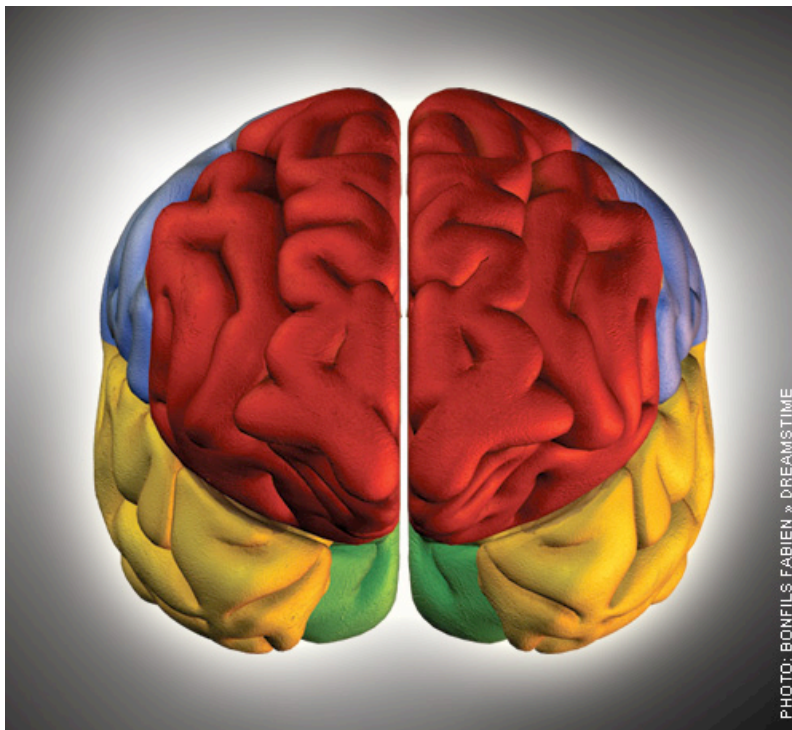


# Dealing With Difficult Team Members?

Use clarity, confidence, and creativity

AUTHOR: BILL CRAWFORD, PH.D.

Defensive... opinionated... resistant... have you noticed how disruptive difficult people can be to a working team? Whether they are dominating discussions, disrupting the flow of ideas, or just being disrespectful to others, these problematic individuals can create enough turmoil to derail even the best of teams. When anyone tries to correct them, they seem to become even more difficult, and they defend the very behaviour you want them to change! Leaders, as well as team members, need a new way to understand this disruptive behaviour so that they can motivate these individuals to turn their formidable energy away from their own agendas and toward advancing the goals of the team.

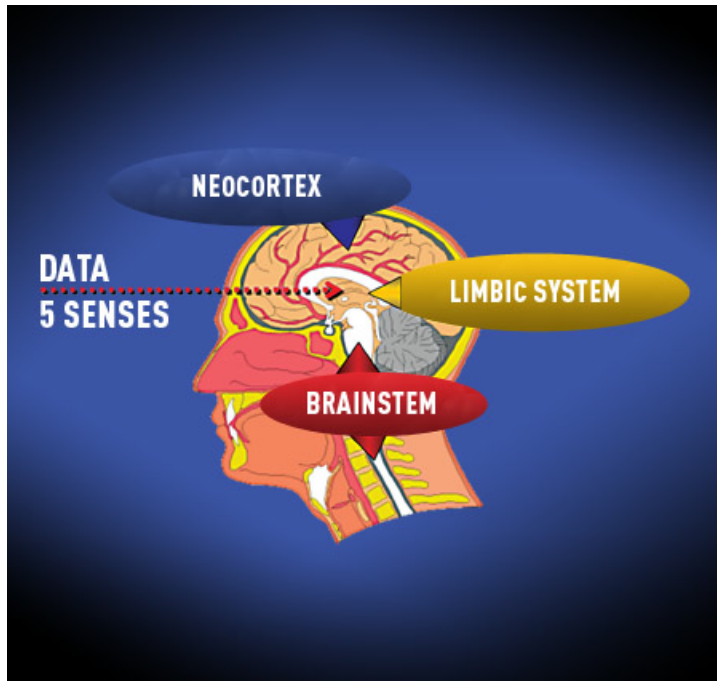


*As we work together in teams, data comes in from our five senses...anything that it identifies as a stressor or a threat to our peace of mind, or to our success, the limbic system sends the data immediately down to the brainstem, bypassing the neocortex.*

A new approach to this problem has its origin in recent developments in brain science. We now know that our brains are divided into three parts: the brainstem, the limbic system, and the neocortex, and each is responsible for different functions.

The brainstem (the lower part of the brain) is where our fight-or-flight responses are located. The middle of our brain is called the limbic system and is, for the most part, where our emotions are housed. In addition, it is also the part of the brain that scans incoming data for signs of threat or danger. The upper 80% of our brain is the neocortex, and this is where we have access to our judgment, creativity, and interpersonal and communication skills.

As we work together in teams, data comes in from our five senses (mostly what we see and hear) and is first examined by the limbic system. If this middle part of our brain senses anything (or anyone) that it identifies as a stressor or a threat to our peace of mind, or to our success, the limbic system sends the data immediately down to the brainstem, bypassing the neocortex.



*Diagram of the three main brain parts*

With respect to teams, the stressful data we perceive is often the behaviour of those difficult people who seem determined to pursue their own agendas regardless of how it affects the team. Of course, what we must also understand is that to them, *we* are the difficult people, because we are perceived as being critical and/or thwarting *their* goals.

This means that when we are upset with them and they are upset with us, we are *all* coming from the lower 20% (fight or flight) part of the brain; thus, our ability to solve problems is severely compromised. It also clarifies why trying to “rationally explain the facts” to a difficult team member or calm them down is rarely effective. When anyone is upset, defensive, or resistant, they do not have access to the part of the brain that can hear and process data in a rational manner. Thus, they will only see our suggestions for change as criticism and, as a result, become even more difficult.

The Solution: **Clarity, Confidence, and Creativity (In that order!)**

» **Clarity**

We must first become clear about which part of the brain we (and they) are coming from. If we are feeling stressed, frustrated, annoyed, or angry, we will not be able to access the qualities we need to employ to be successful. If our team members’ thinking is trapped in the resistant part of their brains, they will not be able to hear our suggestions as valuable information. Therefore, before we attempt to convince them to change, we must first shift from the lower 20% of our brain (the brainstem and limbic system) to the upper 80% (the neocortex) so that we can access the intelligence and interpersonal skills we will need to successfully communicate with these difficult team members. I call this upper 80% of the brain “The Top of the Mind”, and in my book, *Life from the Top of the Mind*, I describe a five-step behavioural model that will, if done correctly, produce this shift (see BRAIN sidebar).

» **Clarity & Confidence**

If our goal is to be influential with others, we must first become clear about what is motivating them. One way to do this is to listen to them, because most of the time they will be eager to tell us what they believe. It’s important to note, however, that this suggestion goes beyond the traditional “active listening skills” that are taught in so many communication classes, and actually requires a great deal of confidence on the part of the listener. In other words, in order to truly listen and to learn another’s point of view, we must be very confident of our own. Otherwise, we will feel threatened and find ourselves in a debate about “who’s right,” which is guaranteed to throw everyone into their brainstem.

To avoid this trap, we must listen with confidence (from the “Top of the Mind”) so that we can become clear about what is important to them (this information will become very valuable when we want to influence them in the near future). The key to this sort of listening is to be clear about the difference between understanding and agreement.

Unfortunately, most people do not make a distinction between the two, and therefore find themselves consistently trapped in brainstem debates. Listening for understanding versus agreement, however, does not engender debate, because we don’t have the need to prove the team member wrong. All we want to do is ensure that we are clear about what is important to them, especially if this differs from what’s important to us.

## » Clarity, Confidence & Creativity

Your creativity will be a vital component to your success, because after you have learned what is important to them, you can motivate them to shift from the resistant brain (the brainstem) to the receptive brain (the neocortex) by asking them “neocortex questions.”

Neocortex questions pertain to the solution and the future versus the problem and the past. As you become more aware of the sort of conversations that come from the brainstem, you will notice how many of these discussions are about the problem and/or the past. Questions such as, “Where did you get that idea?” or, “How many times do I have to tell you?” and/or statements such as, “That will never work” are common to this type of interaction, and only serve to trap the listener in the lower 20% of the brain.

The alternative is to get creative and ask neocortex questions that engage the “Top of the Mind.” For example, if people are accusing you of not listening or being dismissive, rather than defending yourself, you could say something like: “Okay, if I was interacting with you in a way that felt more respectful, what would I be doing differently?” If the discussion revolved around some mistake the individual or the team had made in the past, you could say: “So, knowing what we know now, how would you suggest we do this differently in the future?”

Chances are that after asking these questions, the first thing you will encounter is a blank stare. Given that the difficult team member has been coming from the brainstem, it will take a minute or two for them to shift to the “Top of the Mind.” You will want to give them this time, however, because until this shift has occurred, nothing can be accomplished.

Bottom line: If you want to become more influential with the difficult members of your team, you must be willing to engage them in a manner that shifts the discussion to the part of the brain where true problem-solving can occur. This will require clarity (about what is important to them), confidence (in your own position and its value to all concerned), and a high degree of creativity so that you can continue to ask neocortex questions about the future and the solution.

Once you become skilled in this new method of communication, your ability to bring a “Top of the Mind” perspective to your conversations, and thus influence the quality of these interactions will pay you dividends in all areas of your life.

## How to Shift to the Top of the Mind

### 1.) B

Breathe deeply three to five times

When feeling “out of control,” remember that there is something over which we always have control—our breathing. Respiration is normally monitored by the lower 20% of our brain, so breathing deeply “on purpose” gets the neocortex to take over a function normally controlled by the brainstem.

### 2.) R

“Relax” on the exhale

Since tension is a common component of stress, saying the word “relax” as you exhale sends a command to the muscles of the body to release this tension. Again, this very purposeful command while exhaling helps the neocortex to assume a function normally controlled by the lower part of the brain.

### 3.) A

Ask neocortex questions

Questions are very powerful with respect to what part of the brain is engaged. When we are asking ourselves, “What’s wrong with (these people, this organization, these kids, those idiots, etc.)?” or “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I (make my relationships work, get my kids to mind me, stand up to my boss, etc.)?”, we are asking brainstem questions that engage the lower 20% of the brain. Instead, engage the upper 80% of the brain by asking “neocortex questions” such as: “How would I rather be feeling?”

### 4.) I

Imagine bringing these answers to life

When we are stressed, we usually are worried about some person or situation. We hold images of the stressor in our mind and imagine how bad things will be if we don’t find a solution. This tendency to worry about and imagine the problem engages the lower 20% of our brain, which is perfect if we are in a “fight or flight” situation (i.e. dealing with a problem that can be solved by our fighting someone or running away.) However, few situations in which we find ourselves are truly fight or flight in nature. Instead, most scenarios require that we access our best interpersonal and problem-solving skills in order to be successful. Therefore, we need to use our imagination to engage the part of the brain where these skills reside... the neocortex. We do this by taking the answers from the previous step (calm, confident, in control, etc.) and imagine bringing them to life, or using the present situation to practise these more purposeful reactions. As we do this, we hold images, which are neocortex in nature, of who we want to be and what we want to practice, thus engaging the upper 80% of the brain.

## 5.) N

Notice the change

This final step allows us to become aware of how the previous four neocortex actions (breathing deeply, saying “relax” on the exhale, asking neocortex questions such as “How would I rather be feeling?” and imagining bringing the answers to life) have changed how we feel.

The model spells BRAIN because it is designed to allow us to change the chemical make-up of our brain and body and shift from the brainstem to the neocortex, where we can access the clarity, confidence, and creativity necessary for success in today’s world.