

The Passive-Aggressive: Terrorist Or Freedom Fighter?

“How do you deal with someone who is passive-aggressive?” A question sure to arise when we talk about difficult people. Unfortunately, the term is applied so broadly that it serves little but to reinforce our belief that the *other* person is the problem and that things would be fine if only *they* would change (or seek professional help.) But waiting for others to change seldom produces the results we would like, so how else can we deal with those we may experience as passive-aggressive? The key lies in understanding the motivation for their behaviour and cultivating an atmosphere that supports dialogue and resolution.

What is “passive-aggressive”? The origin of the term has been attributed to the US Department of Defense to describe a soldier who was not openly insubordinate but shirked duty through incompetence or procrastination. (What the army judged as a personality disorder could be seen as a rational survival strategy by others.) Often the term is misapplied to anyone who avoids confrontation. This certainly describes the “passive” part of the equation - behaviour which is indirect and incongruent with apparent agreement or acquiescence. The “aggressive” aspect, however, would require a deliberate attempt to hurt, discredit or undermine another person (or organization). I recently heard the term “passive-resistant” to describe someone who chooses not to express disagreement, but whose compliance is at best half-hearted.

People are quick to label a nemesis as passive-aggressive, but when was the last time you heard someone describe *themselves* in such terms? Yet the behaviours in question are commonplace. Someone may remain silent during a meeting, fully knowing they will ignore the resulting decision. Another person may smile politely at a co-worker or family member only to later badmouth them. (Of course, what others might term gossip, we justify as “objectively discussing a situation at work”.) This apparent contradiction shouldn’t be a surprise, though, for people in conflict see themselves as an innocent victim (or righteous hero) and cast the other person as the villain. Those we might label as passive-aggressive would see themselves as bullied or oppressed. They would justify their behaviour as necessary in the face of a more powerful adversary. One person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter.

There are two aspects to these behaviours that trouble most of us. Firstly, we feel frustrated because we rely on the other person in some way. We require their expertise, input, or goodwill. Secondly, their lack of support is camouflaged. Few expect others to agree with us all the time (as appealing as that thought may be). Most, however, welcome open dialogue to explore and resolve issues. Put simply, we seek support from the other person and, failing that, hope they would express their concerns directly.

This understanding informs a strategy to address these situations collaboratively:

1. confront the behaviour without judging or attacking the person
2. ask directly for what you need (both the support and direct communication)
3. create an atmosphere to encourage and support this.

Firstly, describe the problematic behaviour objectively and specifically. Point out inconsistencies between the other person’s words and their actions. “I understood during our original meeting that you were fine with the timelines, yet the last two reports have been several days late. What’s up?” In raising the issue in this way and inviting them to share their perspective, you allow them to save face.

Secondly, ask directly for what you need. Your need may be concrete (“I need your figures by Friday”) or may address communication (“If you have concerns, please let me know.”)

Thirdly, consider the climate in which these behaviours occur – and our role in creating a climate that leads to their indirect approach to conflict. A tendency to avoid conflict (or accommodate to keep the peace) usually reflects the following beliefs:

- conflict is unsafe (“I’ll get hurt.”)
- conflict is a waste of time (“I’ll lose anyway.”) or
- conflict will damage the relationship (“We won’t be able to be friends after this.”).

My friend and colleague, Donna Soules, explored the topic of “defensiveness” in her master thesis. She noted that a climate of judgement, hostility, or suspicion directly increases the degree of defensiveness in conflict. It’s easy to see that such a climate, coupled with a perception of being up against an overwhelming force (or an immovable object), would cause a person to go “underground”. This could be likened to guerrilla warfare, in which the weaker party seeks to balance power by changing the nature of the engagement. If you find others around you unwilling to meet issues head-on, you might reflect on how you react when disagreement surfaces. A forceful, argumentative reaction leads others to withdraw or withhold.

Collaborative conflict resolution requires a safe space for the conflict to exist. A hostile climate drives people underground, but curiosity, respect, and a willingness to be influenced encourage open communication. For most people to engage directly in conflict, they need to be reassured that:

- they will be safe
- their views will be heard and taken seriously, and
- that engaging in the conflict will not hurt (and might even strengthen) the relationship.

You can establish this supportive climate by being transparent about your intention, by forcing yourself to listen without rebuttal or defensiveness and by demonstrating curiosity and empathy. You can emphasize the benefit of dialogue and indicate the consequences of failing to resolve these issues.

So rather than judging those you would label as passive-aggressive, stay curious and encourage them to meet in a field “out beyond all the ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing” (to paraphrase the noted Sufi poet, Rumi.) In this field, both terrorists and freedom fighters can lay down their weapons in favor of understanding, dialogue, and resolution.