

# Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People



Elizabeth B. Brown

AUTHOR OF *LIVING SUCCESSFULLY WITH SCREWED-UP PEOPLE*

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Elizabeth B. Brown



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# 1

## Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People

It doesn't take two people to change a relationship;  
it takes one.

**W**orking *Successfully with Screwed-Up People* is not like any other business book on the market. It is a workers' manual, how-to book, management guide, and co-worker's Bible. You won't find rules for growing the business, staying afloat, or finance's bottom line here. This book deals with the "driving me crazy" people issues that, nine times out of ten, you carry home at night—the gnat issues that come with working with a (pardon the expression) "screwed-up" person: the co-worker in the next office who chats more than she works; the off-the-wall supervisor; the customer who, by the way, isn't always right; and the endless list of nail-biters, naggers, hangers-on, bullies, and incompetent, irresponsible co-workers and customers. This book deals with an

unspoken, rarely addressed, and universal problem: getting along with those in your work world.

You aren't alone if you think the people with whom you work are making your job more difficult. We all have someone with whom we deal (or have dealt) who aggravates and irritates. Perhaps you will appreciate the comment made by a middle-aged man shuffling behind me with his bags at the Salt Lake City airport. All flights to the East Coast were canceled due to snow and ice. Airline customer service was in crisis. My guess is that you have experienced such a maze, where strangers become instant friends, commiserating about the unanticipated nightmare.

This baggage-pushing chap's loud pronouncement turned a lot of heads: "I'd choose to stand in line any day if it would get me out of the office."

I responded, "Wow—must not be much fun at your job." He laughed, and quickly justified his remark, saying, "Standing in airport lines is a walk in the park compared to dealing with the crackpots I work with."

This man definitely had a "working with screwed-up people" problem. There is trouble in the corral if standing in an airport line is more palatable than returning to your office.

Have you noticed at-work problems are addressed as challenges to be met, dealt with, and resolved? People problems, on the other hand, like those of Scott, the man in the airport line, are stuffed under the table, whispered about, and often utilized as excuses for poor job performance. The "sort of joking" comments we make about our work environments that are the tip of the iceberg of people problems is the meat upon which *Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People* will chew. Though this book isn't written about management, supervision, team playing, or even customer satisfaction, it is all about business. So often these hinted-at negative

interactions at work clog up the gears of business. Improve workplace relationship interplay, and the practical business side will run more smoothly. Jobs are as much about the undisclosed problems and opportunities of interpersonal relationships as work skills.

Maybe Scott stumbled into working with “crackpots” because, like most of us, he accepted his job when a door opened for employment. He didn’t choose the people with whom he worked. He chose a way to earn money for food and rent. Perhaps his job description has him plowing someone else’s cornfield without the possibility of planting his own garden. Perhaps he was fortunate to find the career of his dreams. Either way, it is safe to say no one told Scott that signing his job contract included a shotgun marriage to a family of strangers.

This book is for all of us who need tactics to free us from spinning around the “underwear issues,” the ones no one shares except through innuendo, gossip, and raised eyebrows at work. We can be encouraged by practical ways to deal with irritating people problems that can cause us to roll our eyes and force us to stuff our true feelings. We can learn keys that unlock positive ways to release stress and use humor as we respond to bang-your-head-against-the-wall aggravating behaviors. *Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People* may keep you from twisting around the person you find offensive or, in Scott’s case, preferring a three-hour rescheduling line at an airport to being in the office.

Scott is certainly not unique. Michael, a local flower guru, is passionate about his floral business. His creative juices flow with the seasonal changes. He loves his career, even though his stories of challenges make you wonder why he finds it enjoyable. He chuckles

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*Jobs are as much about the undisclosed problems and opportunities of interpersonal relationships as work skills.*

---

about the Godzilla mothers-of-the-bride, is flabbergasted by customers who want to return flower arrangements because dinner parties were canceled at the last moment, and is blown away by those who insist on the impossible.

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**You can**  
*choose—choose*  
*to be unflappable,*  
*imperturbable,*  
*and unflustered!*

---

“Sometimes I laugh, but my patience has a short life. I need help! What can I do to keep my mouth shut when I am dealing with a jerk or someone with ridiculous expectations? For example, just before closing time on Valentine’s Day, Mr. Bigwig came in, huffing ‘Got to have some roses . . . three dozen, hurry.’ I certainly recognized a man in crisis, but not only were the roses gone, almost every other type of flower was too. I showed the distraught guy what I had available, but nothing suited. He wanted roses and he wanted them now. Finally, tired of being nice, I let it out: ‘Sorry, late-to-the-party Larry, we don’t have what you want. Next time try to make your plans a little earlier.’”

Michael acknowledged that his off-the-cuff comment wasn’t customer friendly. He wanted advice on ways to cool down and become dispassionate when his buttons were hot. Perhaps, like Michael, you need help in addressing with calm and self-control the unreasonable expectations of a difficult person. *Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People* will help you stop muddling through unreasonable expectations, spinning off negative comments, or losing personal control with people who choose their modus operandi to manipulate things their way. The person who is exasperating, difficult, offensive, uncooperative, and unreasonable *chooses* his behavior. You, also, can *choose*—choose to be unflappable, imperturbable, and unflustered!

Remember the story of the little engine that had to climb the big mountain with a very heavy load, too heavy for such a small

engine? The other engines taunted him. “You are too small. Your engine was made for straight roads. We are the big dogs. Give up.” The little engine felt wimpy and underpowered as he started the journey. *Surely*, he thought, *I can do it if the others can*. He began to repeat over and over, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Moving forward required gigantic effort. It felt impossible. He chugged and pulled, heaving as he carried his load over the mountains and through the woods to its destination. He started his journey believing his size determined his ability. He arrived at his destination with a paradigm change.

You may need a paradigm change to meet your challenging people problems at work. You need insight that boosts your resolve to handle fitful, hurtful, or unjust behavior. Could a thought really change any of your work problems? After all, life isn’t a fairy tale. You aren’t a train engine. But, like the small engine, you can harness your somersaulting emotions by simple focus. Thoughts direct how we act and react.

The first book I wrote in this series was *Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People*. It has been an international bestseller, picked up by readers just like you in bookstores, airports, grocery stores, and Walmarts. You will probably agree with me that issues at home and in the workplace are somewhat the same. After all, people are people and we all respond best to the same things: respect, appreciation, and care. But no one believes we handle our home family in quite the same way as our work family. We can disconnect from our work family, keep them somewhat at a distance, and are not as blown out of the water by issues that threaten one of our co-workers. At work, someone’s problems, even though they may affect us, are still *his* problems. We may be willing to help, but we certainly are not going to carry the same feeling of responsibility we would if it were our spouse or child.

It takes only one person to change a relationship.

There are insights about relationships that will help you through some of the inevitable storms that threaten your home in *Living Successfully with Screwed-Up People* and your work in *Working Successfully with Screwed-Up People*. You can be happy and satisfied in the midst of overwhelming responsibilities, conflicts, and even difficult relationships if you look at the situation from a new, healthier perspective. Begin fresh today to change any self-defeating behaviors that hold you hostage. The work world may be full of screwed-up people, but your world no longer has to revolve around them.

- Take back the power from the difficult people in your life.
- Respond productively when confronted.
- Remain poised and in control when everyone around you loses it.
- Win fairly in unfair battles.

My question for you is simple: *Do you really want to bring about positive change in your negative relationships at work?* If so, you must be willing to change first. Unless you change, it is unlikely your relationships will do anything but sink deeper into distress. Change causes surprise. Those around you ask, “Why are you so different?” It is impossible to continue the same type of interaction if one of the parties has metamorphosed his or her actions and responses. It doesn’t take two people to change a negative relationship; it takes only one! That’s a hope point!

So your workplace is not perfect? Put on your glasses. You are about to see a world of possibilities, a way for you to be free from the webs that screwed-up people spin, and a way to find peace in a significant portion of your life—your job! And in the process you’ll

find a treasure: an inner strength and confidence forged through the uncomfortable life lessons gleaned from dealing with difficult people.

Let's start by remembering these insights.

## Insights

- Jobs are as much about the undisclosed problems and opportunities of interpersonal relationships as work skills.
- It doesn't take two people to change a relationship; it takes one.
- You can choose to be unflappable, imperturbable, and unflustered.

## Questions

1. Are you finding someone at work difficult?
2. Do you consider the people you work with as family?
3. How many hours do you spend with your co-workers?
4. How many hours do you spend with those outside of work, not counting sleep time?



## 2

### Who Is the Problem?

Get up high enough and step back far enough to see the whole picture.

**T**here is a degree of shrewdness you need before entering the workforce, and often no one tells you any of the necessary skills to obtain that wisdom. Why is that? Why are there no courses to teach essential people skills before you join the ranks of the employed? I know your parents and friends eagerly congratulated you on finding a job, especially in this job market. Did the more experienced share with you what to expect from your work family, or did they merely smile knowingly and ask what your job entailed? I'm sure they were thinking, *Why say anything now? He will learn on the job.*

Were you adequately prepared, or did you feel like a babe when you walked through the company door? One young woman told me she understood the job particulars of “where to be when,” but

had no idea how to handle the role tiers at her job. What should she call her boss: Mr. Smith or Joe? Should she speak up in the conference room or defer to the white hair? Was she expected to share new ideas or submit to the wisdom of her supervisor, who was too old to ease into the newest technology? Should she pal with co-workers, or consider anyone in the company poison outside the office doors?

Figuring out how to maneuver in the social field of the workplace is critical to job satisfaction. Most of us are surprised by the number of people who simply walk away from a decent position because they don't like someone: one out of six, with as many as one out of three stressed to the breaking point by the negative attitudes or actions of fellow workers according to the 2001 Harris poll.<sup>1</sup> Maybe others who, like most of us, were not advised on how to handle the ingratiating, fawning, or uncompromising behavior on their team stay in the job by slinking into a cubicle, hoping to be out of the target zone. The good news is that it is never too early or too late in your career to learn people skills that make work life more pleasurable.

Lauren, a computer technician struggling with co-worker issues, felt mired in a swamp of emotional muck. "I'm in quicksand," she said. "How do you work with someone who ignores, demeans, questions, or rejects you? How do you deal with mean and unfair behavior? How do you go the second mile when that merely means being taken advantage of? How do you keep your job when you are blamed for someone else's messes? I'm afraid of a misstep, terrified I will blurt out the wrong idea or blunder into a wrong action."

Lauren is in a great place! Whatever action she takes offers her the opportunity to grow wiser. Difficult people are very effective at getting what they want because their actions intimidate or compel. Thinking about how she could make her actions positive would arm Lauren for future encounters. Knowing there is no one right

solution to dealing with her problems frees her from thinking of a blundered attempt to resolve the thorny issues as a failure. Instead, it becomes a lesson of what didn't work. Eventually, if you continue to respond as a mature adult, not allowing the other person's actions to put you in a pickle, his tactics will change. Why? Because what he is doing to get his way is not working.

---

*C*hange  
begets change.

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## Figuring It Out

The first response to irregular actions is surprise, then anger or hurt, guilt, and questioning. You wonder: Is the person really that difficult, or are you just being overly sensitive? Is what you are asked to do really unreasonable, or merely a different way to get the job done? Were you simply put off by the manner or quirkiness of your co-worker's personality? You must step back for an objective look. That may sound simple, but if it were, a book like this would not be needed. Most of us are bewildered by the difficult people problems at work. We don't know how to work with curmudgeons, cranks, loony tunes, whiners, or narcissists.

I suggested to Lauren that she needed an aerial perspective to figure out who was the problem. Lauren understood, telling me, "I always feel lost in NYC, an ant in the midst of skyscrapers, traffic, and people everywhere, with streets in all directions. But when I am looking at the city from above, it is easier to put it in perspective."

Relationships need the same type of aerial view. You can't figure out whether you are the problem or if the blame belongs to the other guy if you are stuck in the middle of the fray. Just as when we wander amidst skyscrapers, in relationship quagmires we are on the ground—stuck between emotions, stung by out-of-the-blue encounters, wondering if we are the cause, and questioning

what we should do to make things better. In the middle of that chaos we must corral our emotions, whip them into shape, and react with objectivity. It becomes even more difficult to distance yourself if you bring your home problems to work, where they

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**W**rong actions  
are wrong; wrong  
responses to  
wrong actions are  
equally wrong.

---

piggyback onto co-worker problems. Leave personal problems at home so when you step into the workplace you deal with only work issues. There are enough of those to keep you busy.

Stepping back to gain some objectivity about the situation begins your journey out of your emotional maze. You may come to the conclusion your negative reactions are unwarranted, or you may affirm that your discernment hit the target: you are dealing with a jerk. The good news is discerning who is the problem frees you from swirling emotions. But you are not off the hook: you are part of a team. It is crucial to mature your skills at peacefully working with those whose burrs irritate.

Aerial vision clears away illusion. Wrong actions are wrong; wrong responses to wrong actions are equally wrong. Aerial vision gives you an objective perspective by which you can determine:

- The possibilities
- The improbabilities
- The impossibilities

## **The Yardstick Measurement**

If you are objective and view a difficult relationship as if you are an outsider, you will often find that your judgment is far more rigid and unforgiving for some than for others. Differing yardstick measurements are why you can find the capriciousness of a certain

co-worker or acquaintance entertaining, while the same behavior in someone else is a potential earthquake. “There’s a woman in my office who is so off-the-wall that she makes me cringe, then chuckle with laughter,” Lauren said. “I really like her but I am glad she isn’t on my team. Her sarcasm and mouthy put-downs are far more out in left field than those of the woman who pushes my buttons.”

Perhaps, like Lauren, you will recognize it is more than just behavior that triggers your negative reactions. Think carefully about why you feel smothered, angry, frustrated, or hurt by someone—and yet similar behavior in another is dismissed without more than a glancing thought. You can grow to appreciate—even enjoy—the person whose capriciousness and idiosyncrasies currently irritate if you refuse to allow her behavior to get under your skin. If you burrow in the muck, you become an integral part of the problem, and it is no longer just the other person’s behavior that is wrong and causing turmoil.

Turning a toxic relationship into a healthy one requires hard work, objectivity, and *laughter*. Humor opens our eyes to see baffling issues in a new, more detached way. Suddenly you are looking at the problem without the consuming emotion. You let the screwed-up person own her behavior, instead of carrying it on your shoulders or adding credibility by responding. Humor prevents you from being jolted by every challenge like a wagon without springs. It is a life preserver when you start to sink into a swamp of chaos. If you laugh instead of wallow or rage, irritation and resentments slip away and a sunny spirit takes their place.

## The Hiccups

The problem is *hiccups*. A teacher shared a hiccup experience she had in her first year of teaching. She was barely getting her bearings

when the principal called her to his office for a private conference. The principal asked, “Do you have anything to tell me?” She was dumbfounded. What did he want to know? What had she done? After she squirmed sufficiently, he said, “You are pregnant!” In the 1970s, being pregnant was enough reason to lose your job. She wasn’t pregnant, and blurted out something like, “I guess time will tell,” and left. This teacher, now a principal, assured me that she learned a lot by that assault. But still, for all of us, surprise attacks, or hiccups, are unanticipated and hard to prepare for.

The teacher squirmed because she felt bushwhacked. If she had been older and wiser in the screwed-up people department, she might have laughed and brushed off the rudeness, maybe saying something like, “Sorry. Bet you thought you would see me squirm with that statement!” Or she might even have had the power to say straight out, “How immature, unprofessional, and rude to make such a suggestion in this manner.” Maturity and experience

help you assess and assert yourself when someone is intentionally cruel or uses a warped sense of humor to hurt. Still, you and I know that there is plenty we put up with at work because we don’t want to lose our jobs!

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*There is plenty  
we put up with  
at work because  
we don't want to  
lose our jobs.*

---

Lauren empathized with this teacher. The times that hung her up at work were also hiccup moments that stymied her by surprise. She didn’t know how to respond or what to do. I suggested Lauren collect

her thoughts and trust her instincts. If she left conversations bewildered, stung, disbelieving, and wondering if the person meant what she said, something was wrong. When something feels off-base, it probably is.

Lauren needed a few simple, noncommittal statements in her verbal arsenal to keep from appearing defensive or flustered, so

she could fly above the fray when another encounter reared its head, statements such as: “I need a moment to think about this.” “Interesting. I’ll consider that.” “Is that what you think would be best?” “How would you have done this differently?” “I’m sorry. I’m trying to do my job without worrying about that problem.”

Or perhaps Lauren needed merely to laugh and brush off the suggestion or remark as if it were absolutely absurd or made in jest. Refusing to give off-the-cuff wrongs or ridiculousness the power of emotion simply lets them bounce off you like water off a duck’s back.

***Surprise attacks are like hiccups: unanticipated.***

Let’s review the steps to developing an aerial vantage point:

- Step back to gain perspective when you confront people problems at work.
- Lower your natural defenses so you can analyze who the problem is.
- Put away naiveté. When something feels off-base, it probably is.
- Determine your course of action.
- Arm yourself with a verbal arsenal of positive, noncommittal comments and actions to stop negative flow.

Relationships that are screwed-up cause a lot of pain. If you are just beginning to twist, now is the time to reverse your patterns. It will take far less work now than if you wait until later. If you have already hit bottom in a relationship at work, and are lost in a quagmire that costs you time and emotional energy, you can reverse the patterns. Often it takes hitting bottom to shatter the naive thoughts that everyone will like you or that you will like everyone.

**L**ow points  
can be hope  
points.

It is possible to regain control of your thoughts and restructure the relationships that have tumbled into chaos at work by stepping back and assessing your situation, getting up high enough to see the whole picture. Then, regardless of others' actions, you are responsible for rising above the wrongs to do the right. Take heart.

Low points can be hope points.

## Insights

- An aerial perspective helps you through the maze of challenges in difficult relationships.
- Wrong actions are wrong; wrong responses to wrong actions are equally wrong.
- Surprise attacks are like hiccups: unanticipated.
- When something feels off-base, it probably is.
- Low points are hope points.
- Laughter helps you fly above the idiosyncrasies or atrocious behavior of another.

## Questions

1. Are you struggling with someone at work?
2. What are the signs that you are spinning off your interactions with the person?
3. Why do you react so strongly against this person when another co-worker with many of the same personality traits is a friend?
4. What could you do to keep from feeling irritated, hurt, angry, or guilty?

# 3

## Hardwired

### *Preprogrammed and Unchangeable!*

In the workplace there are enough targets without aiming at each other.

**F**ive words started our phone conversation: “Help! Our ship is sinking!” As Jack, an executive in a mid-sized company, explained his problem, it became abundantly clear that something needed to change or else the company ship might truly sink. That was the bad news. The good news was that the very thing threatening to sink his company was also one of the most necessary tools for large-scale business growth. Jack just didn’t know it yet.

Once at the company’s headquarters, I began to see the source of the tension in this business: partners who read “how-to” from different books. “Jack worries about everything,” Lori, his partner, said with a sigh. “It’s like I see the business world from 40,000 feet,

and he is on the ground counting the boulders that stand in the way of our success.”

The source of this tension, extremely divergent viewpoints, is in reality a great source of hope for the business’s success. The problem is that though it may be true that two heads are better than one, it does not *feel* better. I was hopeful that as we discussed the value of “different,” each partner could begin to appreciate the unique gifts the other brought to the table.

There were two teams working in this business: Jack’s and Lori’s. Jack knew the ins and outs of the business, having headed it for years. He studies the bottom line and safeguards details in a daily diary. He arrives on time to work and stays well beyond the required workday, analyzing the financials and possible pitfalls of the business in order

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*Two merging into one may be weaker than two working side by side, but it feels better.*

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to be prepared for any downturns. He prefers to store up his nuts for the winter in preparation for a blizzard. Jack is nonconfrontational in negotiation, feeling the facts should speak for themselves. Like a Boy Scout, his motto is “Be prepared,” especially in a down economy.

Jack is challenged by his partner’s seeming optimistic disregard of the facts and figures.

Lori handles the entrepreneurial aspects of the business. She’s a visionary. She looks at the big picture, considers the facts, but believes all will be well, because “it always is,” and is sure business would show up at the door in time for the next payable bank note. She enjoys going out on the limb to be fair or to entice clients. She prefers long lunches with clients to strengthen relationships, as opposed to clocking in on time at the office. She believes it takes money to make money. Hiring the best people out there may cost more, but in the long run would save the company. Lori was challenged by Jack’s fact-based judgment.

It is in this tension that the hope of the company's success lives. Jack and Lori's very different leadership styles and perspectives painted a broad-brushed picture in board meetings. Some members of the board affirmed Jack's conservative, hunker-down stance, especially in the down economy. Others on the board supported Lori in her thought that this was the ideal time to move forward with plans, before loan interest went up and everyone else was vying for the same customer base. The way their board handled the situation was by majority vote after much protracted discussion. Easy? Absolutely not!

Could two such opposite approaches within the same company be good for business? Of course. It scopes the whole picture—but wow! It causes major stress! The way we think and the way we judge create immense problems in “getting along” issues. The business becomes a war zone if respect is not the cornerstone upon which such differences in a company are laid. I thought it wise to meet with the company board and executive staff to give them two concepts to drink in:

1. *Not everyone needs to be the point guard.* The coach of every great basketball team counts on a team composed of a variety of players: point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward, and center. Each player has a honed skill that builds the team and one goal: winning. Does this seem obvious? Then why do we attempt to make everyone play from the same position in business?
2. *Celebrate the differences.* We are hardwired differently. If Jack sees the downside of the economy and Lori sees the possibilities of investment at the same time, together they can help the board evaluate the best moves for the company to survive and thrive.

## Breaking Down the Barriers

I knew the company's board and staff needed insight in order to appreciate the ideas of others who seemed to be flying on different planes. It is normal and natural, when we encounter someone who staunchly believes something we *know* is wrong and may force us into a wrong direction, to growl as our antennae go up and our body armor locks on.

We are not programmed to see the world through someone else's eyes. Nature has hardwired our operating system: the core of each of us, the unchangeable and individual ways we interpret our world and react to it. Those traits are prepackaged and wired to the side of the coin from which we perceive, interpret, and judge information. It even sets the best time for us to be online (time cycle), the structure in which we feel most secure (clutter vs. order), our background screen (noise or quiet), and the way we recharge our power (alone or with others).

We label this encoding "temperament." It is part of nature's protective and inflexible pathway to help us circle the wagons. You see the world white; I see it black. You work best in the evening; I'm on fire in the morning. I need my downtime alone to recharge; you are on a perpetual people-fest to energize. Together we have a full-circle perspective.

Animal species protect themselves through coloration that blends with the environment, replaceable limbs, repugnant odors, or menacing-looking body armor. For humans our protection is mind-directed. We outthink our enemies and survive in dangerous situations by analyzing our options. By joining forces with someone who sees a different side of the puzzle, we develop keener insights for our survival.

Some even argue that temperament is our instinctive behavior, somewhat like how a dog turns in circles before he lies down or

flocks of birds migrate. Perhaps that is stretching the line, but as I talked to Lori, she commented, “My kids certainly came with their own ways of acting. One is quiet and loves to do her own thing; my other was born *smoking cigars*. I certainly influence the way they act out, but I haven’t changed that basic personality I noticed from day one.”

## Understanding Our Hardwiring

The most critical points for any of us to remember about personality are simple:

1. Key personality traits are unchangeable.
2. The way we express these traits is malleable.

Temperament traits can be arranged in a scale of opposites. For instance, an easily identifiable pair of opposite temperament traits is that of orderliness and disorderliness. Jack’s office was simple and clutter-free. Lori’s seemed a perfect model of disarray. Lori quickly piped up in defense of her clutter, declaring that she knew where everything in her office was, and having it all in sight made her feel in control of her world. Jack laughed. “Clutter makes me feel out of control,” he said. “I would label myself a one for order, and Lori a ten for disorder.”

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*Nature has  
hardwired your  
operating system—  
the core of you.*

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Labels, however, are misnomers for identification. Extremes have their place in business success. Being at either end of the scale does not make you screwed-up, though it may seem so to someone whose traits differ from yours. Alexander Graham Bell, the eminent scientist, inventor, engineer, and innovator who is

credited with inventing the first practical telephone and a multitude of nineteenth-century wonders, was a ten in the time cycle of night and day alertness. He stayed up all night doing experiments, then catnapped during the day. Do you think his wife thought his sleep pattern normal and healthy?

In the following chapter, we will delve more deeply into the opposing traits of personality, and then follow with a chapter on ways to appreciate and handle differences in temperament with grace. It is normal to be less reactive—and in better self-control—when we do not perceive differences as personal challenges.

As a teaser, let me list ten questions that may help you recognize traits of personality that are unlikely to change over the course of your life. Perhaps, like Jack and Lori, you will have an immediate flash of insight and new appreciation for simple characteristics that previously seemed threatening and distracting.

1. Do you prefer to ask questions and seek advice before making a decision, or do you prefer to think through the issue on your own in order to evaluate the opinions of others against your own internal compass?
2. Do you make decisions based on facts or on feelings?
3. Do you base your decision on what is best for you and/or your company, or what is best for everyone involved?
4. Do you prefer to work in a quiet environment or surrounded by music or other workplace sounds?
5. Do you prefer an uncluttered environment or one that is filled to capacity or even overflowing?
6. Are you more alert in the morning hours or nighttime hours?
7. Do you feel safer with firmly set rules or flexible rules that act as guidelines?
8. Do you see the cup half full or half empty?

9. Do you reenergize by being with people or by being alone?
10. Do you set work guidelines and then trust that the task will be completed satisfactorily and on time, or do you prefer to check up on progress after making the assignment?

Divergent perspectives are either a safety net or a battleground. The difference between the two is the level of respect for differences. The greater the understanding and appreciation, the more co-workers temper their tension, drumbeating, and battling against the immutable, and instead seek to rationally find what can be changed, what may be changed, and what will not change. Simply stated, we discern when:

- Agreement or compromise is likely.
- Agreement or compromise is possible.
- Agreement or compromise is not possible.

## **Forging Unions through Tension**

Science describes nature as being in a constant state of tension. We recognize that productive relationships are forged by the union of uniquely different forces: the sun and moon light the day and night, electrons and neutrons generate electricity, acid works with alkali for digestion, fine motor coordination is the product of two opposing muscle groups. Tension *works*.

How interesting, then, that even though we affirm differences and acknowledge their reality in nature, we tend to demand conformity when it comes to how the people around us deal with problems. Different is fine—as long as it doesn't invade our inner circles or mess with the way we get our job done. That's why we affirm and bond with those who think and react as we do. If “different”

works beside us, we label him as an outsider and keep him on the fringe instead of making him a valued, full-fledged member of the work tribe. How sad! Different can enrich our worldview, broaden our outlook, and increase the possible ways to work outside our box. The good news: recognizing that diversity is the wellspring of survival in nature and in business may keep your emotions from surging. *You are who you are* as far as temperament is concerned. Count that a good thing!

## Insights

- Nature has hardwired your operating system: the core of you.
- Temperament is the impervious and immutable path through which we interpret our world.
- We are not programmed to see the world through someone else's eyes.
- The most critical thing to know about personality is which traits can be influenced toward change and which cannot.
- You are who you are!
- Two merging into one may be weaker than two working side by side, but it feels better.
- The way we gather information, think, and judge create immense problems in the “get along” arenas!

## Questions

1. Answer the questions in this chapter that help to identify temperament traits. Make a list of yours.
2. Think of someone with whom you work who is extremely irksome. Make a list of their temperament traits.

3. Is it their temperament or their behavior that you find irritating?
4. What are some ways you might share your perspective with others whose basic temperament differs from yours—without their becoming defensive?