

Why can't we all just... TALK IT OVER?!



BY: LEE JAY BERMAN

RODNEY KING FAMOUSLY ASKED, "Why can't we all just get along?" There is a very simple answer to that question: Because we are all different. It is these differences that makes it difficult for us to just get along. Differences cause conflict.

As a professional mediator, I often think of conflict simply as unmet expectations. Most people think that another person or the world at large should treat us in a certain way. As soon as that doesn't happen, we are in conflict.

Conflict comes in many shapes, sizes and depths. Some conflicts are silly and easy to dismiss. Most have triggered an emotion in us. Once that happens, we can't "just get along" until we actually do something about it.

Societally, Americans resist talking about difficult issues. We try to bury them, but like the Garth Brooks song, we bury the hatchet, but leave the handle sticking out. We try to ignore them, but then people just walk around acting strange and teams under-perform. We try to discuss it, but our ego protects us from being vulnerable, so we end up telling the other person all of the things we think they did wrong. Given that all three of these approaches end up making things worse, it's no wonder we are awkward when it comes to conflict.

The other thing that makes us uncomfortable with conflict is that most of us have never been taught how to navigate it. In school, we learned algebra, history and social studies, but never were we taught how to resolve conflict or have difficult conversations.

With this much social angst around conflict and the perception of risk, danger or difficulty in having such a discussion, it is no wonder that we shy away from it.



What would be better? Learn to discuss it. Step into it bravely. Tell the other person how you are feeling, without telling them why you think it's their fault. Allow yourself to be a little vulnerable. Ask what you can do to make it better. Tell the other person what you would like for them to do so that you don't have the same reaction should it happen again. Don't rush to a quick solution until you have explored all of the possible options for resolution. Confirm any agreement you reach to ensure that you are both clear on what's going to happen. And congratulate yourselves for tackling the issue, rather than letting it go.

Most friendships, personal relationships and working relationships are measurably better after such a discussion than they ever were before. And while there is a risk to getting that reward, it's not unlike getting into a swimming pool – it might feel cold when you dip a toe into it, but once you are in, you are happy you got in. •

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