

Fixing Relationships Through Joint Action

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Fixing Relationships Through Joint Action

When a work relationship comes down with a problem, why is it so uncommon for the parties affected to talk the problem through? Why do people so much prefer to swallow their discontent or ventilate it to friends instead of taking it to the source? Why is confronting a relationship problem as aversive a task for managers as giving a performance appraisal to a marginally performing subordinate? The answers are not as simple as the questions may imply, and this paper is devoted to explaining why people in organizations avoid their interpersonal problems and how confrontation can be used to repair work relationships.

The organizational practice of fixing relationships by talking about them was inspired, in large part, by the openness movement, which began in the late 1940's with the invention of the T-group (also known as sensitivity training). As with all movements, the missionary zeal of the advocates eventually got the movement into trouble. The vision of openness as a corrective for organizational problems was a fine one, but too little account was taken of how pure, unadulterated openness fits the conventional cultures and practical purposes of work organizations. The enchantment of the early days gave way to disenchantment, and, by the mid-1970's, the baby was in danger of being thrown out with the bath water. To correct for this partial overreaction against openness, this paper attempts to extract what is most useful, practical, and transferable from the openness movement--then apply it to the problem of repairing work relationships.

Methods of Dealing With Troubled Relationships

Some work relationships start off defective, usually because certain hard-to-surmount differences get in the way (Kaplan & Mazique, 1983). These can be organizational differences--such as in job function, level, and physical location--or differences in demographic characteristics--such as age, sex, and race. Personality can also be a factor. Relationships can also run into trouble once they have formed. There is nothing to insure that a smoothly functioning relationship will remain that way. Good relationships are founded on shared expectations that meet each party's needs, and when circumstances or individuals

change, expectations can fall out of alignment (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1973).

One effective way to overcome a relationship problem is simply to have the parties spend time together in productive and rewarding ways. Contact--that is, good contact--is the basis for all strong relationships (Sayles, 1979; Kaplan & Mazique, 1983). In fact, constructive confrontation works, in part, because it gets the parties interacting in positive ways and breaks them out of the negative cycle. The good contact can consist of getting things done together or spending enjoyable social time together or a combination of the two. All that matters is that the tendency to move away from a person who presents problems is overcome in favor of going toward that person (Horney, 1945).

Ultimately, people bound up in conflict must choose between going constructively toward the tension or avoiding it. Henry Kissinger accounted in these terms for the failure of his relationship with Secretary of State William Rogers:

Had both of us been wiser we would have understood that we would serve the country best by composing our personal differences and reinforcing each other. . . . But all our attempts to meet regularly foundered. Rogers was too proud, I intellectually too arrogant, and we were both too insecure to adopt a course which would have saved us much needless anguish and bureaucratic headaches. (Kissinger, 1979, p. 31)

The choice between moving toward or away from tension is nicely illustrated in the opposing styles that Presidents Kennedy and Nixon used in dealing with segments of the press critical of them. Kennedy, in conflict with Hugh Sidey, the White House correspondent for Time magazine:

. . . deliberately made as much of his administration open and available to Sidey as possible. His treatment of the press in a situation like that was in direct contrast to what that of Nixon would be. Nixon under pressure turned only to reporters from publications already favorable to him; Kennedy, in trouble, turned to those most critical and dubious of him, and if anything tended to take those already for him a bit for granted. (Halberstam, 1979, p. 503)

Kennedy offset the centrifugal forces built into his relationships with unsympathetic reporters by unleashing subtle centripetal forces in the form of social contact. He

cultivated the reporters "not so much by simply inviting them to dinner as by sharing an interest, be it in their profession or the book they were reading, the issue they were fascinated by" (Halberstam, 1979, p. 446). Kennedy went toward, embraced the tension of these troublesome relationships and thereby reduced the tension.

If the parties to a problematic relationship don't increase contact on their own, then influential people nearby can arrange it. An executive told the story of two departments in which "the adversarial reaction between that group and this group over here was immense. One group designed new equipment and the other, in an entirely different organization, manufactured the equipment. The development people were saying 'Those dummies don't know how to put it together' and the manufacturing people were saying 'Those people are a bunch of theoreticians.' Now what do you do in a situation like that?" As the person to whom the development group reported, the executive started meeting with the head of the other group.

In one of those meetings we decided we'd take one of the real dissenters in my group and put him on a year's assignment over in the other area. He balked. He didn't really want to go, but we said we've got to do it: 'They're responsible for producing so you've got to help them understand why that's important and we have to better understand their side of it.' Well, he hadn't been over there six weeks, and he came back and talked to his boss. His boss came up to me one day and said, 'Do you know what you've done? Larry was back today, and he's giving us hell because we're too theoretical on this thing and we don't understand what we're doing.' Now, mission accomplished. Two overt actions, some talking, and pretty soon the groups are working together.

The secret to success was that the two executives structured in more contact both at their level and between the two groups. To increase good contact between parties to a problematic relationship is a way of investing in the relationship.

Another viable alternative to confronting problems head on is to bleed off the tension created by the problematic relationship. This is usually done with the help of a third party who serves either as a go-between or counselor. A go-between is someone, frequently a person at a higher level, who learns of a relationship problem from one of the two parties and then tries to manage the situation by talking to

both parties separately. An effective go-between brings a balanced perspective, helping each party to see the situation from the other's point of view and thereby letting some of the tension out of the situation. If one individual is the offender and the other the person taking offense, the third party helps the offender recognize the offensive element in his or her behavior and settles down the other person by acknowledging the offense but also encouraging tolerance. Recommending this strategy is the fact that it doesn't risk as much as the direct approach; recommending against it is the fact that control stays in the hands of the third party and the participants are deprived of the chance to work things out themselves.

A counselor performs the same role as a go-between except that this person's work is restricted to talking with one or the other party to the problem but not both. The third party helps the client gain insight into the problem and the part that each person is playing in it, and the insight helps contain the emotion kicked up by the problem. In this counseling capacity, the third party is a safety valve that allows an individual to let off steam. The third party also provides a safety net to catch someone who is fresh from an aversive interpersonal experience. One executive talked about how a third party played this role for people victimized by an abusive executive in his company.

A couch jockey is someone who catches the guys coming off the wall. Some people will leave because they can't stand being knocked off the wall. Other people can still survive as long as there's someone to catch them and say: 'It wasn't personal. You gotta understand Sam does that with everybody.' If Sam is that valuable, you keep him. But you get someone to hold a mattress under most people.

The couch jockey's role is vital because the judgment is that the offending executive is too powerful or unreasonable to confront.

Another more or less successful strategy for handling troubled relationships is for one party to circumvent the other. A general manager in charge of a business unit told us, for example, that "I don't work with the head of the legal department because I don't trust the guy. I prefer to use the attorney who specializes in my business."

The extreme solution is to end the relationship completely. Every day people lose their jobs or are transferred to different jobs because other people can't work with them. A

top manager recalled the time, for example, when he blew the whistle on his boss, the plant manager, because his boss had made a deal with a customer to label irregular goods as first quality. Having failed to reach an understanding together, the young manager went over his boss's head and succeeded in stopping the questionable practice and also in losing his job.

Other things being equal, people in organizations follow the path of least resistance. If a relationship doesn't work for them, they will first try to avoid or end it. Ending or avoiding a relationship has the advantage of saving energy but the disadvantage of giving up on a relationship that might have been salvaged. If, because the relationship is indispensable, this route is closed, they may choose to cope with the help of sympathetic non-participants--an option that may relieve some of the tension but leave the problem unchanged. A far better solution, which may be coupled with the preceding one, is to reinvest directly in the relationship by finding ways to work, talk, play together successfully. Unfortunately, the relationship problem may be so severe that the solution isn't practicable; the two parties cannot be together without experiencing failure and bad feeling. It is under these circumstances that confrontation is recommended.

Despite the bad name that openness technologies earned for themselves in the past two decades or so, interpersonal problems can be resolved effectively by talking them out. This approach is nothing more exotic than having the parties to a problem sit down together and (a) recognize their common problem and (b) figure out what to do about it. Implicit in the approach is a willingness to take one's share of the responsibility for the problem, an interest in solving the problem to mutual benefit, and the stability to cope with the emotions aroused by the encounter.

Of all the methods of dealing with a relationship problem, the confronting entails the most direct contact around the problem. And because the problems for which this method is best suited are the most serious, it is precisely in these instances that the urge to avoid contact is the greatest. Sometimes the fault is seen as residing with oneself and the impulse is to hide. People who feel themselves to be immoral, to have sinned, tend to isolate themselves (Mowrer, 1964). Sometimes the fault is seen as residing with the other party, and then that party's standing drops as does one's interest in being with that party. Sometimes the feeling is mutual, and the conflict polarizes the relationship (Deutsch, 1973). In each party's eyes, the other's short suits are accentuated and their long suits obscured, and the negative feelings that come with negative

judgments drive the individuals apart. Each is left asking: Why would I want to associate with a person like that? Because the parties avoid each other, not only is it less likely that the problem will be resolved; it is more likely that the problem will get worse (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

Thus, in addition to whatever ailed the relationship in the first place, complications then set in. So the challenge of using confrontation is not only to overcome the strong urge to avoid contact but also to cope with the new problems that breed off the unresolved state of the original problem. These derivative problems further weigh the relationship down and sink it deeper into the mire (Kahn et al., 1964). If the original problem was primarily organizational (for example, role conflict), then the parties as a result come to dislike each other personally. Or if the problem starts off as a clash of personalities, then organizational problems crop up next (Walton, 1969).

Derivative problems develop for a number of reasons. If the parties spend less time together--and, when they are together, give each other less--then the relationship is left with nothing to sustain it. If they don't talk about the problem, just feel it intensely, each one puts his or her own construction on it. Each one almost inevitably makes sense of it by attributing motives to the other one. Guessing another person's motives is a difficult game at best, and the hit rate is much lower when people are not getting along. As one executive observed: "When people are thrown into adverse situations, Person A then forms certain assumptions as to Person B's motives. He never bothers to check them and as a result you end up with a communication breakdown; a chasm widens."

In addition to reduced communication, less support, and more untested assumptions about the other's motives, another factor feeds into the pattern--a distinct feeling of powerlessness. Nothing is done about the original problem because people feel powerless to do anything to correct it. Not only does this paralysis prevent action on the original problem, it aggravates the situation by making people feel trapped. Perhaps this is the most common and disabling derivative problem. Because an individual feels helpless to resolve a problem, frustration floods the relationship and creates a condition at least as debilitating as did the original problem.

The Value of Confronting

If a problem is confronted effectively, then two kinds of good can come of it. One, the air can be cleared by together recognizing the problem and parcelling out responsibility for it. Two, the problem that disturbed the relationship in the first place can be resolved.

Clearing the Air

It is no picnic to be part of a troubled relationship and do nothing about it but squirrel the emotion away and make assumptions, usually upsetting ones, about the other party's motivations and feelings. For the parties to meet both to name the problem and to test their assumptions can be a source of great relief. The experience of an assistant brand manager, in conflict with his boss, is instructive. The boss patronized this individual one too many times, and:

From then on . . . I resisted every suggestion he made. I didn't want to be around him. . . . I realize now that I began to behave like the child I felt I was being treated as--arbitrarily refusing to participate in projects or participating in a grudging way.

Because the assistant manager felt as if his hands were tied, the problem blew up all out of proportion. Finally, at the urging of a friend, he approached his boss and arranged a meeting to discuss the problem. The assistant manager describes here the aftereffects of the meeting--a sense of progress mingled with feelings of guilt and regret.

In going to John to request the meeting, all I could feel was that we were on opposite sides of a battle line. I felt uncomfortable in just about every way except that I did feel a confrontation was better than continuing the old way.

The meeting occurred. The hardest thing to do was talk about his overmanaging, and John seemed to find it very hard to accept and to answer. For the first time in the whole situation I felt remorse for hurting him because he did seem visibly hurt. In thinking about our 'confrontation' I had not prepared myself for that possibility.

When it was over, I understood the expression 'a wrenching experience.' That's how I felt. No longer angry but wrenched by a lot of conflicting

emotions. Relieved of the anger. Sad for hurting John. Guilt for having done it.

In the days since I am no longer angry. I feel concern for John and a desire to mend the relationship completely. I'm pleased to see him when I do but still somewhat cautious. . . . But I feel much more comfortable.

Beyond vividly demonstrating the emotional intensity of an encounter like this, the episode showed how expressing the anger--responsibly and under control--released the person from the grip of the anger. Having empowered himself to act and having had reasonable success in talking about the problem drained the assistant of much of the feeling tied up around the problem. With built-up negative feeling gone, the positive feelings he once had about the manager could reemerge. All human relationships are ambivalent; they touch off a mixture of positive and negative feelings. If the negative feelings are denied expression, then the positive can also become blocked. Then it takes giving vent to the negative to free the positive (Slater, 1966). To right the emotional balance benefits not only the person carrying the emotional load but also the other person. Although momentarily hurt, the supervisor regained the appreciation and cooperation of the subordinate.

Even if the original problem isn't resolved, it often helps simply to get the problem out into the open. Why should this do any good? We have already mentioned the relief that comes from performing a ritual act of aggression. Relief also comes from having the aggressor acknowledge what he or she is doing and take responsibility for the consequences. "Yes, it hurts to say this, but I recognize that I do a miserable job of running a meeting and I can see that it drives the whole lot of you up the wall." Words like these are music to the ears of an aggrieved person. In fact, when the person being confronted denies the problem or seems to shirk responsibility for the problem, the confronter tends to become frustrated. This was what happened early in the conversation between the assistant manager just discussed and his boss: "At first I was surprised at how belligerent I was acting. His reactions to my complaint seemed very glib and I became even angrier." The two of them managed to get over this hump, however. The boss was able to acknowledge the problem and then the tension and anger went out of the relationship.

An important part of air clearing is coming to see the problem the same way. A female manager, for example, sensed that a male subordinate was being affected by having to

report to a woman. When she asked him, he admitted it. With the problem out in the open, the gender difference ceased to make as much of a difference. This is a problem still at an early stage; it is much harder after it has reached an advanced stage, when the original problem has given rise to a series of derivative problems. They can come to a common view of what happened and especially of who was responsible for what happened only if they stop holding the other primarily responsible.

Resolving the Problem

Sometimes air clearing is all that is needed; other times it is not enough. The successful confrontation strips away the layers of conflict and emotion created by the derivative problems and lays bare the original problem, which is not instantly resolved by simply acknowledging it and which, therefore, requires attention in its own right.

Frequently the original problem is someone's sub-par job performance, which in turn sets off interpersonal ramifications. Interpersonal problems often revolve around personal problems. Something about somebody's personality or performance creates a problem in another person by virtue not only of what the first person is or does but also by virtue of what the second person brings to the relationship. The second person's difficulty in dealing with what he or she finds problematic in the first person, and the first person's response to that attempt to cope, is what gives rise to the relationship problem. Such a situation occurred in the top management team of a city manpower agency which was bogged down by internal problems, one of which hinged on the agency head's administrative laxity. Although well liked as a person and appreciated for his people skills, he frustrated his staff by tolerating inadequate work and by not making sure that work got done or done on time. The interpersonal result was that the staff felt he let them and the agency down by not exercising administrative discipline, and he felt the staff let him down by not being conscientious.

The director came to understand his part in the problem by discussing with his team how he contributed to the laundry list of problems contained in a diagnostic report on the management team. Instead of sloughing off responsibility, he at first made the opposite mistake of taking too much. "Isn't it true," he said to the consultants at breakfast the day after the diagnostic report had been presented, "that I am primarily responsible for all these problems?" After understanding and accepting his rightful share of the problem, he

set up a personal development project. At a stock-taking meeting several months later, the team unanimously agreed that he had improved. Among the comments made were:

Before he just assumed that the task was going to be completed, but now he holds me really accountable. . . . He's less concerned with taking care of people and more attuned to organizational issues. . . . He's less tolerant of substandard performance. Dates are creeping into assignments, and then if I miss the date, his tickler file is well oiled. So there's some machinery. (Kaplan, Lombardo, & Mazique, 1983, p. 36)

In this case, then, both corrective steps were taken. First, the parties to the problem jointly defined it; this by itself was an accomplishment that boosted morale, but how long the improvement would have lasted is moot. The director took the next step by actually making up the deficits in his performance. With the original problem solved, the director's relationship with his team was completely restored.

As mentioned before, once people in a troubled relationship broach the issue and clear away the emotional debris and the second-order problems, the root problem often remains. This may reside in the relationship or in the performance or make-up of one or the other party. To achieve the best result, the underlying problem needs to be dealt with. If that does not happen, a relapse may occur--but not necessarily. The relationship may settle into a new equilibrium, not optimal perhaps but one in which the new understanding at least prevents the derivative problems from recurring.

Whether optimal, suboptimal, lasting or temporary, these are positive outcomes. Outcomes can also be negative.

Negative Outcomes

If the process by which a problem is confronted goes awry, then the chances are that the outcome will be negative to one degree or another. But even when the process is healthy and robust, the results can turn out badly. If through an excellent airing of concerns people's hopes are raised, then morale will be worse than ever if nothing is done. It is also quite possible that a good process can result in a solution that causes some group or individual to lose out. If a group brings its problems to light and it turns out that one of the most serious is the performance of

a key individual, then that individual will lose favor--if not a job.

A story with such an unhappy ending happened in an organization run by a man whose expertise was not in that field. A consultant found the organization in a state of disarray. The agency was disorganized, the staff demoralized, and at the bottom of it was the director's ineptitude as a manager. The consultant helped the staff to talk about the problems, and their dissatisfaction with the director came to light. When talking to the director himself did no good, the staff went to the board of directors which shortly thereafter dismissed the man. The staff was elated, the board sobered, and the agency arguably much better off. But there is no getting around the fact that the improvement in the agency's functioning was obtained at the individual's expense.

Confrontation of this type belongs to the humanistic tradition. It is done in the name of openness and trust and cooperation. It is undertaken in the hope of achieving a "win-win" outcome--one from which all parties benefit. Although this may undoubtedly be the hope and the spirit, it is not always the result. In addition to doing everything within their power to prevent ill-effects, purveyors of openness must admit to themselves and inform others of the potential for negative outcomes. People deciding whether to use this approach should know that it is a double-edged sword (Warwick, 1978).

If confrontation is to achieve the success it is capable of in improving troubled work relationships, the parties involved must know how to use this powerful two-edged technique with skill and subtlety. How can we avoid hurting ourselves and others? How can we maximize our chances for success?

The Process of Confronting

Confrontation is uniquely suited to an interpersonal ailment that has reached an advanced stage. This technique is employed in two steps--getting people to talk and making sure it happens to good effect.

Deciding to Confront

When people agree to talk constructively about their differences, they have taken a big step toward recovery. (In

one study, the decision to seek therapy helped people as much as undergoing therapy; the people waiting to begin treatment improved as much as those who actually received it (Barron & Leary, 1955).) They have acted to break out of the cycle that has immobilized them. They have committed to communicate instead of avoiding each other, to cooperate instead of opposing each other, to find out what is on the other person's mind instead of imagining, to empower themselves instead of rendering themselves powerless in the face of the problem. For the participants to accomplish this switch requires that they recognize the need to talk, that someone sets up the conversation, that suitable arrangements are made for it, and that certain barriers to using the cure are overcome.

Obviously, no attempt will be made to correct a problem that no one recognizes. It is entirely possible that the people with the problem have no awareness of it; for them the relationship is satisfactory. It is also quite possible for one party to see a problem while the other does not. In the former case, it takes an outsider to spur recognition of a problem; in the latter case, it takes the person who sees a problem to bring it to the attention of the other.

What is required beyond recognizing a problem is the felt need to confront it. Both parties must feel the need to work through their differences. If they need the relationship or feel the need to remedy the problem unequally, the situation will not be ripe for confronting. Again, someone else can play a role in awakening a stronger need by acting as an intermediary or in a counseling role. In this way one of the alternatives to the talking cure can also be used in conjunction with it. In fact, professional consultants routinely interview the parties to a conflict before bringing them together not only to release some of the pent-up tension but also to begin developing a common view of the situation.

It is worth noting that the reverse case sometimes occurs, where the need to talk about the relationship is present but a problematic state is not. In fact, it was one of the excesses of the openness movement to indiscriminately put work groups through relationship-building activities. It also happens that people become enamored with openness and use it whether the work requires it or not. At best, they reinforce an already good relationship. At worst, they damage the relationship (if the exercise is mismanaged or in some way goes awry) and such exercises are sometimes as delicate as an organ transplant operation.

Just as there must be a certain symmetry in the parties' willingness to talk about a problem, there must be a synchrony. The parties must be willing at the same time. If

two people are at odds, it is no small task to synchronize anything. Frequently they have fallen into a pattern in which they take turns rejecting each other. Thus, when one suggests that they talk about it, the other, still smarting from the last slight or finding the time and place unsuitable, may turn down the overture, leaving the first person feeling defeated. If the second person later tries to arrange something, the first person--who by now has given up on the relationship--may decline, setting off another wave of feeling in the second person (Walton, 1968). Still, a party to a problem can transcend this pattern of mutual rejection by appealing sincerely to the other for a truce during which they would attempt to resolve their differences. Crucial to a competent appeal is that no blame be assigned, that the overture itself be an example of the cooperative mode that is to be adopted. Such an initiative will work too if, as is usually the case, a healthy element remains in the relationship along with the diseased part.

Another aspect of synchronizing is finding a mutually agreeable time to have the conversation. When someone gets up the courage to confront another person, the way to do it is not to walk up to that person and abruptly begin. On the contrary, it is important that both parties have a choice as to when to meet. To give the person approached a choice both as to whether and when to participate is again to foster the symmetry necessary to constructive confrontation. For the same reasons, even the decision as to where to meet should be taken by both parties so that they share in the control and settle on a place comfortable for both.

If the process by which the conversation is arranged is to be symmetrical, a relative parity in the relationship is required (Kaplan, 1978). Although they do not necessarily have to be at the same organizational level, the individuals should feel more or less on a par. If this is not the case, then a neutral third party can help to equalize the relationship by empowering the lower-power person and opening the higher-power person to the other's influence, thereby building in the requisite symmetry (Deutsch, 1973). A third party of this type is usually a professional, either an employee of the organization or an external consultant. The third party consultant can play an important part in helping the disputants take all the steps necessary to set up a talk.

In fact, the very availability of professionals assumes an enabling condition, presupposes an organizational norm that supports constructive dialogue about relationship problems. To the extent that the organization has parted ways with the societal tradition of discouraging open discussion of relationship problems, then any members who

experience a problem will find it much easier to set up a conversation. Such an event will be a known and acceptable practice, if one that nevertheless excites mixed feelings. The professionals will be both a resource and an institutionalized expression of the practice of confronting troubled personal relationships.

When constructive confrontation becomes established practice in an organization, the barriers to using it are considerably lowered. In organizations where it is unfamiliar, people are prone to catastrophic fantasies about such an encounter. Their overactive imaginations on this score are matched by an inability to imagine the possible benefits. When other people they know have tried the approach and emerged unscathed and even enhanced, anxiety is allayed and interest is stirred. The availability of a professional known to be competent at mediating interpersonal problems has a similar effect.

Actually Confronting

When the parties to a problem sit down to talk, two ingredients are essential to success--the ability to talk about the issues and emotions openly yet under control ("bounded openness") and a readiness to take in and be influenced by what the other party says ("openness to influence"). In the following case study, both of these elements of a successful confrontation operated. The following transcript is from a discussion of the role of women on the board of directors of a new social agency. We cut into the exchange after one of the male board members identifies the three or four members of the core group, the inner circle, all of whom are male. Let's listen in on the conversation and then talk about the role of bounded openness and openness to influence in the success of this encounter.

Consultant: When you identified folks, the core group you identified was all men. Is that an issue here?

First Woman: I think it is. It's something I've felt for a long time. Maybe it is a feeling that the women on the board aren't capable of making good decisions.

First Man: Those were the people I identified. Others may identify other people. But I think Jill's posed a very important observation.

Second Man: I really thought that Sally and Barbara made positive contributions in many of the meetings I

have attended. The input you made was decisive. It gave direction to the decisions we made.

Third Man: (Echoes second man's remarks, mentions two other women who influence him.)

Consultant: Steve and Rick, your appreciation is important, but I think it's also important to hear how the women themselves feel about their participation.

Second Woman: I feel the same way as Jill. I'm not sure what my role is, quite frankly. I feel there are times when I make a statement and then an hour later someone else makes the same suggestion and the response is "That's a great idea." And I'm sitting there going "Didn't I say that before?" It's a frustrating feeling to voice something I felt was a good idea and it's not accepted, but when someone else says it, it's been accepted. I feel like a voiceless member.

First Woman: I have wondered . . . just how much credit for knowing things I have been given. I wonder too if some of the men on the board have had a problem relating to me because I do not sit back and demurely and quietly accept things. I have felt frustration as a woman, and I wonder. I have felt discounted, very discounted.

Second Man: It's surprising to me to hear this. I never expected to see a black-white, male-female group like this sit around and give so much mutual respect, mutual regard, to everyone's opinion.

Third Woman: Regard was given to the opinion, to the voice. But when key decisions were made it was like the voice had never been heard.

Fourth Man: I have a different perception. I think your opinions have carried a great deal of weight. I'm shocked that you don't have the same perception.

Fourth Woman: I think you're right up to a point, but I also think that one problem with the women on the board is that they are quiet people. What the women say is very, very good but they don't speak up. . . . Now that has something to do with it. It has something to do with the force you exert.

Fifth Woman: I have gone through what you're discussing right now (in other organizations) where because I am "woman" I have really been put down. . . . I don't

think you men are doing it intentionally. It's just that women allow . . . women are quiet. I think women expect less of themselves.

Third Man: One of the things I'm aware of, both as a male and uniquely myself, is filling up airspace. It's not just a matter of women being encouraged to say something or assert themselves, but some of us who are ready to run in with an opinion on everything just need to bite our tongues and shut up.

Second Woman: A couple of you men were saying "Well, I admire the contributions of X and Y and Z women and think you've been heavily involved." But X and Y and Z are saying "I feel underutilized." I think it's a case where a small group takes the initiative because other people aren't doing anything, and the people who aren't doing anything don't do anything because they don't feel included, and it feeds on itself.

This was an interesting case in which the men, who made up an in-group, tried to talk the women out of their sense of being uninfluential in the group. The males were one-up and resisted the view that their advantage had created a problem for the women. But the men on the board adopted the subtle strategy of invalidating the women's grievances by giving the women compliments (e.g., "your opinions have carried a great deal of weight"). The men did not shut the women down; one man called the first woman's statement of the issue "a very important observation." So, after the ensuing short chorus of male voices denying the problem, the women felt comfortable speaking out about their lack of influence in the group. They did so with candor but without rancor (e.g., "I feel like a voiceless member"). This is bounded openness, one of the keys to a successful confrontation. In the end the men, through the person of the first man (the incoming chairman), accepted the women's point of view ("some of us (men) . . . just need to bite our tongues and shut up"). This willingness to be influenced is another key ingredient, which amounts to a willingness to take responsibility for one's piece of the problem. The women, in fact, were the first to shoulder responsibility for the problem (e.g., "the women . . . don't speak up"), and may well have made it easier for the men to do so. This combination of bounded openness and openness to influence go hand in hand to make an exchange like this successful. The success of this exchange was evident in the sophisticated understanding achieved at conversation's end, an understanding that unravelled causal threads unjudgmentally ("it's a case where a small group takes the initiative because other people aren't doing

anything, and (then those) people don't do anything because they don't feel included, and it feeds on itself").

Another element of this conversation's success was the role of the third party. Albeit unobtrusively, the consultant opened the issue in the first place by pointing out that the individuals identified in the core group were all men. He also helped to stem the tide of male appreciation by opening the door for the women to speak. Although there is no way to know, his presence may also have helped keep the conversation constructive and fair.

This, in general, is the role of a third-party consultant, if one is used: To encourage a controlled openness on all sides and a corresponding receptiveness on all sides to what is said. To achieve this end, the consultant acts as a gatekeeper and referee, encouraging some people to speak and others to listen; influencing the choice of topic and keeping the group on the topic until closure is reached; helping the participants to understand the dynamics of their problem and to find a way to escape.

Just because people sit down to talk through a relationship problem does not mean that they will succeed. The more baroquely layered the problem has become and the more ingrown the emotions, the greater the danger that the effort will go for naught. When antagonists get together to discuss their common problem, they may merely recreate it. Even when a truce is declared, estranged parties can have trouble laying aside their customary way of being together. It is not easy to cordon off the problem area and climb to a plane from which the scene can be viewed with some detachment.

In attempting to achieve a successful process, there are four principal ways to miss the mark--with too little openness, too much openness, too little receptiveness, and too much receptiveness. As often as not, a power differential is responsible for throwing off the process. When potential confronters sit down face-to-face with opposite numbers of greater power, the expected openness may not materialize. This happened in a meeting to discuss the results of a diagnosis of a community health-care agency. The nurses were the dominant coalition in the agency and inspired a certain amount of fear in some of the other agency professionals. But when the subject of fear came up in the meeting, no one acknowledged it as an issue; in fact, the nurses actively denied it. The lower-power parties did not open up because the climate was not conducive, and the climate was not conducive because the nurses never fully bought into the diagnostic process in the first place.

Too much openness becomes a problem when people state their views too vehemently or harshly or bring up too many issues at once, in both cases overwhelming the other party. Openness goes beyond confrontation and becomes attack. This is one catastrophic expectation that people have about confrontation and, although exaggerated, it does happen. Properly set up, a session should not degenerate into attack, especially in the presence of a third party who acts as social restraint. One of the biggest causes of excessive openness is a perceived lack of responsiveness in the other party.

If confrontation cannot get off to a good start unless one party brings up a problem in an appropriately open way, then it cannot end satisfactorily unless the other party shows itself to be appropriately responsive to the concern. When the party being confronted has the upper hand in the relationship, the likelihood is greater that that party will deny the problem or disclaim responsibility for it. In the foregoing example, the nurses dismissed out of hand the possibility that an element of fear existed in the agency. But even the lower-power party can turn away a constructive attempt to confront. When a young professional's supervisor challenged his lackluster performance, the professional expressed his displeasure with being challenged by frowning a lot, coming to meetings late, whistling quietly during meetings, and wearing dark sunglasses indoors. When the supervisor then called him on these subversive tactics, the subordinate indignantly disputed the perception. Firm in her sense of the situation, the supervisor neither backed down nor resorted to attack and was able at a later date to persuade the subordinate to own up to being angry and distressed with her.

Finally, although it seems hardest for people to accept responsibility for problems, some people take excessive responsibility. To correct for the tendency to over-internalize, it is incumbent on the other party to turn down the overly generous offer. Failing that, a third party can help to apportion responsibility realistically.

When a confrontation overshoots the mark, it often happens in two or three different ways at once. If a high-power party sloughs off responsibility, then the low-power party loses its nerve. If a deaf ear is turned to confronters, then they turn up the volume and exceed the bounds of constructive openness. A successful process, then, strikes a delicate balance between appropriate openness and appropriate receptiveness, supported by a setting structured to achieve a mutuality of interest in participating and a balance of power among participants.

Conclusion

To confront a relationship problem is an act at once arrestingly simple and fraught with drama. Like going to the dentist, the anticipation is so often worse than the actual visit. This was the experience of a newly reinstated head of systems engineering, a man who five years earlier had set up the corporate function and who in his absence became something of a legendary figure. Upon taking his old position, he experienced something no one anticipated. In effect, he couldn't fill his own shoes. On reflection, it was only natural: The function had come a long way in five years, and having been away from the field he had fallen behind. He agonized, the more so because his sense of himself conflicted so sharply with his public image. It was a classic bind: He couldn't bring himself to reveal his awful secret, but unless he let them in on it he couldn't get the help he needed. Finally, he called a meeting with his subordinates and told them of his plight. His people had no trouble understanding or being responsive. In a matter of a few minutes he had let himself out of the box, and he was free to spend his energies equipping himself for his new job. How simple it was for him to tell his subordinates that he didn't feel he was doing the job he felt he should do, that he was letting them down--and thereby enlist their help. And yet how difficult it was for him to admit the problem to them and to expose himself to the risk of rejection. This is the drama that so often surrounds the seemingly simple act of bringing up an interpersonal problem. Should I bring it up? What should I say? Can I control my feelings? How will the other person react? Will he (or she) deny the problem, blame me for it, get angry, be hurt, never talk to me again? The drama resides in the emotion-laden unpredictability of it all.

To face a relationship problem and to face it explicitly with the other people involved is one of the best ways to repair a relationship. This is a form of openness domesticated for work organizations. Not magical, it works by having the parties to a relationship problem talk matter-of-factly about what bothers them, by having them work together to solve their mutual problem. Instead of imputing motives, they test their often ill-founded assumptions about each other's behavior. Although it is sometimes devilishly difficult to use and is no cure-all, the confrontation delivers maximum gain against minimal risk when such an encounter is adeptly arranged and skillfully conducted. The key is the discriminating application of a powerful, if somewhat unconventional, technique.

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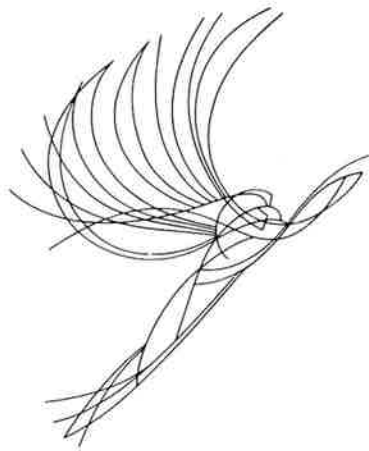
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