

## Conflict that Brings You Closer By Marilyn Suttle



I share an office with my husband. When we moved in, I decided that the office was going to be functional. By functional, I mean a place for everything and everything in its place. My husband wants the office to be functional too, which to him means, there is a place for each pile and each pile is all over the place. Do you sense conflict?

I am not knocking my husband. Many successful people work just fine with the 'pile' system. Maybe you are one of them. One of the most brilliant, high-sought-after lawyers I know is a 'pile person.' Her office is so overrun with piles that she meets with her clients in a separate room. She calls her office 'organized chaos' and nobody dares move her piles, because she knows exactly where everything is when she needs it.

Understanding people's differences is different than living with those differences. I was having a hard time 'living with' my husband's definition of functional. Living with my style of operating in our office was difficult for him too. It ruffled his feathers to see papers whisked away and sorted. It made him nervous watching me pound organizing wall boards onto the walls. First, we tried to explain to each other why we were each right and the other was wrong. That made things worse. Then, we tried to ignore each other's style. That just created an undercurrent of hostility.

Over time, we made some agreements about room boundaries. My areas are mine, his are his. That kind of worked. Yet, I continued feeling irritated every time I walked in the room.

While I was getting handouts ready to run a team-building/trust-building workshop, it dawned on me that my husband and I were a team too. It was time for me to walk my talk. I drew from the classic conflict resolution principle: They won't understand you unless you first listen and understand them. Conflict can be resolved swiftly AFTER both sides understand each other's feelings and needs.

When you don't agree with the other person, it can be hard to listen for their feelings and needs. My husband said, 'The way the office looks doesn't bother me at all.' If I was listening through my point of view, I'd cut him off with, 'It matters to me.' Listening for his feelings and needs changed my focus. I said, 'So what I think you're saying is that it doesn't slow down your productivity or put you in a bad mood to see the office look the way it does. Is that right?' His eyes lit up with appreciation as he said, 'That's right.'

We spent awhile talking about his point of view in depth without one word of criticism from me. Part of me wanted to force him to do things my way, but I've learned that using guilt, bullying, moralizing and lecturing may work in the short run, but it has toxic side effects that breakdown relationships in teams, families, and especially office buddies who happen to be married.

I also learned from listening that my habit of talking to myself while I write unnerved him and distracted him from his work. I didn't feel defensive because he said it as an observation instead of an attack.

When he was complete, I said, 'Would you like to know what it's like for me?' He was all ears. Without skills I might go on a tirade, starting with, 'I am sick and tired of your disgusting messes . . .' That would have shut down communication. Without criticism or judgment, I said, 'When the office is clear of clutter, I feel energized. I concentrate better and I get more done. When I see overflowing trash cans and piles of papers surrounding me, I feel distracted and agitated . . .'

As a result, we decided to paint the office, upgrade our computer systems, and purchase several types of organizing bins so he could keep his piles the way he likes them, but contain them so they weren't on the floor or falling from the shelves. We were both satisfied with our agreement, but more so, we created a feeling of good-will because of the respectful way it was handled.

Did you know that conflict can bring people, teams, and families closer together? Relationships are strengthened whenever a disagreement is handled with

1. A desire to resolve it, and
2. Actions and words that honor the dignity, feelings and needs of those involved.

The conflict over our office brought us closer together.

Today I came across a quote by Samuel Johnson, 'Hope in every sphere of life is a privilege that attaches to action. No action, no hope.' I had hoped for a long time that my office would be an attractive and functional place to work, but it wasn't until action was taken B not force and not ignoring the situation B but action that focused on respect for both of us, that the hope could materialize.

What actions have you been putting off? What conflict are you ready to resolve by listening fully and talking in ways that respect instead of wound?

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