Resolving the Heart of Conflict

BY JAMES FERRELL

ABOUT JAMES FERRELL

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I am going to claim something that might seem absurd. It isn't at all absurd—a truth I hope to establish in this article—but it will seem so on first hearing.

Here it is: You like the conflicts you're in. You like that your teenager yells at you, for example, or that your spouse is giving you the silent treatment. And you like how your co-worker is making your life more difficult. You like that your boss is a jerk and that your employees are incompetent. You like the trouble people are creating for you.

This is not hyperbole. I am not trying to be cute simply to make a point. You really do like these things. As do I. That is my claim—a claim we at Arbinger explore in our book, *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict.* So, what is to be made of this claim? Who in their right mind would like such things? The answer is: no one in his right mind would like conflict, for example, and jerkiness and incompetence. But what if much of the time we aren't in our right minds?

The philosopher Martin Buber observed that in all moments we are seeing others either as people like ourselves or as objects. That is, we are either seeing that others count like we do, or we're not. When we choose to see others as objects and fail to see that they count as we ourselves do, we create within ourselves a new need. We create the need to be justified for our objectification of others—a need that gives us reason to like problems more than solutions and mistreatment more than cooperation.

Consider this example. Let's say I come across a piece of information that will be very helpful to me. Let's say that I also know it would be helpful to a particular coworker but that I choose not to share the information with him. Instead, I keep it for myself.

In choosing not to share this helpful information with my coworker, consider how I will be likely to view him. The worse I can view him to be, the more justified I will feel in keeping the information from him. So I begin to view him more critically than I otherwise would. His faults become inflated in my mind. I have an incentive now to see him as a threat or a malingerer or an incompetent, and so on. I need to view him badly in order to be justified for treating him badly!

Now play this scenario forward. How is this coworker likely to respond to me when I am seeing him in these ways—as a threat, for example, or a malingerer, or an incompetent? Will he now be more or less likely to share information with me, for example, or to cooperate with me, or to consider my advice? The answer, of course, is that the more critical I am of him, the worse he is likely to act toward me.

Which brings us to why we like mistreatment, as incredible as that sounds: The worse my colleague treats me, the more my negative views of him will seem to be justified. While I complain about the mistreatment I am receiving, that mistreatment proves that I have been right about my colleague. While I bristle when my teenager talks back to me, her talking back will justify my recent harsh treatment of her. While I take offense at my spouse's silent treatment, I take from it self-justifying comfort for my own silence or bullheadedness. So while I don't like suffering, I like the innocence I find in suffering. In a perverse way, I come to prize my suffering—the problems others are creating around me, for example, and the conflicts I remain embroiled in—as this mistreatment by others justifies my hypercritical view of them!

When I choose to see people as objects, I become invested in seeing them poorly, which investment invites them to respond poorly to me, which mistreatment I then count as justification. I end up valuing problems more than solutions and conflict more than peace.

The grim truth is that whenever we start seeing others as objects rather than as people, we value justification more than results and find more advantage in war than we find in peace. In conflict, the heart of the matter is that our hearts have come to find advantage in conflict. Until we can escape this need for justification, we will continue to wallow (and find advantage) in the problems of the past. Until we can learn to acknowledge the obvious truth—that my coworkers, family members, and fellow citizens are as important and legitimate as I am—then my relationships will continue to be strained and our results together much less than they could be.

So what can be done about this? How can we begin to find solutions where we have been bound up in conflict? Consider a recent example with one of our client companies—a company that is well known throughout the world, with customers that are fiercely loyal to the brand. We had spent two days with a group comprised of fourteen of the company's executives, six employees who were leaders of the local union, and three leaders from the union's national headquarters. These sessions were designed to improve the overall teamwork at the company's plant sites. With forty minutes remaining in our time together, we proposed that we spend the rest of the time working to solve a conflict in the company.

We invited the group to list the conflicts that came to mind. They quickly named about fifteen problem areas. When we asked which of these was the biggest, they identified a particular labor-management dispute that was scheduled for arbitration the very next week. This particular dispute had lingered for more than a year, with tens of millions of dollars at stake. Every attempt to solve the problem between the parties had failed.

Forty minutes later, however, the problem had been solved. They found a solution together without having to go to arbitration. The question is: How? What happened? What allowed them to accomplish in forty minutes what they had been unable to accomplish in the prior twelve months?

The answer is this: During our two days together, they solved the heart of the conflict that had been dividing them, which was their mutual objectification and blame of each other. Until they saw their conflict partners as people, with hopes and dreams and cares and fears as real as their own, they needed justification more than they needed resolution and were both unwilling and unable to find creative, mutually beneficial possibilities. Until they got in their "right minds," they found too much advantage in problems to be able to find lasting solutions.

Discovering the nature and anatomy of peace, they were able to put an end to the wars that had divided them. The question for each of us is whether we can do the same. Our coworkers, family members, and neighbors—are we seeing them as people? Or do we need justification for seeing them as objects. This is the heart of the matter—the question that determines the length and intensity of every conflict.