

Relationship before Confrontation

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"Your strengths are stronger and your weaknesses weaker than you realize. You need help. And you are also precisely the help someone else needs." Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller, in *The Power of Two*

Collaboration is a powerful phenomenon. Collaboration capitalizes on the strengths of both persons, making the weaknesses of each less relevant. Collaboration favorably alters the principles of basic arithmetic such that one plus one equals more than two.

Additionally, Marcus Buckingham, in his book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, writes, "Each person's greatest room for growth is in the area of his or her greatest strengths." He goes on to write, "The real tragedy of life is not that each of us doesn't have enough strengths, it's that we fail to use the ones we have."

Let me invite you to pause, only two paragraphs into this article, and take stock of your strengths. What are they? And what distracts you from routinely focusing on using those strengths? And what value do you gain, for you or the other person, by focusing on his or her limitations? As a leader, should you not be seeking to evoke the other person's strengths, making them more obvious to him or her as well as to you?

Collaboration requires relationships, and building relationships takes time. Unfortunately, some relationships don't have time to develop before some unexpected confrontation develops. Once confrontation occurs, the development of the relationship seems to go "on hold."

As a leader, you know that building relationships with other competent, caring individuals is extremely important. "Importance" is not the same as "urgency," however. Building relationships takes time, which is counter to the concept of urgency.

Because urgency doesn't drive building relationships, we humans sometimes overlook or delay the necessary steps required to share information about ourselves and learn about the interests, skills, motivations, and desires of our potential colleagues.

Therefore, when some urgent issue that requires confrontation with that other person arises, we may have a rather weak foundation from which to operate. Subconsciously, the "fight or flight" syndrome takes over, we tense up, our breathing and heart rate increase, and we prepare for an attack or a defense.

You may wonder why I'm writing about this issue this week. A friend contacted me after my most recent article saying, "I tried what you suggested, Dennis. I went directly to the person who could most effectively address my concern, and he refused to listen. It didn't work; he blew me off!"

My thought was, "How much time had you spent seeking to understand that person's perspective? How much previous energy had you put into building a relationship with that person, understanding what he wants to accomplish and why he considers his particular approach to be so appropriate?"

A new generation has grown up unfamiliar with Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989). He describes his fifth habit, "seek first to understand, then to be understood" as "the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations."

How many of us, when faced with a situation that leads us to confront, seriously seek to understand the person we are challenging? Is our desire to argue our perspective, or is it to resolve? If we genuinely seek to collaborate on a direction or plan of action, wouldn't it behoove us to seek to understand before we start pushing our own opinion and concept of right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable or not?

One of Frank Sinatra's most popular songs from the past is "I Did It My Way." Why do those lyrics have such appeal? I think the words (and the emotion of the melody) stir our craving for independence. When people pursue what they demand ("I want it now!"), they often don't even consider the potential for logical reasoning and possible interdependence.

Lamentably, we may be losing the willingness to forego immediate gratification. Think about what typically occurs in your organization. Is working to build healthy relationships valued in your culture? Or is the emphasis on obtaining results quickly, such that a culture of confrontation (command and control) has evolved?

Does reflecting on your organization's current "what is" generate concern? If so, what actions might you take to move you and the organization you influence in the direction of "what could be"?

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