

THE ROAD TO CONFLICT MAY BE PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS (AND A LACK OF CURIOSITY)

You may have found yourself embroiled in conflict, despite your genuine desire to get along with the other person. You scratch your head and ask “what went wrong?” Assumptions are often the culprits: you have likely assumed either *what* the other person needed or *how* to fulfill that need.

The danger of assumptions became clear to me recently during an encounter with a car salesman. I entered the dealership to explore trading in my Honda Civic Hybrid for a Honda Fit. I was happy with the mileage and low emissions of the hybrid, but the location of the electric “booster” batteries prevented the back seat from folding down, making it difficult or impossible to transport large items. While fuel economy was still important, I was primarily motivated by the need for more hauling capacity.

The salesman, however, assumed that price was most important to me. He never asked why I wanted to trade in my current car or why the Fit interested me. Instead, he extolled the virtues of the Honda Accord and showed how the dealership’s various bonuses, discounts and trade-in allowance made this “an offer I couldn’t refuse”. I had no problem refusing the offer and left soured on what had been a positive relationship with the dealership. It may not surprise you to learn that Honda was having a major promotion of their Accords that month, no doubt complete with bonuses to their sales force. In structuring their promotion, Honda assumed that price and financing would be most important to potential customers. While the promotion undoubtedly appealed to many potential customers, it didn’t “Fit” my needs. (As a side note, I received a call from the same salesman two months later, commending the benefits and value of the Fit - coincidental with their Fit promotion that month. The salesman clearly had my interests at heart – providing, of course, that my interests coincided with the promotion of the month.)

You may inadvertently create conflict by assuming you know *what* someone else needs. A Boy Scout was once reprimanded for arriving late to a meeting. He explained he was doing his daily “good turn” as required by the Boy Scout Oath: specifically, he had helped a little old lady across the street. The Scout leader didn’t buy this: “You were 15 minutes late - it doesn’t take more than a minute to help someone across the street”. “It does when they don’t want to go”, the Scout replied sheepishly. “She fought me the whole way.” Before helping others, make sure they want your help and, more importantly, find out *what* help they want.

You can avoid the trap of assumptions by remaining curious and asking open-ended questions (the journalistic *what, when, where, why, who* and *how* questions). Here are some examples of questions that invite someone to talk about their needs:

What’s important to you about this, and why?

What would you need to move forward?

What is it you are frustrated about?

The information you receive from questions such as these will allow you to get to the heart of a matter before it erupts into full-blown conflict.

But even when you determine *what* someone else needs, you still must uncover *how* to meet that need. If you don't remain curious about the *how*, you may incorrectly assume you know what they mean by a word such as "support" or "fairness". People often attach different meanings to a common word.

Brady Wilson addresses this pitfall in his outstanding book, *Love at Work: Why Passion Drives Performance in the Feelings Economy* (which I just happened to be reading at the time of my encounter with the car salesman). Wilson draws on the power of emotional intelligence and feelings in the workplace to differentiate between "recognition" (for example) and "*felt* recognition". He cites the example of a company manager who attempted to recognize his staff by taking them to a Toronto Maple Leaf hockey game (insert "Leafs joke" here). The manager was confused by his staff's indifferent response and a bit indignant at their lack of appreciation. Privately, one of his employees explained why this gesture failed to have the intended impact: "We are all females and most of us are Asian. Hockey means nothing to us." Wilson suggests that dinner and the theatre may have had a much greater impact in showing recognition.

Wilson's insight about *felt* needs is instrumental in resolving conflict. Early in my career, I mediated personal injury cases. In virtually every opening statement, the lawyer for the injured party would state that they only wanted a "fair and reasonable" settlement for their client. The lawyer for the insurance company inevitably responded that his client wanted to pay what was "fair and reasonable". You can imagine what they spent the better part of the next four hours arguing about – what was "fair and reasonable".

This theme forms the basis of Gary Chapman's highly acclaimed book, *The Five Love Languages*. Chapman emphasizes the importance of demonstrating love in a way that resonates with another. The need for love is universal, yet as Chapman points out, people *feel* loved in different ways. Some people experience being loved through acts of service; others, when they receive thoughtful gifts; and still others when they spend quality time together. Conflict may arise, for example, when a husband expresses his love by giving his wife a gift. His wife, however, may yearn for quality time together. Not only does the wife not *feel* loved, the husband likely feels unappreciated because his positive intentions are met with indifference or disappointment. There are no villains in such conflicts – only a lack of communication.

There is a wonderful scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which Tevye asks his wife, Golde, "Do you love me?" She finds it a curious question, evidenced by her lyrical response:

*"For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house
Given you children, milked the cow.
After twenty-five years, why talk about love now."*

To Golde, whose love language appears to be acts of service, it seemed obvious she loved her husband. Tevye, however, needed to hear the words. While such differences make for compelling musical theatre, they also fuel conflict.

These misunderstandings often fuel workplace conflicts. Imagine a conflict between a manager (call her Gale) and staff member (Dean), in which they both complain they are not being supported by the other. They each want support and believe they are being supportive of the other - yet both feel unsupported and victimized. Gale sees herself as supporting Dean by “pitching in on the front lines and always being available to answer questions”. Dean, however, frames this behaviour as “micro-managing”. He feels supported when he is given the time and space to do his job and when Gale backs up his decisions. The more Gale “supports” Dean, the more frustrated and mistrusted he feels. As he withdraws, Gale’s need to “be in the loop” and to be accountable for her department remains unmet. Neither intends to be the “villain”, yet both feel not only unsupported, but also unfairly judged by the other.

Open questions can again help us bridge the communication gap and clarify what the other person means when they refer to a need, such as recognition or support. Here are some examples:

*What do you mean by **support**?*

*What would **recognition** look like for you?*

*How could we provide improved **communication**?*

You will take an important step to resolve a conflict when you uncover *what* the other person needs. Remember to take the equally important next step to discover *how* to fulfill that need so they will experience a *felt* need. By remaining curious and asking open-ended questions you will resolve many conflicts and prevent even more.

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