

Conflict Resolution ~ Backing Up to Go Forward

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Recently, I found myself unable to resolve a conflict with a person who was important to me, even though I tried every communication tool I knew, including requesting that we seek help from a professional mediator. I described the problem to a long-time friend of mine, Mark Morris, who was one of the leaders in improving full force self defense training for many years and who still builds the padded suits that make this work possible.

My conversation with Mark brought into sharper focus for me how the very talented caring individual I was trying to work things out with had a history of getting caught up in conflicts with many different people. "It sounds like the person you are dealing with needs to install a reverse gear," Mark said. "If a car doesn't have a reverse gear, it is likely to get stuck very quickly. The same thing is true with people. If you can't back up, it doesn't take very long before you won't be able to go forward."

In an interview on National Public Radio, Nobel Laureate and Princeton University psychology professor Daniel Kahneman, gave one interesting reason why people are more likely to fight than to work things out, "There are actually several reasons for an exaggerated reluctance to make concessions. One of them is something that in the jargon we call loss aversion. The concessions that the other side makes to you are gains to you. The concessions that you make to the other side are losses to you. And there's a lot of research suggesting that losses are weighted as least twice as much as gains. So that creates a very large gap where my concessions seem to me more important than yours."

Loss aversion might be why many people see backing up as being weak or losing when they have a disagreement with someone.

Another reason is that people often see backing up from a position that they have taken as diminishing their self-worth. They might go to great lengths to justify negative behavior as a way of protecting their image of themselves as being important, as being smart, as having good intentions, or as being right.

Common perceptions that can lead to increased conflict are:

- "My memory is always accurate."

- "I am always fair."
- "There is no other explanation possible for what happened."
- "If I was wrong about this, it would mean that I was a bad person."
- "If I change my mind, people will see this as weakness and it will diminish my credibility."
- "If I let someone else win, this means that I have lost."
- "It's my right to say whatever I think, to go wherever I want to go, and to do whatever I want to do. If other people are bothered by this, too bad."

In our workshops, we teach our students how to disengage from conflict in ways that are powerful rather than weak, to communicate without blame, to try to see different perspectives, to understand that mistakes are part of learning, to move out of reach of trouble, to acknowledge ways in which their behavior was harmful to others and to make amends if possible, and to accept their right to change their minds.

These are all ways of installing a "reverse gear" so that you can back out of trouble or go around it in order to move towards where you want to be in a relationship or in a difficult communication. Remember that if someone is acting unreasonable or dangerous, it might not be in anyone's best interest to try to educate that person in the moment.

Common "backing up" statements that do not diminish your value include:

- "I am sorry that I offended you (bothered you/upset you) and I am going to get out of your way."
- "Let's take a break and talk this over when we are not so tired."
- "We have a different memory about what happened and might need to agree to disagree."
- "We seem stuck. Let's get help from a professional mediator."
- "I have more information now and I see that what I told you before was incorrect."
- "I have changed my mind and I understand now that what I said (or did) was a mistake."
- "I overcommitted myself and now I need to change this commitment."
- "I see that my actions (misunderstanding/mistake/negative behavior) caused harm to you. My understanding is that this (specific result) is the impact on you of my behavior. This (specific suggestion within reason) is what I can offer to make amends."

Getting stuck by only seeing one option or only going in one direction can be destructive. Instead, you and the people you interact with are more likely to be emotionally and physically safer if you look at all your choices and at many different points of view before deciding on a course of action.