As an academic leader, one of the most difficult challenges I have faced has been dealing with an authentically difficult employee—a seasoned staff or faculty member who does not stop repeating undesired behaviors that disrupt the department but that are not severe enough to warrant disciplinary action. These behaviors include all sorts of passive-aggressive actions, including lying, claiming not to have been told about deadlines, not taking responsibility for actions, blaming others, etc. In effect, this person is miserable and is making everyone else miserable. Going in as a new chair is challenging enough, but if you don’t take responsibility for the misery in the department, things will quickly go from bad to worse. Remember, the difficult employee was there before you, and he/she plans on being there after you leave . . . or are run off.

Why would a faculty member, in particular, behave badly? Well, there are many reasons. This behavior may be due to career burn-out, frustration with constant change in today’s academic environment, mismanaged administrative corrective actions in the past, or personal problems. We all know you can’t make someone change. Someone has to want to change. Most difficult employees know they are difficult, and they know when someone is trying to manipulate them. What can you do? How can you win? The only solution I have found is changing my behavior toward the difficult employee and employing transformational leadership methods that are authentic and positive.

Through transformational methods, a leader “looks for potential motives in followers, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person of the follower.” (Burns, 1978, p. 4) Developing a true relationship with this employee will take time and effort. Is this easy? No. However, you and your employee will benefit from the experience:

1. Empathize with the employee, regardless of how you would have handled a situation if you were in his/her shoes. Accept that the employee’s experiences, attitudes, and feelings are genuine. Ask how the employee would have handled a situation had certain components changed. This encourages the employee to see alternatives.

2. Listen to the employee when he/she talks about non-work related issues, and learn what values are held or rejected. Do not judge the employee, just listen and learn. See if you can detect those values in play at work.
3. Discover strengths of the employee, and give him/her opportunities to be successful. This may require rethinking current duties. This step may also be perceived as a threat by other employees. They may wonder why you are “rewarding” the difficult person and be resentful.

4. Model positive behavior with the employee. Do not fall into the “Do as I say, not as I do” trap. All eyes will be on the leader even more than before. This is the step where the true relationship building begins. The employee will begin to trust the leader when he/she sees that you are not manipulating him/her.

5. Support the employee when she/he starts making strides toward change. The changes may not be initially what are desired at first, but support them regardless. Believe that this employee can grow and fulfill the potential she/he showed when he/she was hired.

How will you benefit from this process as an academic leader? There are three ways. First, things will be better in the department. That makes your job easier. Second, you will soon become known as an expert on dealing with difficult people. That carries a certain amount of respect in administrative circles. Third, you will have the satisfaction of seeing someone grow into his/her potential. All three of these are incredible benefits.

How long will you have to work at this until there is noticeable change? Probably not as long as you might think. How long will you have to keep these steps up? Long enough until others see the change and start to make positive and honest comments to the employee. Once the employee realized that he/she is being noticed for positive behavior, he/she will want to keep that attention. At that point, others who did not know the employee was ever a problem will begin interacting with him/her, and your circle of support will widen exponentially. Remember, you might be in the ivory tower, but you are also in the people business.

CITATION