

Rule 5: Focus Out Before Focusing In

From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict

"I need a volunteer...Greg?"

Wow, that felt more like telling than asking, I thought. "Sure Ron, I'd be glad to volunteer."

Ron asked me to stand in front of the group as he approached. I knew he picked me for a reason but wasn't quite sure why...that is until his hands hit my chest with such force that I stumbled back a couple of steps.

"What are you doing?" I yelled, trying to regain my composure.

"What do you think?" he said, as he wound up again for a second attack.

My classmates were in shock. Their eyes glued on Ron, trying to determine if they should watch the frontal assault or intervene somehow.

I braced myself.

WHAM! With both hands he struck my chest again. "What did you say?" he screamed.

Clearly Ron was trying to unravel me. I was determined not to engage. I smiled, "I didn't say anything Ron."

He lunged at me again and then again. Each time I took a step back and absorbed the blow. I pictured being Gumby and relaxed my body with each punch. He got angrier and angrier.



"Stop it!" yelled Mary, one of my classmates.

The tension in the room was intense...at least for everyone but me. Ron continued to attack and I continued to step back and absorb. Finally, out of exhaustion, he stopped and shook his head. "You asshole."

We all laughed, including Ron.

The Lesson

The confrontation above was Ron's way of teaching by example. He was my graduate school professor and we were talking about conflict in class. He picked me as his subject primarily because I had not shown any vulnerability in class as of yet and he wanted to demonstrate how easily it would be for any one of us to get emotionally drawn into a confrontation...only it didn't work.

Shhhh! Just between you and me...I probably would have gotten upset with Ron and overtly resisted his attack had I not been on display in front of my classmates. Because I was so aware that I was "on stage" per se, I found it fairly easy to maintain self-control throughout his aborted demonstration by focusing on him rather than me. This helped me better anticipate, absorb, and diffuse what was coming next. It is also the premise behind **Rule 5: Focus Out Before Focusing In.**

Conflict resolution is not about winning. It is not about being right. It is about finding win-win agreements and enhancing relationships. *Focusing out before focusing in* is essentially mental Aikido where the objective is to dance with the other party's energy instead of exerting our own. In other words, it's about focusing on understanding the problem completely from *their* side before trying to assert *our* side. Or, as the late, great Stephen Covey would say, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."



And here's the best part...we already have the skill set needed to do this. It's listening. That's right; I'm talking about the ability to listen from a place of curiosity, sincerity, and openness as opposed to listening from a place of judgment, contempt, and defensiveness.

The easiest way to diffuse an angry person is by showing them that we care about them as a person and their concerns equally. We do this by respectfully listening

and asking questions to ensure that we fully understand what's going on for them. When people feel heard...when people feel validated...when people feel cared for...their anger dissipates and their defenses soften. More importantly, they begin to feel connected to us and want to reciprocate by understanding our perspective.

It's that simple and it's that difficult.

I was speaking at a workshop when a woman in the audience took offense to something I said. She angrily rose from her seat and began to verbally attack me. Shocked, I could tell immediately that this was more of a misunderstanding than anything else. However, instead of interrupting her, arguing with her, or telling her she misunderstood, I took the time to listen and paraphrase back to her what I heard her saying. She looked up at me, somewhat surprised, and said, "Yes, that's it." I then apologized for my delivery and explained what I had meant to say. She smiled and thanked me to clarifying.

Did you see what I did?

This was no different than how I responded to Ron pushing me around the room. Instead of protecting myself through defending or resisting the attack (in this case a verbal assault), I focused out and listened to her words and calmly paraphrased them back to show understanding. I diffused the attack, just like I was able to do with Ron.



John Heider, author of *The Tao of Leadership* once told me to imagine seeing the words **TEACH ME** sitting above the head of every person that I have any conflict with as a way of reminding me to focus out before focusing in.

- *Teach me* what's upsetting you and why?
- *Teach me* how I may have contributed to the problem and what I can do to fix it.
- *Teach me* how to work with you so that we can collaborate better.
- *Teach me...Teach me...Teach me...*

And it worked!

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