficult staff and how best to deal with them. This chapter focuses on two general practices that work in dealing with anyone who holds up your change efforts: self-protection and follow-up strategies.



## 1. Self-Protection Strategies

Below are some techniques for protecting yourself psychologically when you are in a confrontational situation with a staff member. How you address these situations is highly personal and depends on your strengths and areas of comfort. Before dealing with difficult staff, it may be useful to conduct a self-assessment of your abilities to confront challenging staff. The excerpted self-assessment below can be found on p.98 in the book and is available for free online at: [go.solution-tree.com/leadership](http://go.solution-tree.com/leadership):

Skill	Your Level of Skill (Emerging, Competent, Proficient)	Evidence for Rating	Strategy to Improve This Skill
Accuracy in describing the difficult behavior			
Precision in planning confrontational conference			
Confidence in telling the employee the issue at hand			
Ability to keep conversation focused			
Ability to deliver directives to stop negative behaviors			

Below are some self-protection techniques for when you are meeting with a difficult staff member:

- *Positive self-talk* – It is vital to remain calm so you are less susceptible to attack. Positive self-talk helps you control your emotions.
- *Potential pitfalls* – Think through the potential bumps of a new program so you can quickly address questions and concerns.
- *Framing* – Framing statements were mentioned earlier as a way to constrain and focus conversations with difficult people.
- *Voice* – Lowering the pitch of your voice at the end of a directive and speaking more slowly will convey authority.
- *Clarity* – Be as clear and direct as possible. Limit your words and don't feel the need to justify your points.
- *Room arrangement* – Sit directly across from the resistant staff member to convey authority and raise your chair so you are sitting a little higher than the difficult staff member.

## 2. Follow-Up Strategies

You will need to put follow-up plans into place to reshape a staff member's negative behavior. The length of time needed to follow up with difficult staff members will vary from person to person. Below are some techniques to use to follow up:

- Hold a conversation a week after confronting a behavior to check if the person is on track.
- Ask the person to report back to you, perhaps in the form of a written report.
- Observe the class of a resistant staff member to see if there is improvement in implementing the new practice.
- Check in with a team that started implementing group meeting norms in response to having a difficult staff member. You may also want to ask teacher teams to prepare short progress reports at regular intervals during the implementation of a new program.
- Follow up with your entire staff when implementing a new initiative. In a full staff meeting ask small groups to list what is working well, what needs to be improved, and what other unresolved issues still stand in the way of success. Take it a step further and ask staff to brainstorm strategies to overcome concerns so they can take ownership of the problems instead of just complain about them.
- Understand the unmet needs of your staff. Sometimes staff become resistant when their needs are not being met. Below are stages of concern that staff members often go through with a new initiative: Awareness, Informational, Personal, Management, Consequences, Collaboration, and Refocusing. The book describes each of these stages and suggests strategies to address staff needs at each stage. For example, in the first stage, *Awareness*, staff are unaware of the new change and some will experience anxiety and become resistant if the leader does not set aside time to introduce and explain it. (See pages 108-110 for descriptions of each stage.)

## Chapter 10: Influencing Your Staff Members' Behaviors

In addition to addressing the eight different types of difficult and resistant staff presented in the first eight chapters, school leaders need to make sure they put effort into preventing those types of behaviors before they surface. This final chapter focuses on some additional ways to accomplish this.

- *Plan thoroughly* – Poorly planned initiatives are one of the primary causes of negativity among staff. Make sure you think through the details of all initiatives and engage a committee or other staff to help you think through the needs of all stakeholders.
- *Stay alert to the signs of resistant staff* – Note that it is important to recognize that every healthy organization has people who raise reasonable questions and concerns. The key word here is *reasonable*. However, stay alert to the signs of staff who are more difficult. When interviewing candidates, ask about their present jobs to see if they speak negatively. Be aware if staff show any signs of sudden behavioral changes or unlikely alliances which may signal the development of more resistance.
- *Focus your energy* – You must determine when it is worth your time and energy to intervene with difficult staff. If you don't respond, the rest of the staff may see you as ineffective. However, there are some special cases when it is detrimental to intervene. For example, do not intervene if the staff member has no credibility with the rest of the staff or if the rest of the staff is already behind the new initiative. Another time you might not intervene is if the negative comments have validity and you are already in the process of addressing those concerns. Finally, another time you might ignore the resisters is in the case where giving them your attention would take away from the energy you are using to support those successfully implementing the initiative.
- *Build a positive school climate and culture* – Building a positive school culture and climate goes a long way toward preventing negative behaviors from arising. Make sure to treat all members of your staff with respect and professionalism. Create norms to help staff work together, ensure that communication is clear and effective, and involve teachers in the implementation of staff meetings. Overall, treat all of your staff members fairly and ensure a positive workplace for all.

## **The Main Idea’s Professional Development Suggestions: Addressing Negative Staff Behavior**

Below are some ideas for ways to use the ideas in the book to address the negative behaviors of your staff.

### **Identifying Negative Behaviors at Your School**

While no one wants to put people into a box, you will be better able to address the negative behaviors of staff members if you can understand what *type* of behavior they are exhibiting. Below is a chart summarizing the eight types of difficult and resistant staff.

The Underminers	They engage in negative conversations behind your back and fail to follow through on new initiatives or work actively to sabotage your efforts by stirring up negative feelings among staff.
The Contrarians	They are openly aggressive, ready to fight, profess to know a lot about the topic at hand, and are able to ignore the opinions of others. They get energized from fighting.
The Recruiters	They don’t feel comfortable sharing their complaints on their own so they find other staff members to share their opinions. This leads to the development of cliques and undermines the power of the principal.
The Challenged	They do <i>not</i> have the skills to implement a new initiative and conceal this fact by acting resistant. They act resistant because they did not receive enough support or training to implement the new changes and fear failure.
The On-the-Job Retirees	They want to do as little as possible and just coast until retirement. They have a poor work ethic, arrive at the last possible minute, and leave as soon as the workday has ended.
The Resident Experts	They appear to be knowledgeable on every topic. When you introduce a new initiative, before you can explain it in its entirety, the Resident Experts claim that they know exactly what to do but end up doing things wrong.
The Unelected Representatives	They take it upon themselves to speak for others, “ <i>I don’t agree with this idea and I know there are many other staff members who agree with me.</i> ” They can become official spokespersons and stir up negative sentiment.
The Whiners and Complainers	They find fault with everything. They focus on what won’t work in a new idea and they often blame their issues on other staff members or the leader. They tend to bring up issues from the past or issues outside of your control.

Alone or with your leadership team, do the following:

- **Identify** those people on staff who exhibit difficult or resistant behavior.
- Look at the **chart** above and determine if each negative staff member fits into one of the categories.
- **Read the chapter** in the book or summary that addresses those specific negative behaviors. Note that each chapter in the book stands on its own and can be read without reading the entire book.
- Using the ideas in the chapter as a resource, brainstorm some ways you can **confront this behavior** directly.
- Think about what might be missing in your school that could have prevented this type of behavior. Alone, or with your leadership team, brainstorm **preventative structures** for your school that could help prevent these behaviors from developing in other staff members. Use the chapter as a resource for ideas.
- **Take ownership** – what might you as the principal (or the leadership team) be doing that is contributing to or reinforcing these negative behaviors? Using the chapter as a resource, what changes should you make in your own behavior?

### **Getting the Best Bang for Your Buck – A Few Strategies to Address MANY Difficult Behaviors**

While there are *specific* suggestions for addressing each type of challenging behavior, there are also *general* strategies you can implement which will address a number of negative behaviors at once. Together with your leadership team:

- A. Assess how well your school does with each of the following general strategies
- B. Brainstorm ways you could improve these areas in your school

1. *Communication structures* – There is nothing more important than having clear communication in a school, particularly when you introduce a new initiative. Does your school have communication structures such as: regular staff meetings with structured time allotted for giving feedback on a new initiative (such as “Pro-Con Conversations”), individual one-to-one meetings between the principal and staff members, a staff problem-solving process, and an anonymous method to give the administration feedback (such as a suggestion box)? What other communication structures do you have?

2. *Thorough planning* – How well does your school plan for new initiatives? Does your school do any of the following: involve stakeholders in planning for a new initiative, anticipate bumps in the implementation, write out a list of which staff will “win” and which will “lose” due to the changes, plan to provide support for staff during implementation, and provide initial and follow-up professional development for staff? What other ways does your school ensure thorough planning?

3. *Norms and ground rules* – When staff work together, don’t assume they know what is appropriate behavior and what isn’t. It is useful to work with staff to develop norms or provide ground rules *before* problematic behavior arises. Does your school have norms or ground rules for the following staff interactions: how to treat each other, how to communicate concerns, how to involve everyone in a discussion, how meetings should be run, how to criticize ideas, etc.? What other norms does your school have?

4. *The school leader’s behavior* – Is the principal or other school leader unknowingly contributing to negative staff behavior? Consider whether the principal does the following: comes to meetings unprepared, is unclear about expectations and plans, gives negative staff undue attention, fails to directly confront negative behavior, leads in an autocratic way, fails to listen to differing viewpoints, or is oblivious to negative staff behavior? What other school leader actions might contribute to negative staff behaviors?