

What Gets Us Stuck

by **Lou Raye Nichol**

Individuals get stuck. Groups get stuck. Organizations get stuck. We all have a sense of what it means to be stuck as an individual. Have you ever sat down and listed the pros and cons of a decision and still come away undecided? Managers and coaches regularly deal with people locked in an impasse. In fact the very nature of coaching dictates that people will bring some of their stickiest problems to their coach. Individual impasses can give us clues as to the dynamics at work.

An impasse implies that contradictory forces are operating within the person or the situation. Motivating forces impel us to achieve our wishes and goals. However, they are countered by forces that keep us from moving forward. These restraining forces are meeting some sort of need. They may well be the products of fear and operate to keep us safe. Although they provide some benefit to us, they have unintended consequences, much like the side effects of drugs.

To break through an impasse a person must pay attention not just to what she wants to happen, but what is holding her back. What are the interests being served by not doing what she wants? What is her investment in remaining in the impasse? Successful solutions must take care of these interests. However, individuals will have differing levels of awareness of these forces and will vary in their capacity to acknowledge them.

One person may be able to articulate the forces affecting her dilemma and own the problem as something she needs to work on. In this case much of the work is done. She has probably thought of a number of options, none of which satisfy her. Most likely, there are interests that she perceives as contradictory and cannot contain in one solution.

For instance, an individual was struggling with her dissatisfaction about her job which she described as routinized and stifling. She yearned to use her creative potential. Talking through her options, she realized that she associated financial security with her job, and creativity with quitting her job. She wanted both security and creativity, but she thought of them as mutually exclusive. She had not considered making her job more creative. When she realized this, she went to her manager about expanding in her job and got his full support. Later, she developed her own business which used her talents to the full.

A second person may only focus on his wish for change, yet make no progress towards his goals. He remains in a state of wishing for an impossible dream. In this case, the person must start working at the impasse at a deeper level.

For instance, an executive complains of being overworked. At the same time he has had feedback that he needs to delegate more. So he worked with his coach on plans for delegation. However, weeks pass, and he has not moved on them. Clearly something else is at work. He is most likely experiencing fears he

has not been able to articulate. Perhaps he cannot figure out how to break up a project into tasks? Perhaps he is worried about how to deal with work that is not up to standard? Perhaps he has fears of letting go when his name is on the line?

Anyone's state of progress towards goals at any point represents an equilibrium between hopes and fears. Hopes push us forward, fears restrain us. Our fears cannot be underestimated. We will take care of our fears, often at the cost of our wishes. If they are not addressed in some way, they continue to sabotage our efforts. A solution needs to serve the needs of our wishes and our fears. In this case the manager needs to name his fears and find ways of insuring that they are taken care of in any solution. (Stock Whitaker, 1985)

In the most difficult kind of impasse, the person may see herself as a victim and blame her situation on others. Such a person often creates a great challenge for others, because they will want her to change, but she sees no need to. The restraining forces serve powerful needs, and are deeply entrenched.

So, we might shift the example of the manager who had difficulty delegating and have him say: "No matter how hard I try, I can't get them to do what I want. They just don't care. I am the only one around here who will put in the effort.

As earlier, his fears prevent him from moving forward, but he does not accept the same degree of ownership for his role in the impasse. His personal fears get projected out and identified as 'facts' about others. If he is to break through, he must become aware of and accept that in some way what he does or how he does it elicits the response he gets. However, the victim pattern is probably well established and integral to his self-esteem.

Groups and organizations can fall into similar dynamics. They can be stymied by contradictory interests. They can put themselves into a victim role. They can have a great dream that they never seem to be able to pull off. Forces are operating at the group level to serve unacknowledged needs and fears which also need to be faced and resolved for the group to move forward.

References

Stock Whitaker, D. Using Groups to Help People, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, 1985

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