

Why I Oughta

(Conflict Resolution)

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All of us feel like smacking someone from time to time. Most of us like to put on a good face to those around us and pretend our humble and gentle spirit is strong enough to dismiss the conflict we find ourselves in. We are quick to say “that’s ok” or “no problem” ~~only to have arguments with the jerk all day long in our head as we ride around in traffic pretending to tell them how we REALLY feel as we scream at the rearview mirror~~ and go about our day. Managing conflict is essential to a happy life and conflict in some form is unavoidable. Knowing how to best handle it can be tricky.

Let’s start with why there is conflict in the first place. Often the beginning of conflict is when what I want and what you want don’t work well together. I once was approached by an angry man because I had taken “his” parking spot. I thought he was pulling out of the parking lot, not realizing he was pulling past the spot to back his ~~huge, jacked up insecure mobile~~ truck into the spot. He was taking his mother out for dinner and wanted to be as close as he could to the restaurant so she didn’t have to walk far ~~after falling the twenty feet from the passenger door to the ground~~ to the entrance. I was trying to get out of my car as soon as possible because the baby was crying in the back seat. Both of us could not get what we wanted. Things were touch-and-go there for a minute but everything worked out fine. [More on that at the end.]

Managing conflict requires information. The important information we need rests at the root of what both of us want or need. When others confront us we should identify what it is they really want. Sometimes discovering the real want/need is difficult because of the distraction of anger and frustration. Anger is the mask, it’s the powerful stance that protects the vulnerability below. Here is an example:

A mom has been home all day with the kids. They have been nothing short of little monsters since breakfast. The baby has gone all bipolar and can’t decide if she wants to get down or be

held. The third grader is rolling his eyes at every request. The middle child....whats hername, has been underfoot with literally 50million questions. She is tired, behind in her plans for the day, and feeling like something less than the perfect mother she aspires to be. Her husband comes bouncing in the front door and says "Hey Honey, What's for Dinner?" Her response is "I'LL GET TO IT WHEN I HAVE A MINUTE, I'D ASK YOU TO DO IT BUT WE BOTH KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT!"

This lady is angry, but that's not the problem. Her husband ~~stupidly~~ asked what was for dinner, but that's not the problem either. The problem is she feels ineffective, unloved, unsupported, disrespected, and possibly ashamed. She may not need to feel this way, but the reality is she does and that is what needs to be dealt with.

Our demeanor is usually what determines the path confrontation it will take. A **response** is something we consider, something we have already thought about. It is congruent with our values and helps us to move towards those values and not away from them. A **reaction** is our emotional instinct to either fight or avoid the conflict. By slowing down our reaction and turning it into a response we can direct conflict into a more productive conversation. If we respond to the underlying emotions, wants, or needs we are more likely to find agreement or a suitable compromise. How do we best communicate a response versus a reaction? Here are some tips:

- **Avoid sarcasm** ~~unless you use the strikethrough key because when you do that you can say anything and get away with it.~~ Sarcasm always undermines authority and results in our attempts to convey empathy feeling fake.
- **Pay attention to your emotions.** How are you feeling? Awareness of your emotions and where they come from are essential to avoiding unhelpful reactions. Finding compromise means revealing what's behind your anger as well.
- **Avoid getting all lawyered up.** The facts may be important, but they probably have less impact on the conflict than you think. Arguing about who said *what* in *what* way at exactly *what* time is a waste of energy. Focusing on the facts leads to an unending staircase of rabbit trails.
- **Say all the words.** Don't take verbal shortcuts to communicate how you feel. If you want or need something, say it. Don't cut corners to avoid feeling uncomfortable or vulnerable because in the long run you just repeat the cycle of not getting your needs met.

- **SLOW DOWN!** Conflict resolution takes time and attention. Wait until there is a good time to discuss a conflict. A time when you and the other person have calmed down. You can use this time to evaluate where your anger is coming from and which response is most in line with your values.
- **Give a Little (or a Lot).** There are times when an offense is of such significance that we feel we cannot give in at all. Most of the time that's baloney. Most of our conflicts can be managed by admitting some fault and finding a compromise. I know a lot of *RIGHT* people that are miserable because no one likes that guy.

These are just a few suggestions to handling conflict. Obviously these are not sufficient to handle every argument or confrontation, but the principle of focusing on the underlying emotions is central to any conflict resolution. Back to the guy in the parking lot...

I was a little miffed, I mean *come on man* are you really gonna strut over here and start blowing up at me? At first I didn't know what he was talking about. I had to look around and see his truck idling in the lane 50 feet behind me before I connected the dots. I listened as he began to insult me and assessed my options as my wife got the baby out of the back seat. She glanced at me with a wide eyed "you got this?" look. Emotionally (Pridefully) I wanted to whip his scrawny tail right there in front of the Outback Steakhouse. As he talked I picked up on why he may have been so angry. He was out with his mother, not his wife, girlfriend, or buddies. Maybe he is feeling lonely and incompetent. Maybe his mother is elderly and he is trying to protect her needs. Maybe he has made a big sacrifice to bring her out on a cold night and feels anxious about paying the bill. Maybe this guy has had the worst week of his life. It's also possible that he is just a jerk, but even that brings a little sympathy. I turned to my wife who now had the baby in her arms and I said "Honey put the baby back in the car. I accidentally took this man's spot."

It wasn't a big deal to park a few rows down. The baby had stopped crying and it seemed like he needed this spot for some reason. This guy was fraying at the edges. It was as if that spot was his last stand, a last ditch symbol of his competence and worthiness. I just didn't need it that bad, but he did. So I gave it to him.

My wife looked at me with a confused glance, careful not to make eye contact with him. He had calmed down now and shifted uneasily from left to right. He had his hands in his pockets. He halfway laughed out an embarrassed smile and said, "Hey look man I'm sorry, it's no big deal. It's just that I am out with my mom and we don't get to see each other much." I told him we would be happy to move but he was now insistent. "No, no, don't even think about it. Get the baby inside, it's cold. I'm sorry." My wife, now thoroughly confused looked at me for direction. I thanked him and told him to have a good night and to enjoy the time with his mother. Walking into the restaurant my wife kept looking at me like I had pulled a Jedi mind trick. She just shook her head as I smiled. We eventually sat down to eat and after taking our drink order the waiter presented us with a free appetizer. I made eye contact with the gentleman, now sitting with his mother across the room. He nodded and smiled.

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