



talking about...

January 2010

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

The Authority Dynamic

"It is only in our decisions that we are important."

... Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980) French author and dramatist

Last month, I shared with you the philosophy that underpins our work. The basic premise of this philosophy is that the human condition is a continuous yet momentary experience of living. Although this may sound like a simple idea, it does not fit an individual's sense of their life until it is brought to their attention. After all, the vast majority of people are not reflecting on the basic experience of life, they are living their life. At a common sense level, this translates into what we have done in the past, what we want to do now and what we hope to do in the future. We human beings have the remarkable ability to create this sense of time whilst living in the moment.

If you are a long time reader of this newsletter, you will know that a great deal of the focus of our work is on the way that people relate to each other. If we take our basic premise and place it into the dynamics of relationship, we open up a window to some interesting observations. Probably the most important aspect of this relates to the idea of authority. You may recall that I define authority in a specific way. Authority is a declaration we make when we accept another person's declaration (often a decision) that will impact on our future. Simply by accepting another's decision, we give them the authority to make it. One of the key aspects of this understanding is that a person does not have to like the declaration to accept it and therefore give someone the authority to make it.

This is not a trivial matter. Each of us is in a constant process of making decisions about what actions we will take. In doing so, we create the future for ourselves. When we give someone the authority to make a decision for us, we allow them to play a large part in creating our future. As a result, to whom we give authority is pivotal to our future and it does not end there. We explore this further and also look at the reasons we give someone authority. This is generally not an issue when a decision made by someone else is one that we like. However, what happens when we have to accept decisions that we do not like?

Generally this occurs when we feel there is something of more value to lose than in accepting the decision. In other words, at some level we compromise in order to preserve some other aspect of life. This is very obvious within organisations. Every organisation is based in a hierarchical authority structure of some sort. Some are very rigid, whilst others are less so. Unless a person is at the top of that structure, there are others making decisions that will impact them that inevitably they will not like. Yet most of the time, they will accept the decisions because the alternative is to leave and this would have a much bigger impact on their future. Yet accepting those unwanted decisions has a clear impact on a person's relationship with those who make the decisions and also on the person's story about themselves.

Ultimately, more effective leadership can be equated to creating willing followers. This is done by setting a background of understanding and direction that is broadly shared and which allows people to more willingly accept decisions made by others.

"It's easy to make good decisions when there are no bad options."

... Robert Half (1918 - 2001) US personnel-agency executive

Molotov the Follower ...

There was a time in the nineteen forties when Vyacheslav Molotov was the Soviet foreign minister. He was a shrewd man and a hard bargainer but worked for Joseph Stalin, who was "The Boss". He was once overheard talking to Stalin by trans-Atlantic telephone during the course of some very intricate negotiations with the West. He said, "Yes, Comrade Stalin," in quiet tones, then again, "Yes, Comrade Stalin", and then, after a considerable wait, "Certainly, Comrade Stalin". Suddenly he was galvanized into emotion. "No, Comrade Stalin," he barked, "No. That's, no. Definitely, no. A thousand times, no!"

After a while, he quieted and it was "Yes, Comrade Stalin" again. The reporter who overheard this was probably never so excited in his life. Clearly, Molotov was daring to oppose the dictator on at least one point, and it would surely be impor-

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tant to the West to know what that point might be.

The reporter approached Molotov and said as calmly as possible, "Secretary Molotov, I could not help but hear you say at one point, "No, Comrade Stalin.""

Molotov turned his cold eyes on the reporter and said, "What of it?"

"May I ask," said the reporter, cautiously, "What the subject under discussion was at that time?"

"You may," said Molotov. "Comrade Stalin asked me if there was anything which he had said with which I disagreed."

"Matter is mostly ghostly empty space. To be more precise, it is 99.9999999% empty space."

... Sir Arthur Eddington (1882 –1944) UK Astrophysicist

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