CHAPTER ONE

Understanding Difficult Teachers

The ability to work with people is as purchasable a commodity as coffee or sugar, but I'd pay more for it than any other ability under the sun.

-John D. Rockefeller

- O Who are they?
- O How did they get this way?
- O What do they want?
- O What effect do they have?

WHO ARE THEY?

- The Complainer: I have all these problems. . . .
- The Negative: Been there, done that; nothing works.
- The Inflexible: It's worked for years, and I'm not changing!
- The Noncompliant: Oh, did you need that this week?
- The Gossiper: Have you heard . . . ?
- The Anarchist: I can run this school better than . . .

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- The Noisemakers: I'm calling the media, the school board, the PTA.
- The Sniper: Gotcha!
- The Backbiter: I will be your friend . . . until later. . . .
- The Teacher Tyrant: This is my classroom; it's my way!
- The Intimidator: I am right . . . your idea is stupid!
- The Selfish: It isn't my turn

ost teachers are cooperative, positive, and hardworking. Only 5% to 10% of teachers display negative attitudes and disruptive behaviors (Brock & Grady, 2006). Although small in number, difficult teachers create messy problems and big headaches that demand a disproportionate amount of time and attention from school leaders. Their behaviors can damage faculty morale. threaten school culture, and thwart attainment of institutional goals. Most important, their behaviors can interfere with student learning. When displayed in the classrooms, their behaviors are harmful to students and provoke angry responses from parents. Educators sometimes avoid mentioning problems in the profession, fearing that doing so casts aspersion on all teachers. Just the opposite is true. Identifying problem behavior and seeking corrective solutions promotes desirable benefits for everyone.

Although it is not something we like to admit, at times most of us are "difficult." The Oxford Dictionary (1997) defines the word "difficult," as it relates to a person, as "not easy to please; uncooperative; or troublesome" (p. 207). We all have days when that definition might apply to us—when we are grumpy, when we sulk because we don't get "our way," when we complain about a change at work, when we criticize our employer, or when we are less than supportive of a new initiative. And even the best of us have, on occasion, relished a bit of juicy gossip or reacted venomously to a colleague's success.

But there is an important difference between teachers who are occasionally difficult and those who are persistently difficult (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009). A difficult teacher's problem behavior is habitual, affects many people, and is routinely perceived as troublesome by a wide variety of individuals (Bramson, 1981). One author explained, [You can determine if a person is truly difficult by asking yourself] "... would the problem go away if so-and-so went for a hike in the harbor wearing cement overshoes ...?" (Negotiation Skills Company, 2003). Principals in our study were much kinder in their terminology but nonetheless described troubling behaviors. One principal described difficult teachers as:

Teachers who use poor judgment in discipline/supervision issues, are negative, verbally abusive to students, have signs of mental illness, have difficulty differentiating to meet the needs of individuals, want kids with discipline problems out, turn small problems with colleagues into big problems, frequently share negative comments about students/job with others.

Other principals agreed, explaining,

I think another cause of difficult behavior is just self-absorption in general. People forget they are the adults. They are here for the students, not the other way around. There is a feeling of "what have you done for me lately?" That bothers me.

Another principal suggested that for some teachers, "difficult" behaviors were seasonal. She called it "March/February Madness," explaining "most teachers become more difficult during this time."

Sometimes difficult teachers are not consciously aware that their behaviors are inappropriate or how they affect others. However, on occasion, it can be deliberate. One principal reported a situation in which a small group of teachers deliberately ostracized and bullied another teacher whom they wanted to leave the school. When the principal removed the "ringleader" of the bullies from the school, the problem stopped.

Another principal reported a teacher on her staff whose mission in life was to thwart her leadership. She engaged in malicious gossiping, criticized the principal behind her back, and lobbied teachers to follow her lead. When the principal pointed out that she was running the school and suggested that the teacher become a principal herself if she wanted to be in charge, the teacher left the school.

Although the nuances of human behavior are complex and impossible to simplistically categorize, some general patterns of difficult teachers exist. Principals identified the following behavior patterns as problematic.

- **Complaining:** Complainers persistently voice negative comments about students, their job, the principal, and the school. They moan about their personal lives, children, and spouses. Nobody has it as "bad" as they do. Although they gripe and moan incessantly, they do nothing to improve the situation. They relish sympathy and usually hang out with other complainers with whom they enjoy daily pity parties. Their favorite haunt is the faculty lounge.
- Negativity: These individuals throw a "wet blanket" on any new proposal. Their typical response to a new idea is, "That will never work" or "We tried that once before and it didn't work." One principal described negative teachers as "... my least favorite because they sap the strength right out of me" (Brock & Grady, 2006). Just a few negative teachers, especially if they have strong personalities, can quickly lower faculty morale. Additionally, their tendency to seek out new teachers to tell them "what it's really like" makes negative teachers destructive to the professional growth and development of new teachers. They join the complainers in the faculty lounge to create a toxic environment.
- Inflexibility: Inflexible teachers are unwilling to change or resistant to growth opportunities. Inflexible teachers are stuck in a rut of mediocrity. Their attitude is, "I've done it this way for years, and it works for me. I'm not changing, and you can't make me." When inflexible teachers band together, they form an effective bottleneck or roadblock to new initiatives.
- Noncompliance: There are two types of teachers who do not comply: those who are openly, belligerently noncompliant and those who are quietly and passively noncompliant. In either case, they do not follow the rules and do not fulfill their obligations. The belligerent are noisier about their noncompliance. They openly announce their displeasure to you and to anyone who will listen. The passive noncompliant teachers say nothing, but engage in practices such as

- chronically missing deadlines, "forgetting" to complete required forms, or arriving late for meetings.
- **Gossiping:** Most schools have at least one "Chatty Cathy and Chatty Charlie." These teachers love to be the first to know and share. They revel in the attention garnered through their newfound information. Unfortunately, factual accuracy is not terribly important to them. There are two kinds of gossipers: those who gossip because they enjoy the attention and those who gossip because they have a malicious intent. Both kinds of gossiping can cause damage; however, the attention seekers are usually oblivious to the trail of damage. Some nonmalicious gossipers even attempt to share their juicy tidbits with their principals. One principal admitted, "I cringe when [a gossiper] comes in my direction" (Brock & Grady, 2006). Malicious gossipers are another story. They deliberately construct and spread untruths for the purpose of inflicting damage to another's reputation. Often their target is the principal or some other member of the administrative team, and their goal is to damage the leader's credibility. Although both varieties of gossipers create headaches for principals, the malicious gossiper can inflict serious damage to an administrator's
- Anarchy: These teachers either disagree with and/or do not like the principal. They freely share their sentiments with anyone who will listen to them. Their goal is to undermine the principal with criticism, discourage cooperation, and in some cases, incite anarchy. Malicious gossip, backbiting, and sniping are their tools. A few well-planted untruths combined with malicious comments during faculty meetings can effectively diminish trust in a principal. Teachers bent on anarchy destroy faculty cohesiveness and undermine a principal's leadership, especially if they gain followers. Inexperienced teachers and teachers prone to negative behavior are particularly vulnerable to their influence and become prime targets and willing followers.
- Noisemaking: Noisemakers, when thwarted, may seek to call attention to their plight by contacting the media, school board, or PTA. They want attention, validation of their plight, and possibly revenge for the real or imagined

"wrongs" they have suffered. They can undermine the credibility of a new or inexperienced principal with the school's publics. Internally, they can instigate toxic subcultures that undermine the principal's authority and threaten school goals.

- **Sniping:** Snipers take potshots at the principal during meetings by making rude statements or critical comments. Their behavior is designed to arouse an emotional response (e.g., confusion, anger) and thereby fluster the speaker. Any sign of weakness on the part of the principal fuels their behavior and incites fellow snipers, who generally sit together to enjoy the festivities. A sniper with a band of malcontents can disrupt a meeting and make a principal appear ineffective.
- **Backbiting/Backstabbing:** These individuals are sweet to your face but deadly when your back is turned. The backstabber deceives the leader with friendliness in order to gain trust and information. The information is then twisted and used to sabotage, discredit, embarrass, or somehow diminish the leader's credibility.
- Tyrannical: These teachers instigate countless calls to the principal from angry parents and upset students. They consider their classrooms as little empires or fiefdoms over which they alone preside. In their eyes, they are always right; parents and students are always wrong. Middle ground or gray areas do not exist in their black and white world. Consequently, they are the source of poor relationships and constant conflicts with parents and students. Left unchecked, their behavior damages students, relationships with parents, and the school's reputation in the community.
- Intimidating: Intimidators think they know it all and display their superiority through condescension toward colleagues. They are always right and have little regard for the opinions and feelings of others. They routinely intimidate others through their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Some intimidators make condescending or cutting comments that stifle discussion; others are skilled at doing so nonverbally with raised eyebrows, smirks, and looks of boredom or disbelief. Their goal is to make others feel stupid and thus silence them. Their power increases when surrounded by

an audience of like-minded friends. One administrator acknowledged,

In 21 years as an elementary principal, my most challenging staff problem was a teacher who could not get along with other adults. Her style was intimidating to others. She was always right. Her adult social skills and personality were impossible to correct. (Brock & Grady, 2006)

• Selfish/Self-Centered: These individuals view their jobs very narrowly. If a task is not expressly identified in their contract, it is not their problem or their responsibility. These teachers are frugal with their time and are not interested in participating in, much less volunteering for, school projects and initiatives. The often-heard refrains from self-centered teachers are, "Why do I have to do it?" "It isn't my turn." "Not my job." Their approach to teaching is that of an hourly employee rather than as a professional educator. They do not exude interest in improving the school or the profession. One principal explained, "[difficult teachers] want 'ease for self' more than learning for students."

HOW DID THEY GET THIS WAY?

How do difficult teachers get that way? Although hard to believe, most difficult teachers were not born that way. Each of us is genetically predisposed to certain behavioral tendencies and characteristics. Most of our behavior is learned through interactions with others (Aldrich, 2002). Predisposition plays a role in that some individuals are more inclined to be irritable, impatient, inflexible, and pessimistic, while others are calm, patient, adaptable, and optimistic. Predisposition or temperament, however, does not dictate behavior once one reaches adulthood. Adults may be influenced by temperament, but they choose their behaviors.

Difficult teachers want to control their environment. As children, they learned through trial and error which behaviors were rewarded and which ones were punished. A behavior that led to the desired result was reinforced and thus repeated. When children learn at an early age that difficult behaviors such as crying,

tantrums, whining, complaining, and aggression are rewarded, these behaviors become part of their repertoire. Throughout childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, early behaviors are refined, modified, and result in the behaviors adults exhibit when they are under stress or simply want to do things their way.

Some authors report that gender-related societal expectations and childhood games play a role in adult behavior, including inappropriate behavior. Boys and girls are treated differently from the moment they are born. They learn behavioral expectations from interactions with parents, teachers, other adults, and the media. Boys tend to play competitive, outdoor group games. Their games involve leaders, rules, winners, and losers. When participants disagree, decisions are made so the game can continue. Girls tend to play in pairs or small groups. Their games are usually cooperative and do not require leaders, rules, winners, and losers. When disagreements occur, the girls change the informal rules or play a different game. There are no winners or losers. Boys are exposed to and subsequently learn the important skills of assertive behavior and asking for what they need through childhood games. However, they also are more likely to be verbally or physically aggressive to a perceived enemy. Girls' play helps them acquire skills in communication and cooperation but does not aid them in their acquisition of assertive behavior and asking for what they need or want. Since physical and verbal aggression is socially unacceptable, girls may use passive-aggressive behaviors to sabotage their enemies by snubbing, exclusion, and malicious gossip (Heim, Murphy, & Golant, 2001).

Preservice teachers exhibit many of the behaviors they will display in their first teaching jobs. Professors often can identify aspiring teachers who will become a thorn in the side of a future administrator. Students who heave sighs of exasperation, roll their eyes, and glare at anyone who dares delay the end of class by asking a question are using intimidation skills that they may use at future faculty meetings. Noncompliant students whose assignments are chronically late but accompanied by colorful excuses are the noncompliant teachers of the future. Students who are negative, chronic complainers and gossipers will continue these behaviors as teachers. Without guidance, these teachers will be unaware of the inappropriateness of their behaviors and the potentially negative impact their behaviors may have on their careers. Preservice teacher training should include discussions of

appropriate professional behavior with guidance offered to aspiring teachers who exhibit difficult behaviors.

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

A Rationale for Behavior

- Behaviors are chosen.
- Every behavior has a purpose.
- What worked in the past is repeated.

Difficult teachers want things their way. Some difficult teachers seek the enjoyment of creating havoc and thrive on the chaos they create, not caring whether the attention is positive or negative (Aldrich, 2002). They stir up a problem to gain attention and derive satisfaction from watching the havoc they reaped. They gain a psychological reward from attention, and they do not care if it is negative.

Whenever we communicate, we use one of four basic forms of behavior: assertive, aggressive, passive, or passive-aggressive. The behavior style we choose depends on what has worked for us in the past. According to Brinkman & Kirschner (2002), we select behaviors based on what we need to accomplish and the level of assertiveness the task requires. "For each of us there is a zone of normal or best behavior and exaggerated or worst behavior" (p. 15).

Although assertive behavior is the healthiest form, unfortunately, it is also the least used. Under stress, we often resort to unhealthier forms of behavior such as passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive behaviors (Podesta & Sanderson, 1999). An examination of the four behavior types follows.

The healthiest behavior occurs when we are assertive or direct in expressing our needs and wants. Assertive individuals stand up for their rights but are sensitive to the rights of others. They express what they want or feel in a direct and honest manner. They ask questions, listen objectively, engage in dialogue, and examine available choices. Anger or hurt feelings do not dictate their behavior or their choices. The principal in the following conversation is using assertive communication skills.

Janice, the contract specifies that teachers are to be in their classroom by 8:00 a.m. each day. The last five days you have arrived at 8:15 a.m., leaving your students unsupervised. I need you to be there at 8:00 a.m. Is there some problem that is preventing you from fulfilling this requirement?

The passive style of behavior is characterized by inaction. Passive individuals are indecisive; they refuse to make choices and seldom express opinions. They avoid confrontation at all costs. Some passive people erroneously equate passivity with being a nice, unselfish person. Although passivity may be a positive choice, when the situation is not "worth the effort" or we do not care about the outcome, continual passivity at the expense of having our needs met is not healthy. Working with passive people is frustrating because we do not know what they want, and they judge others on how well they guess what their needs are (Podesta & Sanderson, 1999). Favorite responses of passive individuals include, "I don't care" and "you decide."

At the other extreme are individuals who use the aggressive style of behavior. They yell, complain, cry, accuse, blame, pout, or do whatever it takes to get their own way. They want control, and everyone else is expected to comply with their demands. Their weapons are hurt and anger. If you get in the way, you become the enemy to be conquered (Podesta & Sanderson, 1999).

For some individuals, passive-aggressive is the behavior style of choice. They are passive in avoiding direct confrontation but aggressive in acts of manipulation to get even. They act as if everything is fine to your face but engage in devious acts of sabotage behind the scenes (Podesta & Sanderson, 1999). Strategies included in their sabotage toward a school leader might include malicious gossip about the leader, withholding critical information, encouraging dissent among the faculty, sniping during faculty meetings—anything they can do to make the school leader appear ineffective.

None of us use one behavior choice exclusively. At one time or another, we probably use all forms of behavior. We do what has worked in the past. If in the past, the use of assertive behavior has worked for us, we probably rely on it for most situations. If, however, we have become accustomed to getting our way by using passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive behavior to solve problems,

then we will likely resort to one of these behaviors when under stress. The difficult teachers in schools want to do things when, if, and how they want to do them. They want to be in control of their work environment and in control of other people. They have adopted behavior styles that keep the people around them uncomfortable and disarmed (Bramson, 1981; Aldrich, 2002).

A Word of Caution

One should exercise caution before hastily labeling a teacher's behavior as difficult. Teachers are well-educated, intelligent individuals who have a different vantage point than that of the principal. They may be aware of problems that the principal has failed to notice. The difficult teacher may be the only person to recognize a problem that needs to be addressed or to be brave enough to announce, "The emperor has no clothes" (Andersen, 1837). Thus, it is prudent to investigate complaints and disagreements to determine if there is a kernel of truth before dismissing a teacher's behavior as difficult. Painful to admit, but sometimes the principal is considered difficult by the teachers or is inadvertently creating a situation that fosters difficult behavior.

WHAT EFFECT DO THEY HAVE?

Difficult teachers contribute to faculty and administrator stress and can eventually adversely affect physical health. They damage morale, destroy collegiality, thwart productivity, threaten school goals, and make administrators appear ineffective. In short, they are a major source of headaches for school leaders. In extreme cases, they contribute to teacher and sometimes principal attrition.

When the agenda of difficult teachers is to damage a principal's career, they can be ruthless in their quest. Male and female principals are suitable targets for teacher saboteurs. However, some researchers report that women leaders are more likely to be targets of indirect aggression by other women than are men. Acts of female sabotage usually take the form of passive-aggressive behavior such as malicious gossip, backbiting, and sniping; all of which are intended to undermine the female leader's authority and credibility. By contrast, difficult men are usually more overt