Dealing with Difficult People

- Ithra Session — March 2004

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Class Scope

- People within our SCA groups (NOT marriage or family therapy!)

- From an organizational/communicative position (I am NOT a clinical psychologist!)

- Talking about people who are relatively healthy, who act lawfully (I am NOT an attorney, law enforcement official, or judge!)

Why do we need to deal with them at all?

- Part of our groups
- SCA culture, open to all—who we are
- Diversity—experiences, perspectives
- Better decisions

What do we mean by "difficult"?

- The coarse, difficult truth is often: "They don't agree with me, and they don't give up easily"

Three categories of "difficult"

- Lacking social skills to effectively communicate
- Large variance in backgrounds, subcultures, philosophies
- History of hurt, mistrust

Who are difficult people?

- Usually, much like us, but are not now in power (or now out of power)
- Sometimes, people who lack social or communicative skills
- Often, our past (or future) leaders

Assumptions

- People are not difficult, but they may do difficult things

- Our motives are complex, and often hidden to all, including to us

- People won't continue to participate in an activity without some reason

- They get something from participating, for they come, even if it is unpleasant for them

No magic answers today, but some possibilities to consider

"We can't seem to grow"

Potential Problem #1—
Group barriers to new people

"We–ness" or "in–group/out–group"

- Built with norms, vocabulary,
- History, titles, etiquette
- Inside jokes
- Can lead others to feel left out

Serves important functions—not inherently undesirable

- Powerful tool to form "group"
- Any group must exclude some people
- Yields cohesiveness

Particularly common in SCA

- Characteristics of SCA: "no shit" stories, "secret" meetings of peers, etc.
- We are prone to exclusive communicative behaviors—special ways of speaking (even saying "hi!"
- Consider our use of "mundane"

Potential Solution—Inclusion

Role of Chatelaine

- Honor your Chatalaine—make office attractive to competent people
- By the way, birds of a feather. . . (what do you want your group to look like in three years?)

…and,
form structures to:

Ensure people are informed—avoid embarrassment

- Forms of address
- Unwritten rules
- Feasts
- Courts

Ensure people are involved—avoid boredom

- Feasts
- Contests
- Courts
- Post revels
- Long periods of dead time at events

Potential Solution—Review physical barriers

- Informal "get togethers"
- Meeting place accessible?
- Meeting time consistent? convenient?

Potential Problem #2—
We won't allow our group
to grow

Symptoms

- Does your group seem to grow to a certain level, then die back?

- Do you seem to retain a core group, with new people drifting in and out?

- Existing group may see new people as threatening their existing "good thing"

Potential Solution—Make growth less threatening

- Involve threatened people in recruitment efforts
- Provide adequate communication about all new things

Look for opportunities to honor long–time members

- "History of SCA", "court etiquette" lectures
- Point them out as sources of information
- Push for quick integration of new people

Avoid too many new things all at once

- If lots of new people recently, use existing activities to involve them

- If (you predict) lots of new people are coming, then start new activities well in advance so your group can handle new people

Factionalism,
Intra–group power struggles

Potential Problem #3—
Unbalanced level of social skills

Why SCA Groups Aren't Stable

- We tend to attract people who do not interact well—and those who are excellent
- In SCA, different social rules apply, everyone is at same level at beginning
- Any social group gains stability with middle–skilled people

Potential Solution—Checking manipulation within group

is someone "having fun" with the group?

- Usually they are not too involved, but attend
- Seem to be "underemployed" in group
- Apparently enjoy manipulation of people

If so, then confront them - give them tough responsibility

Potential Solution—Education

- Remind everyone of norm of acceptance
- Seek out intimidated people for extra assistance

find those with excellent skills and rely upon them

- Help mend fences
- Prevent misunderstandings
- Increase communication

Potential Solution—Structuring. Ambiguity–reduction

Structure mixing activities (e.g. fighting, dance, music groups)

Provide more structure for those who need it

- Be sensitive
- Be adaptable
- Remember why you started these activities
- Mix more – and less–structured activities

Potential Problem #4—
Just Plain Pettiness

SCA'ers tend to place all their social eggs in one basket

- Therefore, their entire social life is at stake
- Every little problem risks entire social life

Potential Solution—Lessening the social risks

- Encourage people to travel, become involved on regional/kingdom levels (competitions, guilds, fighting, etc.) or even other organizations
- Encourage people to make lots of friends outside of local group

Potential Problem #5—Attribution of motives

We're only human. . .

- We tend to think in terms of why someone does something

- Of course, we do not know why, so we attribute motives

- If we expect the worst, we attribute the worst

Fundamental Attribution Error

If I'm responsible and something good happens, it's because I deserved it—I'm a good person.	If I'm responsible and something bad happens, it's because I'm unlucky (or you're out to get me).
If you're responsible and something good happens, it's because you're lucky (or you benefitted from my help).	If you're responsible and something bad happens, it's because you deserve it—you're a bad person.

We easily arrive at a situation
where every act
is seen as an attack

•"Never attribute to malice what can be
explained through incompetence"

—Hilary of Serendip

Potential Solution— Monitored communication

- More effective communication without changing perceptions is likely to worsen the situation

provide mediation

- At first, individually, then together
- Stick up for whoever is being attacked
- Relentlessly point towards possible good motivations

Find someone who will take care of you afterwards, because you will need it!

Allow lots of time to heal wounds

Potential Problem #6—
"Cliques"

Cliques in the SCA

- Entrenched mutually exclusive social circles (*e.g.* fighters/artisans, households, gamers, students)

Some characteristics of Cliques

- Communication between groups of people is difficult
- Doesn't seem that whole group has anything in common
- Ubiquitous mistrust
- "We" talk—not referring to entire group

Potential Solution—Structured activities

- Encourage mixing around other criteria (geography, interests, time in SCA, etc.)
- Encourage different people to travel together
- Form new cross–clique interest groups

Potential Problem #7— Disenfranchisement

Yes, it does happen here. . .

- Occurs when groups feel they lack power to guide themselves
- May be "real" or "perceived"—same effect

Warning signs

- Many officers come from one sub–group

- When someone asks a question, there is an uneasy silence

- Decision makers boast about no dissent on important decisions

- Most "business" at meetings involves "past"— reports about completed activities

- Appeals for help are always for cleaning up, not planning

May be evidenced in:

- Withdrawal
- Constant sniping
- Unofficial meetings
- Reluctance to help with group's tasks
- Physical separation at meetings

Have you heard these?

- "We gave them the opportunity but they didn't take it"
- "Don't we have a right to spend time with our friends?"
- "They don't come to the business meetings"
- "We are doing the dirty work so they can have fun"

This is one of the most dangerous
problems a group can face—it
can quickly destroy a group

Potential Solution— Trust–building

- Listen carefully
- Encourage open discussion of major decisions (before the decision)
- Specifically ask for advice from group members
- Purposely incorporate competent people from group in group tasks

Potential Problem #8—Apparent inaccessibility of decision–making processes

SCA is explicitly not a democracy, in a culture that prizes democracy

- Difficult for many to accept
- Seems inaccessible
- Note that there are actually few real democracies, but few groups flaunt it!

Certain individuals may seem to be tyrants

- We lack "normal" checks and balances on power, so we substitute other less visible checks, such as social constraints

- Awards for appropriate behavior include rank, decision-making access

- "Word of the Crown"

- We tolerate tyrants

Potential Solution—
Increase base of decision–makers

Use business meetings to discuss problem, not to simply announce decisions

Purposely invite specific people to offer opinions

Step on those who step on others

Discourage decision making outside of group meetings

Keep meetings on–track and moving

- You can get much more done
- Keep peoples' attention for entire meeting
- Engender sense of accomplishment

Meet more frequently, make smaller decisions more often

Consider a local event to discuss future of group

- Priorities
- Events
- Goals (more members, or more activities, or more awards, not everything)