When Colleagues Are Brats

By Jacqueline Waggoner, Ed.D.

Have you ever left a meeting in which you were trying to work with some colleagues on aligning the curriculum for a course that several of you teach, and decided that the best (printable) word to describe a colleague was "brat?" Does it seem like there is someone in your work environment who has a chronically poor attitude?

Recently, when talking with another professor about challenging students, we noticed some similarities between some of the student behaviors we were discussing and some behaviors we had observed in colleagues over the years. After all, aren't professors former children who are now in educated, big-people bodies? Professors enter higher education with baggage from their childhood, just as people do in other professions. Some may not be a delight to be around, are impulsive, and have difficulty delaying having their needs met. Others behave like the school bully, have tantrums, and can be verbally cruel when angry. A third group may exhibit much excuse-making and avoidant behaviors, and seldom complete work in a timely manner. They tend to be off-task, late to meetings, unprepared, or forgetful of the meeting's agenda.

Challenging adults can be characterized as follows:
- **Bully**—sarcastic, aggressive, rude, hostile, mean-spirited
- **Mime**—passive, limited response to suggestions, seldom contributes
- **Pouter**—takes things personally, withdraws, sulks, suffers in silence
- **Victim**—expects criticism, agrees then complains, "poor me" persona
- **Chicken Little**—deflates optimism; says, "It won't work"; "Yes, but..."
- **Scrooge**—surly, quick to anger, volatile, cranky

Aligning course curriculum or collab-orating over a new instructional initiative becomes even more difficult when you enter the meeting and see that "Chicken Little" is there, and you immediately become tense. Here are several tips you can try.

Tip One: Stop the name-calling. The more you think of the person in terms of a negative label, the more you'll observe behaviors that confirm your negative characterization of the individual. Instead, try saying to yourself, "He is really struggling today." It's amazing how you will think differently about the person if you believe he is acting a certain way because he is struggling or hurting and isn't just being difficult in order to ruin your day. Professors struggle and hurt too. You may become less annoyed and more compassionate toward the individual if you "think differently" about him or her.

Tip Two: Use rational detachment. The Crisis Prevention Institute defines "rational detachment" as "the ability to stay calm and in control—to maintain your professionalism—even in a crisis moment. It means not taking things personally—even button-pushing comments that attack your appearance, race, gender, or competence." You can't control what words come out of another's mouth, but you can control how you respond to the comments. You can use self-talk to keep from letting yourself become angry. Tell yourself, "I choose to stay calm and in control"(www.crisisprevention.com/store/pamphlets/hspamphlets.html). At times, individuals may say things to get a predictable reaction from you. Don't reinforce that behavior by giving them the reaction they're seeking. Remain rationally detached from the situation as though you are a third party observing the meeting.

Tip Three: Use cognitive restructuring. Since your colleagues have had a number of years to become the way they are, it's unlikely you will effect a huge change in their behaviors. Instead, you will have to change your responses to their behaviors. You can recognize what thoughts and attitudes you have that cause you stress and physical symptoms. Your reaction to a colleague is influenced by positive or negative thoughts. If you tell yourself that your colleagues truly believe that their proposals are motivated by what's best for students, you may listen more attentively to find the jewel behind the suggestion. In contrast, if you walk into the meeting saying that it will be a waste of your valuable time, you probably won't be disappointed. I remember a staff person who used to walk into meetings saying she would leave with a headache. Sure enough, she did! Cognitive restructuring can help us manage our negative thoughts and how we feel.

Tip Four: Choose your battles. You can decide during each and every interaction whether the issue is important enough to go to battle over at this very moment—or at all. Sometimes we find ourselves getting stuck in an interaction that later we can recognize was really trivial. If you had been in a better mood, would you really have labored the point for 15 minutes, or would you have let it go? In the grand scheme of things, is this a truly important decision with huge consequences? Maybe a cooling-off period will help everyone approach the decision differently.

Tip Five: Smile and laugh. It's amazing how a "group laugh" will help you move past some difficult sticking spot in your curriculum negotiations. When the drama becomes too overpowering and you seem to be losing perspective, lighten up! Will a sense of humor pave the way to a resolution? There are

and live with enhancements
- Build time into faculty meetings for technology updates
- Require that new staff and faculty hires be technology inclined

Suggestions for Chairs
- Include an interest in and fondness for technology use and research in the job descriptions for all new faculty hires. Not all have to be experts, but they should be proficient.
- Require that all new staff hires have technology skills and enjoy continuous learning and use of new tools. For example, most faculty no longer need "typing" support, but they have various needs for assistance with Web page management, PowerPoint polishing, and data analysis on spreadsheets. These are now basic skills that departmental staff must have to provide the support faculty need.
- Use budgets wisely to purchase small but important technology accessories for faculty and staff, such as flash drives, PDAs, and software to support research. These inexpensive items can go a long way toward encouraging technology interest and growth.
- Model the behavior you expect from your faculty by teaching online and blended courses yourself.
- Learn how to troubleshoot hardware and software problems so you can be a

resource for faculty when glitches come up.
- Manage the department website with a staff member; make frequent updates to the site for announcements and agendas, and use them in meetings to show staff what you do to keep items current.
- Attend university technology committee meetings to advocate for curricular and research needs.
- In merit decisions, support faculty who are leaders in technology innovation.
- Write grants to get external funding for new tools and equipment.
- Differentiate the needs of novices from those of more advanced technology users, and provide appropriate support for both.

Faculty who try to stay on the cutting edge of emerging technologies are a particularly dedicated bunch. They are fine teachers and scholars who have set a moving target for themselves in a field that is never at rest. While they tend to be self-motivated and need little direction or support, they do need resources, access to tools, and affirmation that their work is significant, recognized, and appreciated. They look to leaders at the departmental, school/college, and university levels to meet their needs so that they neither get behind in the ever-

changing field of technology nor get overwhelmed trying to keep up with the "latest and greatest" new application or tool.

Faculty who are a bit more reluctant with technology need direction and support more than they need constant access and affirmation. They are also fine teachers and scholars, who may still find appropriate uses for the overhead projector and chalk. They look to leaders at various levels of the university to provide support for the old-school approaches as well as tangible, practical tools and training to help them move forward in the often intimidating world of emerging technologies.

For many chairs, the burden of our daily administrative work keeps us so engrossed in managing crises or facilitating faculty dialogue that we can lose the fun and fascinating component of managing the world of emerging technologies. As we move forward with our faculty to explore, use, and research these tools, we must remember that we are no longer trying to just herd cats; we are now herding cybercats.

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some really serious things in this world, like child abuse and death. How important is your issue now? Keep things in perspective.

Tip Six: Celebrate your successes.
When you have a successful meeting or interaction, acknowledge it, and use it as an opportunity to build some positive relations to help out when the next difficult situation occurs. Use every possible opportunity to build positive relations with the most difficult colleague in the room. Give specific feedback about what

contributed to the meeting's success when giving your summary of the action plan. Let's demonstrate the same patience and understanding with our peers as we do with our students.

Remember, people's negative behavior really isn't about you; it's about them. So don't be too hard on yourself if you don't handle the situation well. Don't worry; your colleagues will give you another opportunity to develop your skills. Each of us can continue to learn new ways to manage difficult situations for the sake of our students. Navigating rough waters with colleagues will give our students the best faculty and pro-

grams they deserve. The interpersonal skills you refine will make the working environment more pleasant for everyone. The only person you can truly control is yourself; so take charge.

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