NOT ON THE SAME PAGE

The importance of communicating clearly

By Doug McCarthy

I was completely caught off guard when my eight-year-old daughter asked, "Daddy, where did I come from?" She seemed too young to be asking about the birds and the bees, and I assumed when the time came she would ask her mother. My anxiety was heightened by the prevailing wisdom that parents should be direct and honest with their children when they ask about sex.

On the other hand, I was a teacher. Surely I should be able to handle this moment. As we both sat down on the couch, I started by asking her, "So, Stephanie, why do you want to know where you came from?" Her response was, "Well, my friend Kerstin says she comes from Windsor – and I was wondering where I came from."

Well, this was very good information for me to have! To this day I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't harvested this piece of intelligence with my simple question.

Not on the Same Page

Most of us have experienced or witnessed two people trying to communicate when they are 'not on the same page.' A

question gets asked, an answer is given, and the questioner replies, "That is not what I meant!" In his book, The Conflict Resolution Toolbox, Gary Furlong says the common cause of communication problems and the unsuccessful attempts to resolve them stem from the lack of information required for an adequate diagnosis. Assumptions about problems and solutions are made without all of the essentials being revealed. Furlong says, "... the first critical skill the practiced professional must have is the ability to diagnose, to determine the root cause of a specific problem."

In many situations we would not accept solutions offered to us if we did not feel there had been adequate diagnosis. Imagine our reaction if we complained to our mechanic of an unusual noise in the engine of our car and he responded, "Okay, I will get you a new motor." We would understandably be upset that a major, expensive solution was offered without any thorough diagnosis. Yet, often times solutions to communication problems are adopted without a lot of thought.

The Notion of Winning

A common barrier to a good diagnosis is when both parties focus more on the notion of winning (or at least not losing too badly). A successful practitioner tries to change the winlose paradigm to one of attempting to understand another's point of view more clearly. Asking open-ended questions and responding in a way that signals understanding is an effective way to collect diagnostic information.

Signalling that we understand, does not necessarily mean that we agree. However, people who believe their point-of-view has been clearly diagnosed and understood by others, are often more open to logical solutions.

The better the information provided, the better the diagnosis will be. And this results in logical solutions that are acceptable to all parties involved.

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