

## The Muck Stops Here

by Diana McLain Smith

The following guidelines for helping ourselves out of the muck were forged over time, as we observed our own interactions:

- **Collect data on the things you say and do:** The single biggest differentiator between success and failure among study groups is the use of a tape recorder. People are so skilled at taking action that they are far more likely to recall what they were trying to do than what they actually did. This is a recipe for disaster. One person cries, “I was trying to support you!” The other retorts, “What do you mean? You were patronizing me!” Only with a tape recorder can you get reliable data on what you and others actually said and did.

In our group, we would not talk about any especially contentious issues unless we could look at the transcript of the interchange. We would then select a couple of brief exchanges that were emotionally “hot.” These provided us all the raw material we needed to see what happened.

- **Account for what happened:** Once you have gathered direct data, each person can reflect on the events that took place and why they occurred that way. We use these four sets of questions:
  1. *What “results” did I get?* In other words, how did people react to my action? What did they do next? Beware of making attributions about people’s reactions; your attributions may say far more about you than about the others. Stay with the direct data of what people actually did and said. Ask yourself: What do I like about the results I got? What don’t I like? Did I move closer to, or farther from, my goals?
  2. *What did I say or do to help create these results?* Start with yourself; that’s something you can change. You might see, for example, how you kept coming in to reassert your view every time a colleague said something you didn’t like. Phil, Bob, and I can’t count the number of times that we discovered that the other person’s “intransigence” was only matched by our own.
  3. *How did I see the situation, myself, and others in the room?* What did I feel at that time? How did this inform my actions? These questions help uncover how you were framing the situation to make it seem, to yourself at least, that your actions made sense, even if they were problematic. Look closely at how you view any situation that you find tough to handle, and ask yourself: How might my actions have made sense, given the way I viewed the situation? Then ask: How does this way of viewing the situation increase, or decrease, my degrees of freedom.
  4. *What aspects of this particular situation did I find challenging?* You might find some background factors, such as unclear roles, difficult to take. Or you might find some triggering event hard to handle, such as getting negatively evaluated or yelled at. Note the contextual factors that stretch you. This is your learning edge.

Once you have answered these questions, you have the makings of a story that can account for the results you got. In crafting the story, steer clear of evaluations. Don’t say, “I acted inappropriately or badly.” Just tell what happened and how. For example: “When up against a strong personality, like my client Sam, who is negatively evaluating me, I see myself as helpless and Sam as holding all the cards. This makes me feel as if my only choice is to withdraw. In the end, I don’t end up getting what I want or helping Sam get what he wants. This seems to make him evaluate me even more negatively.”

Keep a journal on your findings. Over time, the patterns you see, from one situation to another, will shed light on your model of the world and suggest ways to revise or extend it.

- **Reflect with others on your accounts:** Bob, Phil, and I invariably told different stories about the same exchange. Sharing our stories, and how we arrived at them, helped us see things that each of us had missed individually. When reflecting with others, explicitly describe 1) the data you selected from the transcript and 2) how you interpreted that data. Then invite others to help you revise and elaborate your account by asking them to offer 1) new interpretations of your data, or 2) any data that you might not have seen. This data might include other things you did, your impact on them, or things they were trying to do.

Don't reject alternatives out of hand. If your view of the situation doesn't match theirs, ask how they arrived at it. Most important, ask them to help you see things you might have missed.

- **Set conflict to work:** The challenge here is to transform "here we go again" conflicts into ones that require each person to grow. Bob, Phil, and I are all very different. Even today, our clashes are intense and emotionally charged. Early on, we knew that we could use these differences to our advantage. We just didn't know how. It took us a while to discover that if we stopped trying to get each other to be different (i.e., easier to deal with), then we could use the very characteristics that drove us crazy to drive our own growth instead. The fact that we posed difficulties for one another became an asset, not a liability. We now see one another's downsides as an opportunity to expand our own abilities to help a much wider range of people in a wider variety of circumstances. [Note: The phrase "Set conflicts to work," is borrowed from Mary Parker Follett, who used it in a paper presented before a Bureau of Personnel Administration conference group in January 1925. It was reprinted in *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management*, by Elliot M. Sachs (Harvard Business School Press, 1996).]
- **Embrace inconsistency:** No matter how competent you become, there will always be a gap between the behavior you espouse and your actions in real life. That's because the knowledge you need to act effectively is, by definition, much more complex and demanding than the knowledge you need to talk about effective action. You may believe deeply that "People should support one another and be inclusive." But you (and others) will continually run up against circumstances where that rule doesn't apply, or applies so poorly that it doesn't make sense. At that point, "real life" action judgment will always override the rule. Don't sidestep or squelch the gaps between the espoused rule and the action rule. They are telling you something about the limits to your espoused theory as well as your theory-in-use. Listen.
- **Be humble in your efforts and compassionate toward imperfections, including your own:** While you may like some people more than others in your group, keep in mind that a range of personae live within each person. The way you operate toward them will elicit the persona you see—the sonofabitch you fear or the best person someone is capable of being.
- **Invest in outside help—no matter how good you are or become:** Chris Argyris and David Kantor were invaluable to our group, helping us see things we could not see on our own. *View consultation as an investment in excellence, not as a cure for sickness.*

Bob, Phil, and I began our journey together almost twenty years ago. While we have touched on painful moments from our pasts, we were always much more interested in learning how we perpetuated the past in the present and how we might create a new future. That is something you can only do with a little help from your friends.