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Confrontation

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A tanned and relaxed family of five approaches the ticket counter at Acapulco International to obtain their boarding passes for a plane back to the states. The service agent behind the counter politely informs the father that all the seats are filled and they will have to take the next flight that leaves in 8 hours for Dallas. With out hesitation my father launches into a verbal confrontation that seems to last for an eternity. My gut wrenches as I watch the scene develop, my Dad's eyebrows arching, the service agent cowering under the his enduring the wrath. The incident become known in the White family circle as the time my dad turned into Ivan the Terrible.

Enjoying underage champagne in first class on the back to Dallas. I reflected upon the effort it took to make sure I was on this plane instead of a later one. I also wondered if I had what it would it would take to enter into that kind of confrontation.

There are at least 4 things you can do when you enter into confrontation with somebody.

The first two are my personal favorites

1. Stay and do nothing (enjoy bitching with other people about the situation)
2. Vote with your feet (grass will be greener some place else)

The second two involve hard work and can make lasting changes, but you have to do the work. They are

3. Change your attitude

4. Change you behavior

My brother law has a great poster that hangs in his office, it show a broken chain link.

Underneath it the caption says that the only thing common to all your Dysfunctional relationships is you.

Option 1. Stay and do nothing invites us to complain and post pone and it does nothing to move the process forward. Many feel trapped in jobs that may leave us little or no choice but to stay and do nothing because of the money. In this option we are abandoning all hope of moving forward. We have a story at work that involves a supervisor and a disgruntled employee. Everyday the employee would say something negative about the work environment and how he worked with a bunch of incompetent losers. One day the supervisor sat down with the employee and said Joe, I want to end your long standing suffering of these incompetents and if you will, just sign at the bottom of this form you and I will be much happier persons. Of course what was offered was a resignation letter.

If your not asked to leave a second option is to leave yourself. Like Johnny Paycheck's song "Take this Job and shove it, I ain't working here no more".

Or, You won't have this dog to kick around any more.

And finally “Make sure you bury me face down so everyone can kiss my ass when I am gone”.

The solution of leaving has immediate gratification but offers little recourse in the future should you change your mind.

The first two options are viable but have to be practiced at the right time.

Now for the hard options, the ones where you recognize you’re the part of the chain that is breaking.

Here you can exercise the third option of changing your attitude. Victor Frankl a renowned psychologist and professor who endured the atrocities of concentration camps he decided to gain control of his attitude by mentally rehearsing his lectures and in the end gained more freedom over his thoughts than his Nazi captors ever could.

Finally can you change you behavior. Could it be your own behavior is what is causing the conflict. Are you reaping what you sow with co-workers and family? You can throw them off balance when you start changing your behavior to reduce the conflict they may not know how to handle the new you.

My good friend Dr. Kay gets a laugh at some of the props I use to keep my mind on confrontation. I few years ago there was a craze going around where everyone was wearing WWJD bracelets on their wrist. WWJD stood for (What would Jesus Do) during

the same period of time, one on the more popular TV shows was NYPD Blue. One of the main protagonists of the show was Andy Sipowics. Andy was a gruff Vietnam veteran who was a street hardened cop and could coax a confession out of anybody. My solution to get into conflict was to wear the rubber band with WWASD printed on it. This stood for What Would Andy Sipowicz Do.

A mental image of conflict can be imagined on two axes . These are assertiveness levels and focus. (Make a cross with hands)

In assessing assertiveness of someone you are in conflict with be aware if they are shouting or mumbling, are they demanding or suggesting.

On the focus axes people may be Task or people fixed. In the TV show Dragnet Joe Friday would be interviewing the distraught widow or girlfriend on the murder of their significant other and when the grieving person would start babbling he would say “just the facts ma’m” he definitely task oriented on the other hand when you ask your teenage daughter how school was you find out how all her friends are doing but nothing about grades she is people oriented.

Within these axes of assertiveness and focus you have 4 intents. People want to get it done, get it done right, get along with people, get appreciation from people.

If they have a get it done intent it will be similar to what I hear from my son on his homework when he want to go out and play. It does not matter that you cannot read his homework but in his mind it is done. Close enough for hand grenades and atom bombs is what we used to say in school

When the get it done right intent is present you hear the following phrases, haste makes waste, measure twice cut once, look before you leap. In general a good mode for airline pilots, surgeons, auto-mechanics and finally shuttle launch managers.

Finding a balance in these intents takes knowing when good enough is good enough, and also not letting a time line force a bad decision.

With the get along with people intent. You will hear, "I know Joe is a poor performer but he has been here for so long".

One needs to balance the intents of getting appreciation as well giving. Not only look at me but look at you have done as well. You get what you give.

When you cannot get what you want a cast of ugly characters emerge.

When get it done intent is thwarted others appear to be wasting time, going off on tangents or talking too much. The Tank, the sniper, and the know it all appear.

The tank is on a mission. Come hell or high water the job will be done. Will rip anyone apart however it is not personal

The sniper is out to control through embarrassment. He makes frequent make sarcastic comments during open forum. Watch for these people during the comments tonight.

Know it alls are actually quite knowledgeable but wear you down through there incessant talking. Yap, yap, what I would do is this, snore.

Three new characters emerge when get it right intent is thwarted, they are the Whiner, The no person and the nothing person.

For the whiner nothing is right everything is wrong. Would you like some cheese with that whine?

The no person is the one that says "we tried that before and it didn't work then and I am sure it will not work now". He is the black hole of optimism in any organization.

The nothing person says fine do it your way if it don't work ,out don't come crying to me.

The threatened intent to get along has a cast of the passive nothing person, the wishy washy person and the maybe person.

The nothing person says “if I don’t have anything nice to say I won’t say it” and avoids conflict.

The wish washy person, serves awful waffles never makes a decision that ruffles feathers.

In the threatened intent to get appreciated the grenade, the friendly sniper and the know it all appear.

The grenade is Rodney Danger field with a pin. When he gets no respect he goes off “Kaboom”. You often hear him saying I don’t know why I even bother no one here appreciates me.

The friendly sniper uses sniping as a fun way of gaining attention and often will enjoy the return snipe.

They “think they know it all”. Is full of exaggeration, half-truths and useless advice. They can persuade and mislead an entire group.

Getting from conflict to cooperation with this cast of characters requires blending and redirection. You blend using your body language, when the other person move forward you lean forward. Blending should not be forced; it should signal I am with you. As a

warning do not mock every thing that they do. To blend vocally match both volume and speed. Loud people like volume.

Blending should always precede redirecting whether your are listening to understand or speaking to be understood.

While your problem person is talking,

1. Blend visibly and audibly
2. Back track using the persons own words
3. Clarify meaning, intent and
4. Summarize what you heard
5. Confirm you got it right.

To reach deeper understanding identify the other person's positive intent. Assume they are not out to get you.

If you are dealing with someone who wants to get it done as a top priority be quick and to the point.

If you are dealing with someone who want to get it right pay attention to the details.



If you are dealing with some one who wants to get along, show you care. Chit chat and have considerable communication.

If you are dealing with some one who wants to get appreciation use words of enthusiasm and appreciation.

Identify the criteria that the person is using that is causing the argument. Try to find the reasons behind the person's disagreement and seek to resolve

When you talk with problem people speak to be understood.

1. Monitor the tone of your voice
2. State your positive intent
3. Tactfully interrupt interruptions
4. Tell your truth
5. Be ready listen

A year or two after the Ivan the terrible incident, my late Uncle came to pick me up at my home in Lafayette to take me to St. Louis. He was going to test my skills and aptitudes that might identify a future career. However that future was already wired, I was going to be an engineer. He flew his plane in to the same field that Amelia Earhart landed on before leaving for pacific. His plane was a tool he used in his trade to go to the far-flung

plants of Ralston Purina. He was corporate psychologist in based out of St. Louis Missouri advising their management on how to improve their management skills.

I asked him at the time if I would ever have the same intensity in confrontation as my dad did during the Ivan the terrible incident. He told me we all find our own way in conflict resolution. When he closed that door to his office posted on the back of it was a placard that read the modern psalmist lament

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no one because I carry the biggest stick".