



Hold Up a Quarter

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

This article is about perspective. No two people will see a phenomenon the same way. As our fingerprints are all unique, so is our perception of what is going on around us. A simple way to demonstrate this is for me to hold a quarter out in front of me while I am facing you. I will describe a round metal object with an embossed head on it with the word "Liberty" around the circumference. You will describe a round metal object with an embossed picture of an eagle sitting on a branch or some state-specific rendering. We are both describing the exact same object, yet we see it differently.

The same phenomenon happens when two people see any kind of situation at work or at home. They see the same thing, but it has a different appearance depending on their personal vantage point. This means they will draw different conclusions about what just happened and the significance of it. Taking the next step requires each individual to react to the stimulus in an appropriate way. Each person is free to react however he or she feels is appropriate for the situation. Even if both people perceived exactly the same thing, what would seem appropriate to one person might be the wrong thing to do for the other. All this discrepancy leads to squabbles about actions taken.

For example, let's suppose a manager is discussing an employee with a severe attendance problem with her supervisor. The manager and supervisor may have different opinions about the problem itself. Perhaps the supervisor knows the lady has a child who has special needs, and this calls for more trips to the child's doctor than would be normal. The supervisor wants to be lenient based on this knowledge. From the manager's perception, this employee needs to be treated with the same set of rules as everyone else or it will be hard to maintain discipline. The manager sees an untenable situation that needs progressive counseling, while the supervisor sees the need for flexibility.

Differences of opinion about what is happening and what should be done in response to it create a great deal of conflict in any work place. Since what I see is obvious to me and the resulting call for action is a logical consequence of that perception, I will be pretty sure my way is right. The trouble is that another person will be just as sure his perception and remedy are right. If I know that I am right, and you see things differently,

then by definition, you must be wrong. In most instances my reaction to this dichotomy is to try to educate you on why your perception is incorrect. You, of course, will try to get me to realize the error of my thinking. We are off to the races in conflict.

This genesis of conflict is going on in small and large ways within each and every day. Is it any wonder there is so much acrimony in the workplace and at home? This problem is ubiquitous. What are some antidotes so we can reduce the conflicts between people?

Seek to understand assumptions - In coming up with different perceptions of what has just occurred, the root cause is often based on differing assumptions. I might assume the bulb is burned out while you may be convinced the wall switch is off. A third person may think we are experiencing a power failure. We all observe a dark room, but we ascribe the cause to different assumptions. Each of us will come up with a course of action different from the others based on our assumptions.

Try reversing the roles - If you and I are at loggerheads over an issue, it is often helpful to call a temporary truce and ask you to verbalize my argument while I attempt to articulate yours. This process can create a kind of empathy that is helpful at seeing the other perspective or it can uncover flaws in the logic of either party. This method can backfire, though. I was once in disagreement with an individual and suggested a reverse role play. He said, "Fine, you start by stating my position." I did my best to lay out his thesis. He looked at me and said, "You know, Bob, you're right."

Use Reflective Listening - Often perceptual arguments involve two people talking at each other, but neither party doing much effective listening. Reason: when each party is pretending to listen, he or she is actually spending nearly all mental energy preparing to speak. Reflective listening forces each individual to pay full attention to what the other person is actually saying. Once reflective listening is employed, it is not uncommon to have two people who were feuding suddenly realize they have been in violent agreement. They were expressing their opinions in words that sounded opposed but were really congruent.

Watch the language - Rather than say, "You are clueless, can't you see that he has no intention of picking up the mess," try, "I am seeing his actions somewhat differently than you do. Can you tell me why you're assuming he will not pick up the mess?" Asking questions rather than making statements is a technique that can reduce the inflammation in perceptual disagreements. Aggression can make it difficult for a person to hear, let alone understand. As David Halberstam wrote, "...excessive amounts of testosterone leads to a loss of hearing."

Agree to Disagree - Acrimony can easily be thwarted by simply agreeing to disagree. After arguing about an issue for a while, either party can say something like, "This issue

is not worth arguing over, I am not going to convince you, and you are not going to convince me. Let's not get hung up on it. Just because we see this issue differently is no reason we cannot respect each other and work well together."

Do not blow things out of proportion - Much of the acrimony in personal disagreements can be avoided if people remember the petty squabbles from day to day mean very little in the long run. If an issue that seems worth fighting over today will be totally forgotten in a week, it is a good idea to relax and just let the other person win rather than duke it out for several days. Pick battles worth fighting and ignore the insignificant give and take issues.

Get a good mediator - Often a third person can step in and clarify the different opinions and help people sort out their differences quickly. Reason: The participants get emotionally involved in the fight and lose objectivity. A cool head that is respected by both parties can make some reasonable suggestions that at least soften the struggle.

Give in - Just letting the other person win is often a great strategy. Some people find this hard to do for reasons of pride or ego. Who cares who is right or wrong? In fact, in most arguments both people are a little bit right and a little bit wrong. The true winner of an argument is usually the one who quits the fight first.

Humans have a remarkable ability to drive each other crazy. This tendency is amplified by close proximity. It is the reason why you can appreciate and love members of your family until they come to visit for a week. At a distance, it is easy to manage disagreements most of the time, but when people are underfoot every day, the little things tend to become so irritating, the conflict begins to snowball.

I am reminded of the TV show "Everybody Loves Raymond," where the characters do nothing but fight through the whole show. I rarely watch that sitcom because I find it exhausting. As one person adroitly observed, "I don't watch TV to get an ear full of fighting, pettiness, cruelty, lack of respect, and sarcasm. I can get all that at home." Since we all see things through a slightly different lens, and we process assumptions about what is happening through our parochial brain, we are going to have conflict. Expect it and take some of the evasive steps above to keep the volume down on interpersonal differences. Life is too short to be habitually annoyed by fellow workers or family members.



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