Force-Field Analysis—Part 1

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As you begin this column, think about a specific decision that you face.

Perhaps a condition that is not now acceptable is causing some pain. Maybe you would like to take some action to move the situation to a more tolerable level.

Or maybe you are involved in a situation that is already quite good. You have a sense, however, that with some additional effort, you could improve the situation in a major way. (If you are a frequent reader of this column, you know that I advocate continually looking for ways that you might improve!)

Either situation involves "change." Many humans tend to resist change, especially changes that are imposed from the outside. The particular situation I've asked you to consider is probably a change that you welcome. But others may resist your efforts. And you'd like to minimize the opposition they might present. In fact, you probably would like them to enroll in and support your proposed actions.

"Force field analysis" is the technical term for identifying and evaluating the conflicting forces that naturally will support or resist the change you are considering. Kurt Lewin, a psychologist who made great contributions in group dynamics and organizational development, articulated the concept.

Don't be frightened by the fancy name. You've probably done this dozens of times and just didn't know there was a specific term to describe it.

Have you ever listed all the advantages and disadvantages of a proposed plan of action? Have you worked to identify all the "pros" and "cons" associated with an opportunity you face? Both are examples of conducting a force field analysis.

A friend was considering an invitation to accept a promotion to management. She wasn't sure she wanted the additional responsibility. She clearly has the skills, and her employer had recognized her competence and commitment. Her boss offered the opportunity when a vacancy arose. My friend struggled with how to make the decision, and I suggested she do a force-field analysis.

As I describe how to use this tool, why not consider that situation you face? Follow along with your actual analysis as I use my friend's situation as an example.

Take a piece of paper and consume the page by drawing a large capital "T" on it. You've now created two columns where you can list ideas. At the top of the left-hand column, put a description of what you consider the positive aspects of the situation. In my example, we'll label the left column as "Reasons to accept the promotion to management." At the top of the column on the right, put a contrary description. For my example, let's write "Reasons to remain in my current role."

Immediately your mind will start formulating thoughts associated with each column. Capture the ideas as quickly as they come. Sometimes thinking of an item in one column generates a "yes, but…" idea for the other column. If that occurs, put them both down in their appropriate columns.

Soon you'll run out of energy, but that's not the end of the identification process. If you can keep your lists alive for awhile, your brain will continue to suggest additional ideas. A friend or coach can help by supplying additional thoughts. If you are part of a team, this is an excellent activity for involving everyone. Put the list on a chartpad or other large board where all can see and add to the ideas.

This is a great start. Now you have a catalogue of all the driving and restraining forces that will affect the proposed change. Next week, I'll suggest some ways to use the information you've generated.