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Empathy and Relationships

EMPATHY

Empathy Is the Key to Conflict Resolution or Management

Empathy has been found to undermine biased conflict perceptions.

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Conflict is a fact of life and occurs for a variety of reasons, such as differing perspectives, priorities or solutions to a problem. Many believe that "**misunderstanding is the cause of 90% of all conflict.**" Irrespective of the actual percentage, a great deal of conflict does stem from misunderstandings.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "**Misunderstanding is a failure to understand**, or an argument resulting from the failure of two people or two sides to understand each other."

Meanwhile, unless the level of conflict (hurt feelings) from a misunderstanding is such that it can be swept under the proverbial rug, it tends to fester if left unaddressed. Tragically, the discomfort associated with conflict is such that it is often left to fester.

Interestingly enough, many people love to quote, reference or base their arguments on scripture, but how often do people consider the following Biblical proverb?: "**The beginning of**

wisdom is this: Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding."

To the extent that a conflict stems from a misunderstanding, as many do, it should be rectifiable through gleaning understanding. When people don't make such an effort, is it because the discomfort involved makes doing so unaffordable?

Regardless, let's assume that a misunderstanding didn't lead to the conflict, or that the conflict is somehow unresolvable. Does that mean that a relationship of any type is somehow doomed?

According to John Gottman, a world-renowned relationship expert, not all conflicts can be resolved. "**Unresolvable 'perpetual' problems exist** even in the healthiest of relationships due to 'lasting personality differences between partners.'" Gottman has found that "**only 31% of couples' major areas of continuing disagreement** were about resolvable issues.... Sixty-nine percent of the time, couples conflicted about perpetual issues in the relationship that never get resolved. What mattered was not solving these problems but the affect around which they were discussed. The goal seemed to be to establish a dialogue with the perpetual problem [**even differences in deeply held values**] that communicated acceptance of the partner, humor, affection, even amusement, and active coping with the unresolvable problem rather than the condition of 'gridlock.'"

It would be a mistake to believe that this reality is somehow limited to marriages and relationships of a romantic nature, especially considering that Gottman's research on couples relationships has been successfully applied to "**relationships in the world of work.**"

Returning to Gottman's findings, it bears mentioning that words have meaning and it has long been recognized that **the meaning**

of words influences human behavior. Notice the importance of dialogue in Gottman's findings and the fact that he did not use the term "discussion" or "debate."

"In his groundbreaking book, The Fifth Discipline, Peter Senge makes a powerful distinction between dialogue and discussion: In a discussion, opposing views are presented and defended and the team searches for the best view to help make a team decision. In a discussion, people want their own views to be accepted by the group. The emphasis is on winning rather than on learning.

In dialogue, people freely and creatively explore issues, listen deeply to each other and suspend their own views in search of the truth. People in dialogue have access to a larger pool of knowledge than any one person enjoys. The primary purpose is to enlarge ideas, not to diminish them. It's not about winning acceptance of a viewpoint, but exploring every option and agreeing to do what is right.

Dialogue helps teams to open closed subjects, remove blocks to communication and heal rifts."

Kenneth Cloke makes a distinction between dialogues and debates as follows:

"We can also distinguish dialogues from debates, which are simply two successive monologues pretending to be a dialogue. Debate defines issues and solutions adversarially, in ways that make them automatically unacceptable to the other side. Dialogue, on the other hand, as defined by Physicist David Bohm, is 'a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us.'

Dialogue defines issues and solutions collaboratively and searches for ways of making them acceptable to all parties. Debate is a circular process, in which opponents argue and disagree with each other and are more interested in demonstrating that they

are right than they are in discovering the truth. In dialogue, truths emerge not from one side winning and the other losing, but from both sides explaining their different perspectives, identifying the meaning of their disagreements and searching for solutions that satisfy their underlying interests....

Another way of thinking of dialogue is to regard it as a learning process in which participants with diverse ideas, backgrounds and experiences try to understand not only what the other thinks that is different, but more importantly why they think that way, and what events and experiences led them to do so. Part of the power of dialogue is its encouragement of personal stories, life experiences, and the lessons people draw from them. These induce empathy in the listener and invite deeper levels of listening."

A great deal has been written about the fact that when spouses feel compelled to win their arguments with each other, they end up losing their relationship. It would behoove us to keep this in mind because the need to "win" arguments is not conducive to happy marriages, positive family dynamics, or interpersonal relationships of any type.

Notice that Gottman also used the term "acceptance", rather than "tolerance."

J. Krishnamurti explained tolerance as follows:

"You have your beliefs, and another has his; you hold to your particular form of religion and another to his; you are a Christian, another is a Mahomedan, and yet another a Hindu. You have these religious dissensions and distinctions, but yet you talk of brotherly love, tolerance and unity - not that there must be uniformity of thought and ideas. The tolerance of which you

speaking is merely a clever invention of the mind; this tolerance merely indicates the desire to cling to your own idiosyncrasies, your own limited ideas and prejudices, and allow another to pursue his own. In this tolerance there is no intelligent diversity, but only a kind of superior indifference. There is utter falsity in this tolerance. You say, "You continue in your own way, and I shall continue in mine; but let us be tolerant, brotherly." When there is true brotherliness, friendliness, when there is love in your heart, then you will not talk of tolerance. Only when you feel superior in your certainty, in your position, in your knowledge, only then do you talk of tolerance. You are tolerant only when there is distinction. With the cessation of distinction, there will be no talk of tolerance. Then you will not talk of brotherhood, for then in your hearts you are brothers."

Meanwhile, as Thomas B. Watson stated in his article titled **Tolerance Is Not Enough** that was published by 'The Harvard Crimson', "**Tolerating Blacks is still racism**. Tolerating Jews is still anti-Semitism. And Tolerating gays, lesbians and bisexuals is still Homophobia. Accepting us means respecting us, valuing us and loving us for who we are."

Gottman also refers to the "active coping with the unresolvable problem rather than the condition of 'gridlock.'"

Interestingly enough, the presence of empathy "**results in feelings of satisfaction**, relief and trust. Furthermore, it supports patients, resulting in new coping strategies. A lack of empathy causes feelings of frustration and disappointment."

Circling back around to misunderstandings, it's been found that "**egocentrism drives misunderstanding in conflict and negotiation**." Everyone interprets things through their own lenses, which filter information based upon our personal biases,

beliefs, assumptions and values. This is where egocentrism comes into play. **“Parties rely on their own interests and priorities** when estimating those of the other side, and ignore the other side’s true interests and priorities.”

Fortunately, however, **“a simple focusing manipulation [has been found to undermine] biased conflict perceptions** – when negotiators were instructed to focus on their partner (rather than themselves) they had more accurate estimates of the amount of conflict between their own and their partner’s interests. The debiasing effect of this other-focusing manipulation resonates with extant work on perspective-taking and role reversal, showing that negotiators who take another’s perspective and try to place themselves in other’s shoes fare better in reaching mutually beneficial solutions. It also resonates with considerable work on social motivation in negotiation, showing that negotiators who value their partner’s outcomes engage in more constructive negotiation and less readily become trapped in escalated, polarized conflict.”

Empathy is one of the most important skills to develop and practice. It allows us to understand the world as others see it, is a key component of compassion, and is incompatible with shame and judgment. **Absent empathy, critical thinking is impaired** because not all perspectives are considered, which precludes a deeper understanding of problems. It also happens to be an amazing form of **bias reduction** and **helps to keep your biases in check**.

About the Author

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