

AIR UNIVERSITY

*Dealing  
with  
Difficult People*

*We make a difference...*

*one idea at a time*

**Dr. Stef Eisen, Col (ret) USAF**  
**With thanks to Dr. Hank Dasinger**  
**Air University**

**The Life of a Commander's Spouse.....**



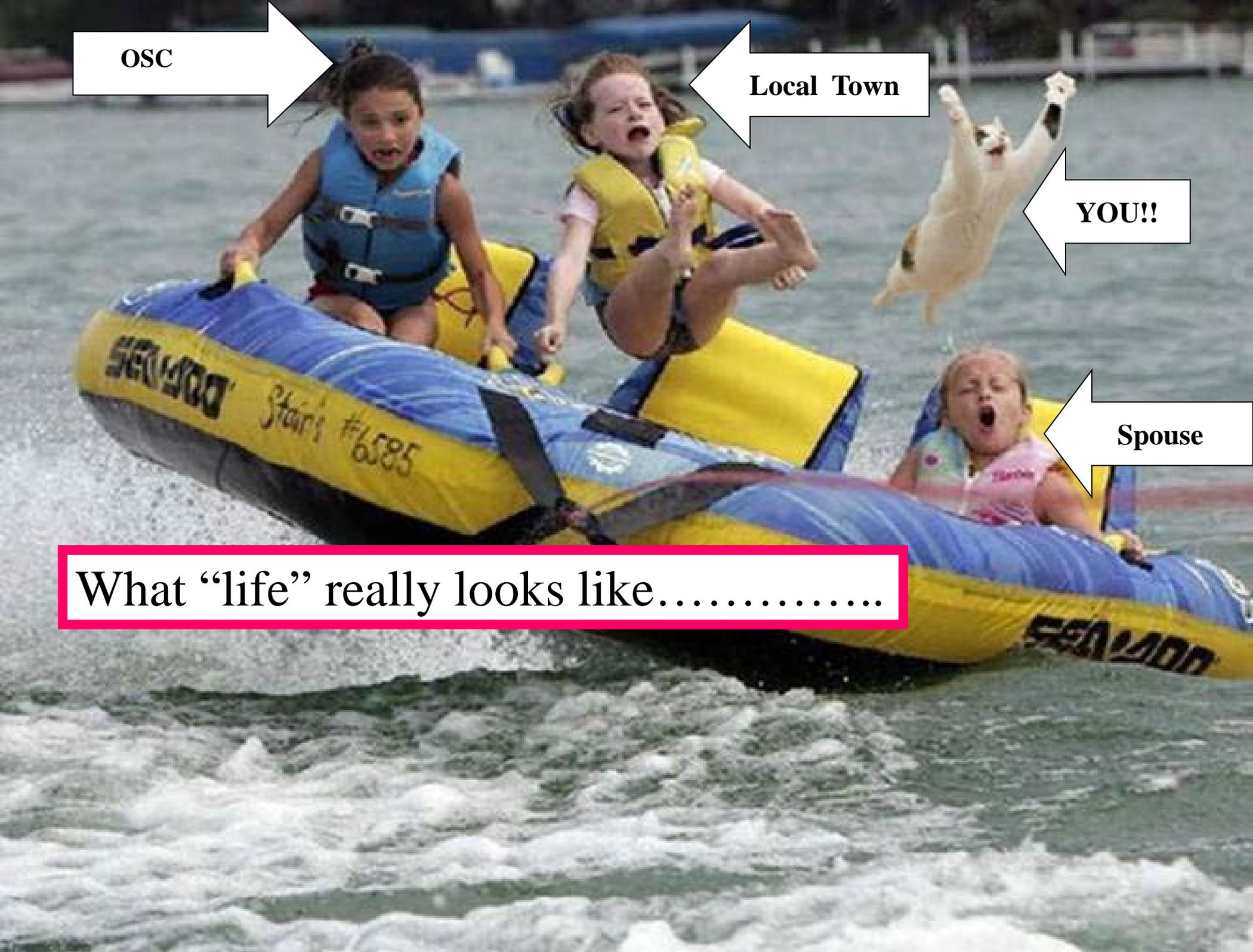
OSC

Local Town

YOU!!

Spouse

What "life" really looks like.....





# Dealing with Difficult People



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1. Why Should We Care?
2. Why People Do What They Do
3. Assertive Communication Skills
4. Types of “Difficult” people
5. Tips on handling “Difficult” people



# Why Should We Care?



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- Challenge is to form coalitions of willing people (**volunteers**) eager to serve and able to do so effectively with others
- You just can't ignore / avoid difficult people
- Your team will work best if the group has strong and productive relationships

**“Dealing with people is probably the biggest problem you face...” (Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*)**



# Why Should We Care?



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- **Difficult people have “costs” -- they**
  - **Cause other people to leave the team**
  - **Undermine the leader’s authority / affect reputation**
  - **Weaken communication / Waste time**
  - **Cause dissention among team members**
  - **Diminish the team’s productivity**
  - **“Suck the life out of you” from the mudslide of problems**

**Why are some people so difficult?**



# Why People Do What They Do



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- **Unclear boundaries**
- **Conflicting expectations**
- **Rewarded behavior is repeated behavior**
- **A word about psychopathology**

**What to do, what to do....**



# How to Handle Difficult People



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## General Strategies

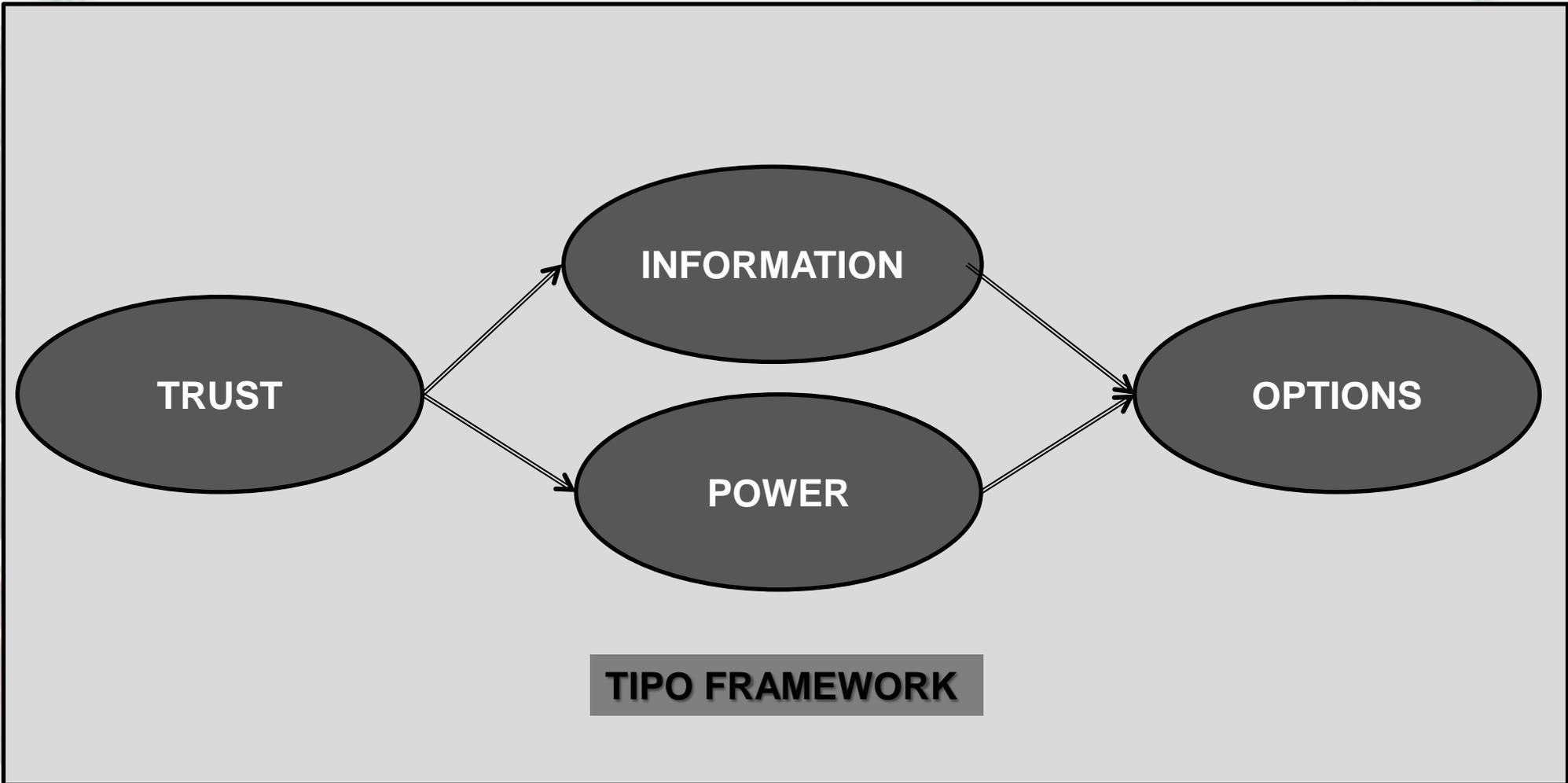
- **Actively listen to and observe others...communicate**
- **Don't ignore a problem...confront them head on...they won't just go away**
- **Understand what may be behind the problem behavior**
- **Avoid talking about others behind their backs and don't "pile on" when others do**
- **Establish group norms for your team**
- **Be assertive (behaviors that take care of self but not at the expense of others)**

**What assertiveness can do for you...**



# Influence Icebreaker

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# Benefits of Assertiveness



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- **Reduces anxiety / stress caused by conflicts**
- **Allows effective expression of thoughts, feelings**
- **Confidence and control over life improved**
- **Others respect you, your ideas and opinions**
- **Relationships with others are greatly improved**
- **Able to say “no” when you mean “no” without guilt**
- **Motivates others toward assertive behavior**
- **Allows you to ask for help without fear and stress**

**How do you “assert”????...**



# Assertive Responding



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- **Change your Mindset: It isn't a reflex, but a response**
- **Put the problem at the center of the table – takes the focus off of personalities and on to the behaviors – you can't change beliefs / attitudes, but you can change behavior (especially if the changed behavior has a reward versus a punishment)**
- **Be Specific and Direct and have them “solve” the problem**
- **Respect Yourself and Others – blame isn't the game, it's all about discovering the way ahead**
- **Prepare and Practice (response versus reflex)**
- **One key: Questions over statements**
  - **This won't work.....**
  - **I don't like.....**
  - **It's always been done this way.....**
  - **You aren't fair.....**
  - **That's a bad idea.....**

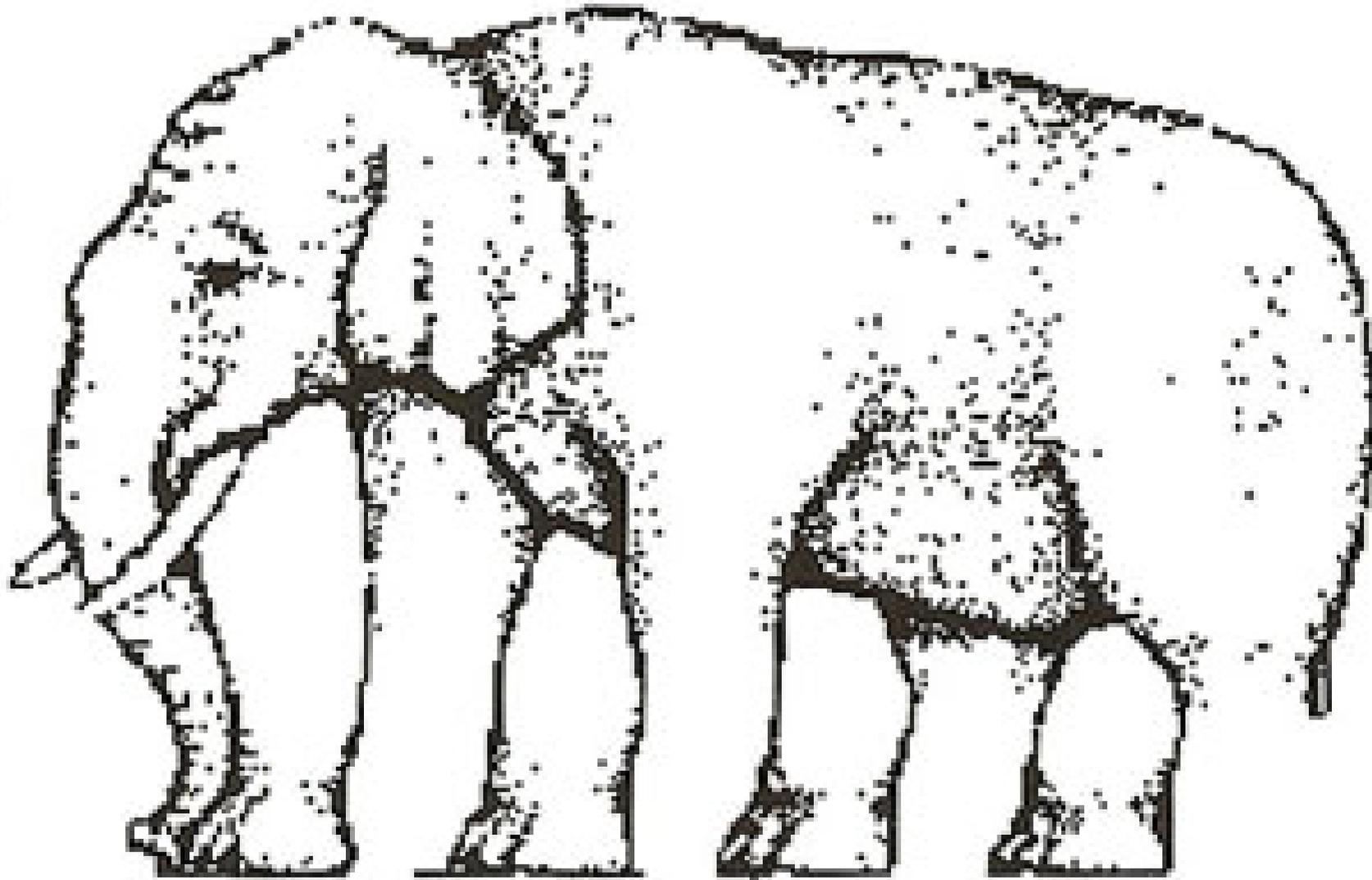
**Let's look at some “difficult types”**



# Blink: The Other Side of Thin Slicing....



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## Another Example?

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According to a research at an English university, it doesn't matter in what order the letters in a word are, the only important thing is that first and last letter is at the right place. The rest can be a total mess and you can still read it without problem. This is because we do not read every letter by itself but the word as a whole.

Ceehiro

Might you / your cohorts have a hard time “seeing things” another way?



# Types of Difficult People



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**Task  
Master**

**Bully**

**Busy  
Body**

**Recluse**

**Black  
Hole**

**Liar**

**Outlaw**

**Blamer-  
Complainer**

**Know-it-  
All**

**A common theme is assertive responding...**



# Task Master



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- **Makes unreasonable demands on your time, resources, and attention...Task Masters may:**
- **Be overloaded, or unaware of the impact of their demands**
- **Simply be dumping on you to avoid the work**
- **Be motivated by ambition (at your expense)**
- **Simply be clueless**
- **Consider it their right to pass on their work to others**

**What you can do...**



# Task Master: What You Can Do



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- **Approach the TM is a positive way**
- **Observe how TM manages his/her workload and use this observation to shape your perspective**
- **State clearly how the extra work is negatively impacting you and the team as appropriate**
- **Explain what you're willing and able to do**
- **Develop a plan to deal with the overwhelming workload ... distribute the work more evenly**
- **Decide what is most important...decide if there are tasks that don't really need to be done**



# Bully



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- **Bullies pose a problem whether they're subordinates, colleagues, or bosses**
- **A bully who works for you may steer clear of you, but will try to bully others on the team...ultimately you have to contend with the bully's behavior.**
- **Bully looks, sounds fierce, but is often hurting and motivated by need for acceptance, respect**
- **Unfortunately the Bully tries to meet these goals by intimidating others and making others feel small**

**What you can do...**



# Bully: What You Can Do



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- **Bullies thrive on fear; if you're intimidated, don't show it...keep your cool...don't take the bait. Questions over statements**
- **Try to understand what makes the Bully feel inadequate—work to manage those situations — help the Bully find more appropriate behaviors**
- **Avoid being sucked in by bad behaviors...set up the Bully to “win” by putting the Bully in situations where skills will be recognized and performance will be successful**
- **Engage positively by taking an interest in the Bully's life/work and by asking specific questions**



# Busy Body



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- **The Busy Body doesn't respect personal and professional boundaries**
- **The Busy Body moves from person to another carrying personal information about others**
- **The Busy Body tells the stories as a way to gain acceptance or to manipulate or gain influence**
- **Unfortunately, the Busy Body engages in these behaviors often at others' expense**

**What you can do...**



# Busy Body: What You Can Do



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- **Re-direct the Busy Body to work-related conversations...guard against being pulled into inappropriate conversations about others**
- **Try to re-direct the Busy Body's natural social skills to more helpful ways of interacting:**
  - **information gathering from other team members,**
  - **helping with a newsletter, etc.**
- **Delete inappropriate messages w/o responding**
- **Don't let the Busy Body intimidate or make others feel invaded or uncomfortable**
- **Enforce boundaries**



# Black Hole



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- **Someone who takes everything you can give and then asks for more**
- **May have difficulty respecting others' boundaries**
- **May have confusion in expectations**
- **May never finish a project**

**What you can do...**



# Black Hole: What You Can Do



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- **Take an active interest in BH's tasks and projects...watch and guard against the natural tendency to want to avoid the Black Hole**
- **Encourage the BH to move on when a task is sufficiently accomplished**
- **Invite BH's input on others' work as a way of showing value in the BH's opinion**
- **Give the BH positive feedback on increased independent decision making and work**
- **Don't let a good call go unnoticed**
- **Set expectations / standards for completion of projects**



# Recluse



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- **The Recluse is isolated and does not communicate with others...withdrawn and non-participative**
- **May be shy, uncomfortable around others**
- **May prefer to work alone**
- **May not trust others (burned by a Busy Body before?)**
- **May not be very skilled in working with others**

**What you can do...**



# Recluse: What You Can Do



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- **Don't force interaction...the recluse will not likely become a social butterfly**
- **Stay focused on tasks in your contacts...other kinds interactions may be viewed as intrusive**
- **Establish a routine or procedure for the Recluse to provide information to colleagues who need it**
- **Provide appropriate comm tools to the Recluse**
- **Do allow the Recluse to have solitary time in exchange for interacting with others**
- **Avoid intruding into life of Recluse—when not needed, or asking for something recluse is not comfortable with**



# Liar



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- **A person who deliberately misleads you. This person has an ethical problem**
- **Lying viewed as easy way to get what is wanted or to avoid responsibility for something**
- **Believes lying makes the Liar smart or more clever than the person being lied to**
- **Uses as a source of power through manipulation**
- **Tricky to deal with—never know where you stand**
- **May be trying to undercut authority, advance self at other's expense, or get away with something**

**What you can do...**



# Liar: What You Can Do



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- **Take defensive action...document your case**
- **Assess how bad the situation is...the scope of the lying**
- **Get “authority” (not legal, but others with supervisory skills) involved as soon as needed**
- **Don’t get trapped by the Liar – you are giving the Liar “ammunition to shoot you with”**



# Outlaw



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- **Doesn't play by rules unless they're his/her own**
- **Underlying behavior may be belief that everybody should be able to come and go as they like**
- **Outlaws often feel trapped, bound, constrained by structure/rules...go about business—ignore rules**
- **Outlaw can turn into negative role model...folk hero-like, a “Rebel without a Cause”**
- **Can distract others or even gain a following**
- **Extreme Outlaw is compelled to openly challenge your authority**
- **If unsuccessful, the Outlaw blames the rules**

**What you can do...**



# Outlaw: What You Can Do



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- **Focus on creativity, not compliance**
- **Leverage Outlaw's tendency to question; nurture it as curiosity among team. Loosen the reins a bit**
- **Set up a regular time for "challenging the rules"**
- **Credit the Outlaw when appropriate for rules that are changed or discarded**
- **Stress the "end results" all are working toward; encourage solution-focused thinking.**
- **Put the Outlaw in charge of linking procedures and processes to group success**
- **Reward successful or team endorsed suggestions**



# Know-it-All



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- **Someone who claims to know everything about everything**
- **Wants to be in control...pays little attention to what others say**
- **Condescending, irritating...freely gives opinions**
- **Defies authority and insults others, annoying them and alienating co-workers**
- **Because of alienation, contributions are not what they could be, especially given K-i-A's intelligence**
- **Illusion of superior intelligence is often behind the behavior**
- **Need to be seen as smartest anchors self-esteem**

**What you can do...**



# Know-it-All: What You Can Do



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- **Encourage the Know-it-All to participate in helpful ways**
- **Go to the K-i-A first, asking for help in figuring something out**
- **When research needs to be done, ask the K-i-A to do it.**
- **Make practical assignments to the K-i-A as well as tasks involving complex challenges**
- **Share your K-i-A's talent across teams and projects**



# Blamer-Complainer

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- **Someone who blames you and others for his/her mistakes**
- **Sometimes called whiners because of their tone of voice when blaming and complaining**
- **Adept at buck passing, finding fault in everyone and everything**
- **Negativity of the Blamer-Complainer drains energy from others**
- **Are often terrified of being held accountable when making an error**

**What you can do...**



# Blamer-Complainer: What You Can Do



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- **Accept blame when appropriate...crucial in demonstrating the need for shared responsibility**
- **Encourage constructive, action-oriented problem-solving in place of Blaming-Complaining**
- **Leverage Blamer-Complainer when critical eye is needed on a project that may not be going well**
- **Campaign against fault-finding...acknowledge that people can make mistakes but reinforce and reward problem solvers...make it public**