

Chapter 12: Log Jams

When you see individuals or groups dig in and resist all efforts to find compromise, does it not seem from the sidelines that they are like children behaving irresponsibly?

Why do we call impasse "childish"? Because we know that it is the work of stubborn people who do not know how to listen or compromise. Adults know better.

However, when *we* are personally engaged in the deadlock, we see it very differently. When people draw the line in the sand and simply will not budge, the problems are deeper than they may at first appear and often represent matters very differently than the topic at hand.

There is a reason we get this stuck.

What is really going on?

Impasse is always more than a disagreement over the issues. It is most often a result of a difference in principle or values.

If you can identify the values underlying the disagreement, you may also be able to move the conversation to a place where the values are in agreement.

What we must all remember is that any time we are involved in a stalemate; we have two problems to solve to move forward.

1. When you are completely stuck, you must acknowledge that you are so intent on winning that you have stopped really listening. The other party is the same. To get it moving again, both sides will have to engage in real listening. This means you will have to listen with a true attempt to walk in the other person's shoes. You do not have to change your mind but you must listen with an openness to understanding why they might have a level of "right" in their arguments. Only when you are really open to the other person is the energy open.
2. To solve impasse, you must go to a deeper level in the discussion. First identify the values (as opposed to issues) you are fighting over, and then try to find the values which are deeper than those over which you are fighting. Those values, or beliefs, are the reason the energy is stuck but they are also, often, the way out of impasse.

The example we may all relate to is our government's inability to reach agreement on major issues. It is easy to take sides, and certainly the stakes are high. We must remember that we

are divided as a country on these very issues and the impasse in Washington is reflective of the views of the voters. The common ground is fairly evident.

Hopefully, we all want a healthy, productive, sound economy in which no one is excluded from superb education, quality health care, fair financial treatment, or abundance. We have become so focused on the nuances of a specific health care plan, or specific solutions to the economic issues (stop spending) that we have forgotten the reason these things are so important.

We might do better if we were to throw out the divisive solutions that are causing so much trouble, and solve the problems in new ways by setting out the criteria of the end state more inclusively. The question is NOT "How much should government be involved at the local level?" as described by a congressman in the thick of the fight the day after the shutdown in 2013.

The question is "How do we make sure that we are operating with sound financial principles AND at the same time ensure that we are taking care of those who need assistance, creating a climate where our businesses can be wildly successful, and keeping the money flowing in directions that allow our country to thrive?"

In other words, take every issue, describe it as a problem, and place the word AND between the solutions. Think of the difference in energy in any system that is solving problems by putting the word AND between solutions as opposed to arguing about which solution is better.

If our elected officials were asking "How do we take care of our health issues and make sound financial decisions?" instead of the either/or discussions they now have, would we not have a lot more moving energy than we do now? If you think this is oversimplified, play back some of the discussions we have actually heard. "We will NEVER agree to a federally funded health care system." "We will NEVER back down on Obama Care." People filibuster for hours about why there cannot be compromise as opposed to trying to find compromise. How is that going for us?

We are amazing creatures, capable of solving any problem given the right problem description. Let me also state that I have personally seen this concept of isolating a vision that everyone could agree to' applied successfully again and again to seemingly unsolvable problems!

Ask Yourself:

1. Do you get stuck on principle often? In any situation can you define the belief underlying the principle?
2. Can you keep breaking the belief down to something that helps you communicate without judgment (judgment is a symptom of being closed).
3. Example: I am not going to budge in my determination that my child cannot have his/her cell phone until his/her grades are _____. The principle behind this is that my child needs to get good grades so that he/she can be successful. The phone is irrelevant. It is a means to an end. If keeping the phone from the child is not working, see if there is another way to help motivate the child to get good grades. Impasse is any situation where people keep trying the same things and keep getting the same result.

Case Study:

A labor management team was involved in hostile discussions about next steps after an intense and at times, violent strike. There was a lot of residual anger based on actions taken during the strike and the discussion could not seem to get past a rehash of what each side had done to the other.

Taking the issues one at a time, they were asked to consider why the issue was so important. They were to net it out into a short sentence. As they did so, they were then asked to continue breaking it down until they reached the real value that they were basing their argument upon.

This conversation looked like this (this was a real discussion with a facilitator asking the questions in parenthesis after each statement):

Labor:

1. No more contractors. (Why?)
2. They take work away from our full time employees. (Why is that so important?)
3. We need to protect our full time employees. (Because?)
4. We need job security. (Why is that so important?)
5. Because people can be more focused on their work when they aren't afraid. (Why is that so important?)
6. If this facility is to be successful, the labor force needs to be motivated and productive.

Ultimately the value statement is: We want a successful, productive facility in order to protect jobs and our future. (hiring contractors was an *issue*, but successful facility was the end state or value driving the issue)

Management:

1. We must hire contractors in order to remain flexible. (Why is that important?)
2. Because it allows us to adapt to changing market conditions without taking on the long term responsibility and cost of a full time employee. (What does that do?)
3. It allows us to maintain a viable business in a fluctuating environment.

Value statement is: We want a successful, productive facility to protect our future. (hiring contractors was an issue, but the end state was a successful facility)

This is over simplified, but the result was that for the first time these two groups realized that their real dilemma was to protect jobs by ensuring a successful entity. Labor, as a result became much more involved in wanting to understand the numbers and the business planning process, and the discussions shifted to problem solving how to make the organization successful AND create a safe and productive work environment which was an end state they could all agree on.

Try This!

Apply these steps to any disagreement.

Step back and attempt to be objective about your opponent. Try to find out what the value driving your opponent might be. For example, it might be they are attempting to assert their sense of freedom or dominance.

Once you think you have the right principle or value, give in to it. In other words, let them have what it is the other person thinks he or she is fighting for. Do so in a way that minimizes the fall out, but let go.

For example, if your teen always needs to be right, figure out where he or she is right and acknowledge. If your teen needs to assert his or her sense of being adult enough to do _____, try to find a way to treat the teen as an adult. If they handle it badly, be sure to limit his or her exposure and make the teen own the result. Do not step in and save the teen from his or her bad judgment. Create natural consequences for bad choices when you decide how to give the person what he or she wants.

In Summary:

Clearly impasse is an undesirable energy state. As a result, you must find mechanisms for getting the energy moving again in a direction upon which people can agree.

Discussing the underlying values is a technique for addressing the energy state. By asking "why?" people want a specific outcome, you begin to move people to the values they are

trying to honor. You keep asking until you find a value that is agreeable to all, and then you have a direction and you also have released the log jam.