

Conflict

From the Editor

Have you ever had a time when a quite ordinary phrase takes on a new meaning?

It happened to me not so very long ago when we were planning a management conference with one of our clients. "We've got to make sure there are a lot of question periods throughout the day so it just doesn't become a dump of information," one member reminded everybody.

Question periods ... question periods. Bang on, I thought. We should question periods; question old assumptions; question old answers; question anything that stops thinking; ... question periods. That has to be one of the first steps to creativity and innovation, to getting ourselves outside of the box.

At LIVE Consultants we help you to question periods. That's true whether we are working with you on strategic planning, making change, or developing a learning process.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

Somewhere around the 60s fighting got a bad name. Just about then we started to tell our children not to fight and that walking away was a sign of strength.

Half true. Walking away is a sign of strength ... when the issue doesn't matter.

Conflict is a natural part of interpersonal and team relationships and so we had better understand how to fight *constructively*.

In this article, Stephen Baetz, defines some of the benefits of fighting, offers some ideas on how to fight, and suggests four behaviours to avoid if you are going to fight fair in an interpersonal relationship.

Stephen is a partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization that sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

Learn How To Fight

Harvey rattles on like a refurbished Model T: spirited, steady, shining. He's flattered by the comparison. A Model T is a legacy that symbolizes innovation, new thinking, and daring. Harvey likes that association. He's not as fond of the unspoken suggestion that he, like the Model T, is ... old. Real old.

"It ain't all bad being old," Harvey insists.

"You live past your allotted four score and a few more and everybody thinks you're wise and that you must have secrets. Truth is that how long you live has more to do with the genes you inherited than any special wisdom that comes with age. But I don't tell 'em that. I let them think that experience makes you smart."

Harvey smiles, reshuffles himself in his chair, gazes into inspired space, and bites his bottom lip. Sage stuff. He loves the role.

"My niece's daughter came by last week and after some idle chit-chat about politics and the weather she asked me what the secret was to a good marriage." Harvey lowers his voice so Lucy won't hear, leans forward, and then pauses for effect. "Fight."

Harvey worked to suppress his grin but only half succeeded.

"Fight?" I asked.

"Yup. Good marriages have two people who only fight when they have to ... know how to fight and ... fight fair."

Harvey leaned back in his chair, shut his eyes in liturgical solemnity — something he always did to prove the righteous, if not the right, were on his side — and ... fell asleep. He must have figured there was nothing more to say.

M-m-m-m. Build a solid relationship by fighting ... only fight when you have to ... know how to fight, and ... fight fair. Not what I expected.

Only Fight When You Have To

Fighting is to be expected; indeed, even natural and healthy within organizations and teams. The world in which we make decisions is complex, ambiguous, and uncertain. Reasonable, thoughtful people are going to have disagreements about what realities should be considered, what strategies are best,

what is important to the customer, what resources should be invested, how quickly issues should be responded to, what the core responsibilities of leadership are, or who should be taking ownership for an outcome. Teams whose members challenge one another's thinking and question existing paradigms will end up with several important benefits:

- everyone will have a more comprehensive appreciation of the choices,
- a broader and more fertile range of options will be generated,
- the quality of decision making will improve,
- buy-in to decisions will increase, and
- the number of inconsequential issues and the amount of interpersonal needling should decrease.

However, these benefits can only be accrued if we learn to fight about the stuff that matters.

What is worth fighting about in teams or interpersonal relationships?

Fight when individual, team, or corporate values are being violated. Fight when you believe that choices are being made from a narrow range of options. Fight when action is not guided by purpose. Fight when choices are being made that move you away from your goal. Fight when balance is missing. Fight when expediency overrides wisdom. Fight when apathy diminishes genuine concern.

Just as important is understanding when *not* to fight.

Don't fight to get the adrenaline running. Don't fight to frighten, intimidate, or diminish. Don't fight for insignificant victories. Don't fight over who gets to be the child. Don't fight as a replacement for honesty or hard work.

Knowing when and when not to fight implies that fighting is an activity that we ought to choose. That's right, choose. It is not a behaviour that we lapse into as an easy out to get our own way.

Know How To Fight

Once you've decided to fight and you are clear about your reasons, you then have to figure out how to fight so that you get an outcome

that is important. Here are some suggestions that you may find helpful.

Define what you want to achieve.

Be real clear about what you want others to believe, know, or do as a result. The goal is the fight's prize. Lose sight of the prize and you will be both unsuccessful and more likely to use tactics that will poison the relationship in the longer term.

Listen more than talk.

Many people believe that fights are won by overwhelming "the other side" with as much verbiage as can be mustered. The-more-the-better-to-wear-them-down seems to be the strategy. The premise appears to be that if the other side has given in exhausted, you've won. It doesn't mean that at all. It just means they are exhausted — not won over — and once refreshed they will be back at it.

Listening allows you to hear where their arguments are flawed, what their needs may be, what is limiting their thinking, what they are assuming ... in short, it helps you understand where they are most vulnerable and what your points of leverage are.

Present how you see it.

Avoid the temptation to attack directly what they have just told you. Instead, offer your point of view and a reason or benefit with it. Connect your suggestion to a purpose the two of you might share. Make sure the benefit relates to needs that are important to them.

If you start by attacking the ground they are standing on, they have no place to move and are obliged to defend it even more vigorously. Your point of view — especially if it is proposed as a suggestion — offers an alternative piece of psychological turf that they can go to if they give up their's.

Use I language.

Say something like, "I'm wondering if ...," "I have another point of view I'd like us to look at ...," "I see the situation this way ...," "I need ...," or "I am concerned about ..." An I-statement merely asserts your perspective without minimizing the point of view of others or telling them they are wrong.

Ask what they think.

Find out how they view your idea or suggestion. Understand that they may take a few swipes at it but that is often nothing more than a testing activity. Respond to the major criticisms only.

Test whether or not they could agree to your position, your point of view.

Repeat your suggestion and your reasons.

If you think you haven't been heard, play broken record: keep coming back to your suggestions and your reasons. Fighting requires that you are persistent and that you don't give up on something that is important to you.

Fight Fair

Dirty fighters may win the immediate battle but they won't be able to win in the longer term. So when you fight, fight fair ... which means you avoid these behaviours:

- *Kitchen sinking*
This happens when a fighter brings every issue, every slight, every imagined hurt to the fight. They throw everything but the kitchen sink into the argument ... even if it isn't relevant to the issue at hand.
- *You-ing*
It sounds like this. "You didn't do your homework on this issue ... You only know half the facts ... You are not carrying your weight." A you-ing feels like the sharp, pointed finger of attack and it will only cause the other person to be defensive.
- *Awfulizing*
This behaviour makes the action seem larger and more horrendous than it really is. It is characterized by the words *always* and *never*. "You always have to have your own way." The fight then degenerates into whether *always* is true. A single situation of proof to the contrary deflates the argument and you haven't moved closer to your goal.
- *Running away*
Leaving the fight half way through causes the issue and the feelings associated with it to go underground.

Let's Stop Training And Let's Start Educating Managers

Ever wonder why senior management views trainers as mechanics and the classroom as the service department where you send people to be fixed?

Senior executives didn't get that impression on their own.

Somehow or other that impression is there because our profession has helped to create it. Training has been used all too often as a quick fix. "Not performing? Let's send them on this training program, give them some basic skills, and see if it makes a difference."

It won't.

We owe it to our organizations to provide people with an education and get out of the quick fix business. Education improves the quality of the organization's intellectual capital by not only building skills but also by building knowledge and the supporting attitudes. Education is a longer-term developmental process which helps people understand context and constraint. Education focuses as much on how to think as what to do. Besides, if the truth were told, most immediate performance problems are best addressed by the immediate manager on a one-to-one basis with specific coaching, support, and follow-up — not by more classroom input and practice.

If our business is education, then a long-term development process should be what we offer and promise. To do that, we should

- be thoughtful about what attitudes, skills, and knowledge we help managers to learn,
- develop a variety of learning experiences — inside and outside the classroom — that complement one another,
- measure what contribution we are making to learning, and
- refuse to offer quick fixes.

If you would like some help in figuring out how you can best carry out the development work of an educator, please call us.

For more information about our services, contact us at (519) 664-2213.