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Communicating without Conflict

In the Chinese classic *The Art of War*, Sun-tzu says that, *the supreme excellence is to win without fighting*. Wouldn't it be cool if we could apply this wisdom in the workplace?

When people just do the minimum to get by, you have a problem with motivation. How can you encourage people to work harder and smarter of their own accord? The old quote rings true that, *a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still*.

According to Daniel H. Pink, author of a new book, *DRIVE: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, "Carrots and sticks are so last century. Drive says that for 21st century work, we need to upgrade to autonomy, mastery, and purpose."

This makes sense in our own experience. The stick of imposed authority is usually resented and resisted. Its counterpart, the carrot of reward is often a siren song, which is hard to resist, but not worth it because it leads to a bad result.

Pink says that the only source of sustained motivation is intrinsic reward. That people have a desire to direct their own lives, to continually improve at what matters most to them, and that we also long to serve a higher purpose. He adds that while science knows this to be true, many businesses and organizations still operate on the misguided assumptions of the carrot and the stick.

Why do we act this way, when we should know better? I believe it is because under the surface we have not resolved a deeper problem, *how to communicate without conflict*.

Rules may keep us somewhat civilized, and social rewards may keep us well behaved. Yet notice how often *conflict* comes up in casual conversation. It is hard to estimate what a drag conflict can be on motivation, except to know that the cost is high.

In the New York Times bestseller, *The Celestine Vision: Living the New Spiritual Awareness*, author James Redfield says that people who are cut off from their own source of renewable energy, sustain themselves by sponging up the energy of other people. The result is negative behavior which amounts to a power struggle for energy and attention.

The engagement can range from passive to aggressive, but it is based on what he calls existential insecurity. People attempt to alleviate their insecurity by drawing

energy from other people. They play the game to gain sympathy, to place blame, or to justify themselves. Whatever the outer form, it amounts to a conflict that drains energy and actually sustains the problem.

Redfield offers strategies for disengaging with this power struggle, helping self and others to find a more sustainable source for renewing their energy. He navigates a wide horizon, moving from paradigm shifts in the new physics, to psychology, eastern religion, and the human potential movement. But at the core he integrates the insights of these diverse approaches through the metaphor of energy exchange and renewal.

Energy is contagious. Positive energy lifts us up, and negative energy drags us down. Finding ways to renew your own energy frees you from the insatiable need to feed on the energy of other people.

Albert Einstein said that problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them. Perhaps this is why people turn to martial arts, meditation, dance movements and sports, which not only serve as a metaphor for healthy energy flow, but also can be a means to energy renewal. This goes beyond mere rest and recreation. We need to change our thinking to solve the problem at a deeper level.

I have found that the practice of Aikido itself contains the answers to many otherwise baffling problems of energy and conflict resolution. Most people assume that Martial Arts techniques are designed to resolve the conflict after it occurs. In fact, they are designed to prevent or avoid the conflict in the first place.

It is not easy for a team of people to get into flow and work harmoniously together. Psychology can provide insights into communication, motivation, and energy. But as Sun-Tzu said, the *supreme excellence* is to avert conflict in the first place, and win without fighting.

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