Example 1

Instead of "As usual, you were really obnoxious in the team meeting today" (personal accusation),

Say "I thought your comments about my work were unfair and I'd like to discuss this with you" (reference the specific behavior and ask for a clarification).

Example 2

Instead of "You're taking up all the time on the two-photon microscope" (attribution of selfishness),

Say "It's becoming difficult for me to find time on the microscope. Can we discuss how we schedule time on it?" (Reference the specific behavior with evidence, e.g., there being only 10 hours per week available for other users and that affects you.)

Example 3

Instead of "Jack, you're being possessive of this equipment and creating an atmosphere of resentment and hostility" (accusations),

Say "Jack, if you have concerns about the equipment, let's talk about it when I'm done here."

Making statements such as these, that address the behavior and its effects on you, requires thought. Because it's another person's behavior that's making you frustrated or angry, the first reaction you have will likely be to attack the person. It will take practice to recognize your feelings before you act on them. Only then will you be able to decide what to say or do so that you're accomplishing your goal of improving a relationship with a peer, getting your work done, or being able to make a point in a meeting.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Not everyone is as reasonable and even tempered as you are. You will at times have to deal with people in the lab who will tax your diplomacy skills. You can use the "Agree, Empathize, Inquire, or Assure" strategy that we introduced in Chapter **6** to manage your interactions with a variety of challenging personalities.

Angry or hostile people

We showed in Chapter 6 in the section on dealing with an angry boss that you first need to create an environment in which what you have to say can be heard. Only after you have shifted the tone of the conversation from one of hostility to one of collaboration will the other person be able to listen to you. The following example illustrates how to apply some of these tools.

▸▸ *Case Study: Think Before You Speak*

Barbara is an assistant professor in biochemistry working on the role of SMADs in signal transduction. Six months ago, she had an idea about a way to use a green fluorescent protein (GFP)–SMAD construct to monitor changes in the intracellular location of a particular SMAD during cell signaling. She discussed the idea with Mohan, an assistant professor of physiology with experience using GFP constructs. Later that year, Barbara sat in on a seminar about SMADs given by Astrid, a faculty member from another institution. Astrid discussed some preliminary work in which she used a SMAD–GFP construct in almost precisely the same way that Barbara had planned. Moreover, she indicated that this work was being done in collaboration with Mohan.

Barbara felt herself getting red in the face during the seminar. She believed that Mohan had stolen her idea and she was furious. At the end of the seminar, hardly able to contain her anger, she approached Mohan and pulled him aside.

"I told you that I was planning to do almost exactly that experiment six months ago. Now I find that you did the same experiment with Astrid. This is infuriating and amounts to theft of my work." During this recitation, Barbara became increasingly agitated and shouted loud enough for everyone leaving the seminar to hear, "How can you possibly justify what you did?"

Mohan was stunned and embarrassed. People were looking at the two of them. In desperation, he said, "Look, you're way off base here. I never talked about your work. Why don't you calm down? You have completely misunderstood this situation and now you are making a mountain out of a molehill."

To Barbara, this felt like an attempt to brush her off and she became even more furious. "You're an outright liar, Mohan, and I'm taking this to the committee on scientific misconduct," she shouted.

After hearing Barbara call him a liar, Mohan became furious and said, "Go ahead. You're paranoid and everyone knows that."

In this case, we have the advantage of knowing that Barbara did in fact talk to Mohan about her idea. But we do not know whether Mohan knowingly misappropriated it or whether something else happened. Whatever the case, Mohan's reaction simply fanned the flames of Barbara's anger and resulted in her filing a formal charge of misconduct against him.

Mohan did everything wrong when confronted by Barbara. He denied her anger, or that she had any reason to be angry, by telling her to calm down. Telling an angry person to calm down is probably the least effective way to get them to do that. In fact, it is likely to increase their anger. Then Mohan told Barbara that what she is furious about is not a big deal. It was clearly a big deal to Barbara, and hearing Mohan deny that she had something to be angry about did not help. What could Mohan have done differently? Let us rerun the tape with a new and different Mohan.

Barbara: "I told you that I was planning to do almost exactly that experiment six months ago. Now I find that you did the same experiment with Astrid. This is infuriating and amounts to theft of my work. I demand an explanation."

Mohan: "Barbara, I can see that you are really angry. I see how this looks to you, and I'd be angry too if I thought that someone did that to me. Frankly, it should have occurred to me how this would look, and I apologize for not speaking with you sooner. Can we go somewhere and talk about this? I'd really like to explain how this situation came about. The last thing I want is for our relationship to be damaged because of this. . . ."

Principles used

- **Empathize.** Mohan acknowledges Barbara's anger and shows that he understands why she is angry.
- **Agree.** Mohan has agreed that Barbara has the right to be angry based on what she *thinks* happened. In doing this, Mohan has not agreed that he has done anything wrong. It's important to note that telling Barbara that he can understand her anger is not the same as admitting that he did anything wrong. In fact, in this case, Mohan did not do anything wrong. But he needs to create a climate that enables him to explain this.
- **Apologize.** Next Mohan apologizes, not for doing anything wrong, but for failing to anticipate how Barbara would perceive the situation. Apologies work wonders with angry people, even if you are not apologizing for precisely what they are angry about. It shows Barbara that Mohan cares about her feelings and is willing to accept some responsibility.
- **Inquire.** Mohan tells Barbara that he would like to hear more about what she believes happened, further showing that he is interested in her perception.
- **Assure.** Finally, he assures her that it is important to him to maintain their relationship.

All of this will allow Mohan to explain the situation from his perspective in a calm setting.

When they met later, Mohan explained that after Barbara initially came to him for advice he thought that was the end of their interaction about the experiment. The very next month, Astrid approached him with a similar request, asking Mohan to collaborate on her project. Because Astrid was a competitor of Barbara's, Mohan felt that he could not

tell Barbara about Astrid's work and vice versa. Mohan felt that he was in a bind. For lack of any other alternative, he went ahead with the collaboration with Astrid.

The issue here is not whether Mohan did the right thing. The issue is what the two participants can do to resolve the problem. In the second scenario, Mohan defused the situation by not reacting angrily to Barbara's insults. He created an atmosphere in which Barbara was willing to listen to what he had to say. In the first scenario, Mohan's behavior resulted in a lot of people spending a lot of time adjudicating something that could have been resolved between Mohan and Barbara.

There is another aspect of this case worth noting. Mohan's collaboration with Astrid was not the result of maliciousness. Recall our discussion of the fundamental attribution error. In our experience, most instances in which it seems as though a colleague has behaved in an insulting or malicious manner are in fact the result of thoughtlessness, inexperience, or naïveté. Barbara was prepared to think the worst of Mohan without knowing all the facts. She owns a lot of the responsibility for the misunderstanding.

In Barbara's case, awareness of her hot buttons might have helped. Barbara's strong reaction to Astrid's presentation could suggest a predisposition to feeling exploited. If Barbara had known this about herself from previous incidents, she might have been able to recognize what was happening to her during Astrid's presentation. She might have asked herself whether an angry confrontation was really what she wanted. What she really needed was to better understand the circumstances of Astrid and Mohan's collaboration. Better self-awareness on the part of either of the participants would have prevented an ugly and unnecessary incident.

More tips on dealing with an angry person

- **Never say "you're wrong"**—try "In my opinion" or "I see it differently." ("I can understand that you might be upset about the GFP construct. I'd like the chance to tell you how I see it. I respect your view, but I look at it differently. Can we discuss this in an hour?")
- **Use the person's name**—"Jim, I'm sorry you're angry. Tell me what the problem is."
- **Maintain eye contact to let them know you are listening**
- **Let the anger run its course—listen, nod, empathize**
- **When you do speak, don't let them interrupt**—"I'd like to finish what I'm saying."
- **Ignore attacks**—don't take anything personally
- **Apologize for real or imagined offenses**—It costs you nothing to say, "If I did something wrong, I apologize. Tell me what you're concerned about."
- **If you really did do something wrong, APOLOGIZE RIGHT AWAY.** The longer you wait, the harder it will be.

Critical or judgmental people

Some people have the uncanny ability to find something worth criticizing with everything you say or do. Rather than arguing with them, try the following:

Them: "Don't you think your research program is a bit diffuse? It seems like you are spreading yourself way too thin on all these projects. Look at my lab, for example. . . ."

(Agree) "Well, it's true that I have a lot going on in my lab."

(Empathize) "I appreciate your concern."

(Inquire or assure) "If our roles were switched, which of my projects would you deemphasize?"

Note that this approach could also be applied in the case study "Talk About It" on p. 138.

(Agree) "Jack, I know this is a sensitive piece of equipment and that you're in charge of it."

(Empathize) "That's a lot of responsibility and I understand your concern that it be used properly."

(Inquire or assure) "I share your concern because this instrument is important for me too. How do you think we can help users feel more comfortable signing up for and using the microscope?"

Pushy or demanding people

Them: "I need your completed section of the program project grant two months before the filing deadline."

(Agree) " I'm with you, I always like to have things in hand way in advance so I can get the big picture."

(Empathize) "I know how much work it is to assemble a big grant like this and we all appreciate the effort you are making."

(Inquire or assure) "I'm stretched thin right now but I'm working on this every day. Is there some way I could get you my part in sections? I'm done with the Rationale and Specific Aims. Would it be helpful to send those to you now?"

Dealing with pushy or demanding people

- **Never make hasty decisions—you may regret them later.**
- **Suggest interim solutions** ("I can get you the outline tomorrow with a summary of how much more work I need to do. When can we get together to discuss a timeline to which I could commit?").
- **Tell them that you are feeling pressured and you'd like time to think it over.**

Passive–aggressive people

Whereas angry or hostile people act out their feelings in your face, passive–aggressive people get at you by doing nothing. How is this possible? Here are some examples of what passive–aggressive people do.

- Withholding support by not showing up for a meeting
- Sitting silently in a meeting when you know they have something to add
- "Forgetting" to communicate important information to you
- Refusing to discuss or admit that there is a problem

Passive–aggressive people can be the most frustrating group of people you deal with. Because they infuriate you by not doing things, it's hard to confront them with overtly egregious behavior. Here is how the Agree, Empathize, Inquire technique can be used with such people.

In this example, you may have reason to believe that a colleague isn't coming to meetings because the group didn't agree to a proposal he made four meetings ago.

(Agree) "I know we all have a lot of meetings to go to, but I've noticed that you haven't been at the last three joint project meetings."

(Empathize) "I know you have a lot going on in your lab and you've been traveling quite a bit."

(Inquire or assure) "What can we do to make these meetings work for you? Should we change the meeting time? Are they being held too frequently? What about if we hold them in your office so you don't have to walk across campus? Would you be willing to participate by phone if you are out of town? The team really needs you at these meetings."

Dealing with passive–aggressive people

The meeting organizer keeps "forgetting" to include you in meeting invitations.

- **Present factual data** ("I've not received notices for the last three project meetings.")
- **Be nonjudgmental** (Don't say, "You're excluding me from the project meetings.")
- **Ask open-ended questions—avoid questions that can be answered by a yes or a no** ("When can I expect to be put on the list for forthcoming meetings?")
- **Don't force the issue but ask for specific commitments** ("I'd like to be copied on all team correspondence. Which ones will you be sending me?")
- **Don't get caught up in power struggles** (Don't say, "It's not your decision who gets invited to the project meetings" even if that is true.)
- **Involve them in helping solve your problem** ("What would you suggest is the best way for us to make sure all the required people get invited?")
- **Be clear about the consequences** ("It will be embarrassing for both of us if I have to explain to our vice president why I haven't been at the last two meetings.")
- **Don't give up—maintain a positive attitude** ("I realize you have a lot to keep track of when you arrange these meetings.")

Procrastinators

People who have a habit of putting things off can sometimes look like they are passive-aggressive, but they're not. People put things off for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with you. Procrastinators may be anxious about making a mistake or appearing inadequate. Often, they are perfectionists who fear handing in a less than 100% perfect product, when 90% is all that is needed.

For a colleague who keeps delaying something they need to give you:

(Agree) "I know that getting this program project submission in on time is going to be a real challenge."

(Empathize) "I also know how busy you have been with all of your other responsibilities. I'm not sure how you manage them all."

(Inquire or assure) "I really need the first three sections of your grant component by the end of the week. Can you commit to that? It doesn't need to be perfect at this point, just close to final. Everyone agrees that your section is really important for the success of this proposal."

For someone who keeps putting off an important discussion:

(Agree) "I know this discussion is something that's been put off several times because you're so busy."

(Empathize) "I can only imagine all the things you're dealing with right now."

(Inquire or assure) "If there's a problem between us that I'm not aware of I'd like to know about it. Our ability to work well together is very important to me. How about if we just agree to spend ten minutes either now or at 9 tomorrow morning?"

Dealing with procrastinators

- **If necessary, present factual data without being judgmental** ("I have everyone's sections for the grant submission but yours.")
- **Be nonjudgmental** (Don't say, "You're always late with your grant submissions.")
- **Ask open-ended questions—avoid questions that can be answered by a yes or a no** ("When can I expect your part of the grant application?")
- **Don't force the issue but ask for specific commitments** ("I need your entire section done by next Wednesday at noon. How much of it can you send me today?" not "Soon," or "Next Wednesday," but "Next Wednesday at noon.")
- **Don't get caught up in power struggles** (Don't say, "In my role as principal investigator, I need to insist that you finish your section by the end of the week.")
- **Involve them in helping solve your problem** ("What would you suggest is the best way for us to make sure the grant gets in on time?")
- **Be clear about the consequences** ("If your section isn't completed on time, the team will want to know why.")
- **Don't give up—praise and reassure if appropriate** ("I know your section of the grant is going to be one of the strongest.")

Complainers and help-rejecting complainers

We all complain on occasion, but some people seem do it for a living. As scientists, we might be prone to getting tangled in a complainer's web because of a tendency to seek solutions to problems. Most frustrating are "help-rejecting complainers" who are much more interested in complaining than in finding solutions. Nothing you suggest will make any difference or will be worth trying because the whole point is to complain.

- **Listen.** Some complainers don't want or need your advice; they just need to vent. Ask yourself "Is this person really asking for my help or are they just venting?" If the latter is the case, you're off the hook; all you need to do is sit there.
- **Empathize** ("That sounds like a real problem.")
- **Don't try to solve their problem for them.** If you want to be helpful, help them focus on solving their own problem ("What are you planning to do about it?" or "Do you have any ideas for solutions?").

Needy people

Closely related to complainers are people who repeatedly ask for help from us regarding a personal or non-work-related matter. An example might be a colleague or even an employee who is going through a difficult life situation such as divorce, separation, or other extended family crisis who wants to tell you about it daily. Your role in such situations will depend in part on the nature of your relationship with the person. You might be

more willing to discuss personal matters with a peer than with an employee for example. You can still show empathy with an employee's or even a peer's circumstance without getting involved with helping them solve their personal problems. This is called "boundary setting," knowing just how far into someone's personal life you feel comfortable going, or that is appropriate in your role.

Dealing with needy people

- Sometimes all you need to do is listen.
- Be clear in your own mind about the differences between work relationships and personal relationships, then
- Set appropriate limits on your involvement with the personal problems of professional colleagues, but
- If you decide that it is appropriate to offer help, focus on solutions rather than on complaints.
- If their personal problems are impacting their work, suggest that they speak with an employee assistance program (EAP) specialist if your institution has them available.

Argumentative people

Remember, it takes two people to have an argument. Just because the other person is argumentative doesn't meant that you have to follow suit.

Them: "That binding data can't possibly be right. You didn't do it in the presence of magnesium and everyone knows that magnesium is required. You did this all wrong."

(Agree) "I do agree that this enzyme is very sensitive to the reaction conditions."

(Empathize) "I appreciate your picking up on that Fred. I know you are familiar with these reactions."

(Inquire or assure) "Can we go over the reaction mix together after the meeting? I had read that either magnesium or calcium would work, but I could be mistaken."

When dealing with difficult people, remain focused on your task

Your task is to get your work done, not to act insulted or annoyed. It's hard to get work done with a hostile, argumentative person

so

- Agree—to defuse anger
- Empathize—to start a dialogue
- Inquire or assure—to show interest in what they have to say

Are you one of these people?

A few years ago, a friend saw the book *Dealing with People you Can't Stand* by R. Brinkman and R. Kirschner (1994) on Carl's desk. He picked the book up, leafed through it, and asked whether Carl had read the sequel *Dealing with People Who Can't Stand You*. Of course, there is no such sequel, but his point was well taken.

It's lots of fun to talk about how obnoxious other people can be, but has it ever occurred to you that they might be talking about you in the same way? We all exhibit

some of the characteristics discussed above, it is just harder for us to see these behaviors in ourselves than it is to see them in others. Using the self-awareness that you will develop as you go through the exercises in this book, take a step back and observe yourself during interactions with your peers. Every interaction, whether pleasant or unpleasant, productive or unproductive, requires at least two people. Take ownership of your own role in difficult interactions. The next section introduces some additional tools to help you ensure that you do not annoy other in the same way that they annoy you.

HOW TO DISCUSS SCIENCE WITHOUT ARGUING

It is not uncommon to observe participants expressing hostile or insulting remarks to one another in a team meeting, especially when discussing their interpretations of data. Nothing frustrates scientists more than having to listen to presentation of data that they believe are flawed or just plain wrong. Carl has seen people become furious listening to someone recount the results of a poorly designed experiment; they squirm in their seats, make pained facial expressions, and interrupt the presentation with aggressive, snide, or hostile questions. Some scientists consider it their obligation to express their frustration overtly and in damaging ways. This was exactly what Fred thought in the case study discussed in Chapter 2.

There often seems to be an unspoken agreement that the importance of good science is so great that objections, criticisms, and destructive comments can and should be delivered swiftly and mercilessly. The corollary is that people are simply the instruments through which questionable data are delivered, and their feelings and reactions need not be taken into consideration when criticizing their results. Unfortunately, the outcome is that important comments, critiques, and suggestions get lost in the noise of hostility. Scientists who display such attitudes fail to recognize that valid scientific criticism has to be heard and accepted by the recipient to be useful. Consider the following example:

Joe says, "That binding data can't possibly be right. You didn't do it in the presence of magnesium and everyone knows that magnesium is required. You did this all wrong." Fred immediately feels attacked and gets defensive. "No, you're wrong. It doesn't need magnesium; almost any divalent cation will do. I've done it this way before and presented the results in previous meetings. You must not have been listening."

This is the beginning of an argument. Both sides now feel insulted and defensive. The ensuing discussion will likely be more about scoring debating points than determining whether the reaction really should have been done in the presence of magnesium.

The reasons for interactions such as this are multiple. Team meetings are often regarded as competitions rather than peer-to-peer discussions. This is the responsibility of the team leader to correct, and it is addressed in detail in Chapter 5. The team leader must create an atmosphere in which science can be discussed without participants feeling the need to score points at the expense of others. She must also model how to question and critique data in a way that is scientifically rigorous and at the same time respectful of the presenter. The following are some examples of how this can be done:

Example 1

Instead of "That binding data can't possibly be right. You didn't do it in the presence of magnesium and everyone knows that magnesium is required. You did this all wrong."