

Assent, Dissent, Descent

Recently...

- I told Emma (my 8-year-old daughter) she needed to get dressed to go. Instant protest, heel-dragging, power struggle. Yet we were going to do something she wanted!
- I observed a new cross-functional team starting up. The person assigned to schedule the first meeting asserted, "Since no one else wants to, I will chair the team." People rolled eyes and crossed arms (mostly hidden!) Yet she was right -- no one else wanted to chair.
- I was presenting at company and I told participants to discuss their ideas from a worksheet with the person sitting next to them. A few evaluation forms were quite negative, some said that I was "making them share too much." Yet they all said they wanted to get closer as a team.

What's the common thread?

When people feel pushed, they defend.

This defense response is wired into the very core of the human brain, and when it becomes activated we're more likely to get dissent -- followed by descent into in conflict. The reaction is a "basic rule" of emotional intelligence: When people feel attacked, they defend. Understanding this rule provides invaluable insight into how to work with (rather than against) people in all areas of life. It's an awareness that becomes even more critical in today's climate.

Big surprise - people are stressed! Between global climate change, recession, war, and all the "noise" of our daily lives it's no wonder. But the stress also comes from our success. It's a terrible paradox: on the one hand we have an abundance of choice and possibility. On the other we're wallowing in the deluge. While people are seeing myriad options -- options of where and how to work, a billion choices for information and entertainment, the liberty to be anywhere in

the world -- they are also facing a concurrent level of chaos and risk from the unknown.

From your brain's perspective, the impact of all this choice and uncertainty is an elevated sense of danger. In all sectors, at work, at home, and even at play, people are more vigilant, more wary. It's as if we see the tethers that hold us to the ground are frayed -- any small threat could send us out of control. This heightened state turns up the power of our "you attacked, so I'm gonna defend" reaction.

When I told my daughter what to do, when the manager declared herself the chair, and when I told my students to share their personal stories, the person on the receiving end felt pushed. And when people feel pushed, they push back. At an emotional level, they felt something was being taken without their assent, and they defended against the subtle power-grab.

Push-back and defense comes in many forms, often subversive, sometimes unconscious. We drag our heels, try to be "witty" (but actually sarcastic and cutting), check out, sabotage, ask pointed questions, or just give off a kind of hostile vibe. All these ways of defending and pushing back boil down to a primal survival mechanism.

So we get in this tug-of-war -- and it is so easily avoidable. Let me go back to Emma. When I "push" my kids, I am trying to assert control. Yet I know in my own experience that when people try to control me I get incredibly annoyed. Especially at my family members.

My grandma was complaining that there was too much food in the freezer. In a "helpful" (read: not helpful) way she was reminding me several times a day, "Don't forget to eat out of the freezer."

Finally I snapped at her, "You think telling me a hundred times is going to make me do something? All you're doing is annoying me!"

"Well, it keeps it in your mind," she retorted with the certain huff of an elder who knows better.

Turning this around, I can see that I'm constantly telling my kids what to do. I'm trying to control them. Sure, it's a little different with a 6 and 8 year old, but if I feel so put upon by grandma telling me to eat the lasagna, wouldn't my kids feel put out by my telling them what to eat, when to brush their teeth, how to dress, how to talk, when to do their homework, when to go to bed... then, on top of it all, to try and rush them out the door?

Perhaps the lesson my daughter is trying to teach me is about being aware of and

responsible with my own power. This includes recognizing that she is her own person with her own power. It becomes quite visceral and clear at home -- and I suspect it's pretty much the same dynamic at work. We each have power, a force of will and courage, and we can use it as a pathway or as a bludgeon. When we push without assent, we are trying to take someone else's power, and they are likely to have some form of tantrum about that.

Some solutions -- and I am NOT telling you that you have to do this!

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First -- don't pretend people are rational. So often I hear managers, educators, and parents surprised that people behave like people. "We're all mature adults, people will just do their jobs." Right.

Second -- get assent. Even if you have the power and authority (positional power) to demand, you need to take the few extra seconds to ask.

Third -- stop attacking. You know that if you attack, they will defend. So pay attention to your feelings and behaviors, your tone of voice, your attitude as you approach others. Are you attacking, or are you supporting?

Easier said than done!

Here's a tip: Anabel Jensen, one of my mentors and the President of Six Seconds, likes to say, "See the adult in the child -- and the child in the adult." When I remember that, I am more careful about these subtle power dynamics.

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