

DEADLY DYNAMICS: How to Stop the Other Person From Being Unreasonable

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The Most Common Form of Conflict

In my work I do a lot of conflict resolution and lately I've been seeing quite a lot of what I call Deadly Dynamics. If you aren't in the midst of a deadly dynamic right now, you've certainly experienced it once or twice in your career and I guarantee it's going to pop up on your team one day soon. Learn to recognize now it before it throws a monkey wrench into all your hard work.

What are Deadly Dynamics?

What is a Deadly Dynamic? It is any situation in which two people are unwittingly driving each other into the very behavior they each hate. When it's happening to you, all you can see is that the other person is a pain (or a Dope, or a Jerk, or a Pick-Your-Favorite-Epithet). You're very aware of the dysfunctional behavior of the other person, but have a hard time seeing what you do that keeps the dynamic spinning. In my experience, it almost always Takes Two to Tango.

The best way to describe the phenomenon is with a few examples:

The Case of the Micro-Managing Boss

Bob has a classic complaint: "My boss, Jason, is a real micro-manager -- controlling, insecure, the whole nine yards. He's always peering over my shoulder. He even spies on me by squeezing my peers and direct reports for dirt! I usually like to bat around ideas with my boss, but if I ask this guy for input, I know he'll just take over. The only way to have any control over my work is to try to stay below the radar. It's a full time job to keep him from meddling in my work."

We can all sympathize with that situation. Micro-managers are a nightmare. The only choices are to live with it or go look for another job.

But now let's go talk with Jason: "Bob is so secretive. He won't keep me informed about what he's working on and never asks for my input. It's like pulling teeth to get any information from him. It makes me worry that he is doing a lousy job or even something unethical -- either way it's something that will one day blow up in my face. I've even had to resort to asking his peers and direct reports what's going on so I don't get blind-sided!"

Now the picture looks a little different. They are caught in a deadly dynamic -- Bob holds back info. Jason, fearful of what he doesn't know, asks for more information than he would otherwise. In response, Bob becomes even more close mouthed. And on and on. All Bob can see is that Jason is Micro-Managing. All Jason can see is that Bob is Secretive. Neither is aware of how his own behavior is part of the dynamic.

The Case of the Flighty VP

John is a CEO who has concerns about a new VP: "I really value Mary's brains and enthusiasm, but I wish she weren't always in 'sales' mode. She gives me all the reasons why we should leap into action, but seems more interested in getting me to say 'yes' than in having a real dialogue about the pros and cons. I don't want to squash her creativity, so my first response is to acknowledge all the things I like in an idea, but often after sleeping on it I have some questions and concerns that I need addressed before I'm ready to commit resources. Mary travels a lot so I often send an e-mail the next day with my questions and concerns. And then I never hear back! She flits off onto the next thing. This lack of response to my questions makes me worry about her initial analysis as well as her ability to follow through and execute on any of her ideas. Maybe she doesn't really have the initiative I thought she did."

By now you know that Mary's experience is very different: "I started this job with a lot of energy and a desire to make a big impact, but after a few months I am very discouraged. Time and again I meet with John to talk through a new initiative. He's always very enthusiastic and gives me the green light, but the next day I get a long e-mail from him completely back pedaling. He can't tell me 'no' to my face or even engage in a face to face dialogue, so he does it by e-mail. Classic passive-aggressive

behavior! I could spin my wheels fighting him, but its clear he wants me to drop the idea and not waste any more time on it. I keep searching for an initiative that he will buy into so I can take some action and really show him how much value I can add to the business. I do my best to present a compelling picture so that he'll HAVE to say 'yes', but it doesn't seem to do any good. He clearly doesn't want VP's with any really initiative."

These are two people with very different styles who could complement each other, but instead drive each other to the extremes of their typical style.

What do these situations have in common?

1. Each person's viewpoint seems perfectly reasonable when viewed in isolation.
2. The two people are working at cross purposes.
3. Neither is aware that the other person's behavior is a response to something they are doing.
4. Each person assumes they know what the other is thinking or trying to do, and they're usually wrong.
5. The frustration has led them to assign bad intent and to put a derogatory label on the other.
6. They each assume the other can't change.
7. Neither person has brought up the issue with the other.
8. Nothing will change until they talk openly to each other.

Changing the Dynamic

The hard part about changing a deadly dynamic is that you're often not aware that you are in the middle of one. It doesn't feel dynamic at all. In fact, you feel very stuck in the face of unreasonable behavior that seems to have nothing to do with you. So the first step is to try to see what has so far been invisible to you. (Kind of like being in The Matrix and waking up to discover a whole new reality.)

The only way to fully see a deadly dynamic is to talk to that other person that you are so frustrated with. Sounds like a good way to make things worse, right? Well, it will make things worse if you're convinced that the other person is the problem and your job is to show them the error of their ways!

Instead, approach them with a spirit of inquiry and a desire to

understand the other side of the dynamic: I've been frustrated lately with how we've been working together and I'm wondering if you're frustrated too? I think if we both shared our perspective we might get a more complete understanding of what's going on.

You might want to share this e-mail with them and say: This newsletter got me thinking that we might be in the midst of our own deadly dynamic. Would you be willing to talk about it with me and see if we can get ourselves on a more productive footing? I'm open to the possibility that I'm doing something that adds fuel to the fire.

Silly Dynamics

Sometimes dynamics are more silly than deadly. My Dad is a frugal and practical guy and will wear a pair of jeans until they fall off his body in shreds. My Mom thinks Dad is a handsome devil (still!) and loves to see him looking his best. She also thinks that a man who has been so selfless and generous all his life deserves a few nice things. So, when she is out and about she picks up a few gifts for him so he can throw out those old rags and wear something spiffy. Dad's response is to put the new clothes away until he "really" needs them -- what could be more practical? But poor Mom never gets the satisfaction of seeing him in nice clothes, so the next time she is out shopping and sees something in the window, she thinks, "Won't that look nice on my sweetie" and buys it! Dad again puts the new duds in the back of the closet and calls me up and says: "Tell your Mother to stop buying me new clothes! I have a closet full of things I've never worn!" I tell him the only way to stop her is to unwrap some of those new things and wear them so she can get some satisfaction, but he can't get himself to do something so wasteful. Mom gets no satisfaction, so she continues with her wasteful shopping. I've told Dad that it is in his power to change the dynamic, but he says: I'd rather complain.

So there you have it. Would you prefer to complain rather than make a few adjustments in your own behavior?

(There is also the Heavenly Dynamic, in which Mom loves to cook gourmet meals and Dad loves to eat them. Dad takes one bite and his face is instantly transformed with bliss which he follows up with verbal appreciation. With such a response, Mom outdoes

herself on the next recipe and Dad searches for more superlatives with which to praise her. Good behavior elicits more good behavior. We should all be so lucky.)

Andrea Corney, President of Acorn Consulting, helps executives and management teams successfully meet the challenges of leading, managing and working with others. Visit her web site to learn more about how you can get traction on the critical issues facing your business. <http://www.acorn-od.com>
