

Keeping Our Bearings with Difficult People

The fishermen in Discovery Channel's *The Deadliest Catch* routinely deal with dangerous conditions caused by the elements. Those of us working in offices don't operate in life-threatening situations, but we may see some parallels between the deadly weather and some of our difficult colleagues.

While surfers and swimmers are told to stay home when Great White sharks appear close to shore, nobody closes the beach because of a crab sighting. Yet it's Alaskan crabs at the center of the Discovery Channel program, *The Deadliest Catch*.

The hit series follows captains and crew as they ply the Bering Sea. Its "deadliest" designation isn't just a TV pitchman's hyperbole. The Alaskan shellfish industry averaged 400 deaths per 100,000 workers during the 1990s. That's more than triple the rate for lumbermen, ranked No. 1 among the most dangerous jobs in the United States by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2002, as reported by [CNN/Money.com](#). But it isn't because the fishermen's target is inherently dangerous—crabs are hardly man-eaters. Rather, the risks are ratcheted up by the *conditions* that the fishermen endure.

They manipulate cumbersome

equipment—cages weighing hundreds of pounds apiece—during intense work shifts, as much as 40 hours out of 50. The work would be physically demanding under the best of conditions, but crab fishing takes place between October and January, when arctic weather is extreme. The elements have uncomfortable parallels in the work climate. Let's take a look at some.

Howling Wind. Even when storms blow winds up to 40 to 50 knots, crew members must make their way across the deck or stand ready and steady at the rail. Just as we must keep going in the face of a coworker's tantrums.

For example, one executive coach reports, "One client is having a difficult time with a 'partner' who is very emotional, accusatory, with no ability to stop and see her part in things. My client isn't the only one who has trouble with this person. She creates havoc wherever she goes; she stands in the way of forward progress and blames everyone around her. But she has a tremendous amount of power. Her boss is afraid of her and so is HR."

Ice. Alaska's crab boats must sometimes dodge the kind of bergs that sank the Titanic. Even more insidious, mist and spray

freeze when they come in contact with metal, adding tons of weight to the boats and making them top heavy and at greater risk of tipping or sinking, much like the colleague who throws cold water on initiatives.

A European executive is all-too-familiar with this kind of difficult person: "We were colleagues at the same hierarchical level; then I got promoted, and he sort of needed to provoke me to see how I would react. For example, I used to plan the timetables for the week for all the staff; he would come to me while I was doing that and comment on my choices. It made the hairs rise on the back of my neck; just seeing him come through the door would make my temperature go up."

Rogue Waves. Not only does the Bering Sea whip up 40-foot rollers; unusually high crests—perhaps 60 feet high—also arise spontaneously. They can knock a boat sideways or pitch it over. An office "rogue wave" walks in on a smoothly running project and generates uproar.

Such a colleague bothered Mary, a star performer promoted to team leader. After six months in her new position, Mary was finding her stride. Everything clicked

as she provided oversight for a week-long event at a remote location. The Friday kickoff went swimmingly. When Mary headed home late Saturday night, the team was handling things smoothly, and all stakeholders gave glowing feedback. So Mary felt justifiably proud as she walked into her office Monday morning.

And then the company's "rogue wave" struck. When Mary turned on her computer, she found a carping e-mail from a peer who had gone to the event on Sunday and felt that piece of the project was below standards. Barely managing to keep panic at bay—could everything have fallen apart in the few hours after she left; would her boss demand an explanation—Mary started making phone calls. She sorted through the colleague's complaints, dealing with the grains of truth and clearing up misconceptions. By noon, she had made some adjustments and restored the confidence of her team. But she felt deflated.

"This person does that kind of thing all the time," Mary complained, "and not just to me. Just seeing her name in my inbox makes me cringe. She's always going to find fault with something and rile everybody up. She ruins my day."

But something remarkable happened for Mary: She heard herself talking like a victim—"She ruins my day"—and began to reflect. Mary realized that nothing had really happened. No business had been lost; she hadn't been called on the carpet. The only damage was to Mary's mood. She'd let her difficult colleague hijack her thoughts...again.

**Blow winds, and
crack your cheeks.**

**Rage, blow, You
cataracts and
hurricanes...**

**I tax you not, you
elements, with
unkindness...**

King Lear, by William
Shakespeare

Mary decided enough was enough. She realized that she had no control over her colleague's penchant for criticism and agitation, but she could choose to respond differently. Mary switched her thinking from listing all the ways her colleague is wrong to exploring how she can keep her bearings no matter what that colleague does.

The other sufferers cited in this column have come to similar insights.

"One day I decided to talk to my former peer," says the executive dealing with *Ice*, "setting up some ground rules we would both respect—doing my best to find common ground and increase our level of awareness about what was going on. Keeping my cool couldn't be done by an effort of will. It had to be done by backing away from the situation and assessing my reaction, not allowing myself to be the victim. I kept saying, 'Act, don't react,' so most of the time I was able to work

smoothly with him."

The client facing *Howling Wind* is "working hard to just stay under the radar and be kind, which is very challenging," reports his coach. "His goal now is to deal with the storm without being triggered. I encourage him to imagine he's the mountain that stands still as a storm passes, the person who can observe it and say, 'I've seen this before, and it, too, shall pass.'"

These scenarios point to a key distinction. What makes people difficult isn't that they're temperamental or volatile, malicious or vicious. What they say or do, no matter how outlandish, is difficult only when it triggers something in us that makes it hard for us to keep our bearings.

Over and over on *The Deadliest Catch*, the Alaskan crab fishermen offer the same lesson. When they hear that one of their own has been lost at sea, they don't get angry at the crabs or rage at the weather. They know that the wind is going to howl, ice is going to form, and unpredictable waves are going to surge. Those are forces of nature that mere humans can't change.

And so are our coworkers. We can't eliminate the difficult people from our offices or our lives. But we can stay alert and aware and find ways to keep our bearings—no matter what, or who, happens. **SF**

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