

Why are they (you) fighting?



Most issues and points of difference and even bad events are resolved without conflict. Negotiation, discussion and helpful 3rd party input resolves the issue. Even when the issue is stressful and damaging (eg someone runs into your car...) most of the time people deal with the situation without descending into acrimony. But at other times a similar situation can quickly descend into conflict and acrimony. Why? And what can you do to help calm the situation??

The key thing to bear in mind when a 'fight' breaks out is it is always personal and emotional. If you can remove personality and emotion and all that remains is a difference or disagreement that can be negotiated, compensated and resolved¹. Conversely whilst a person's emotions are dominant, rational decision making is nearly impossible!

Unfortunately, emotions kick in quicker and are far more powerful than rational thought. Fight or flight is one of the most basic of survival strategies and the triggers for an emotional 'fight' response are based on each individual's life experiences. As soon as a 'trigger' matching the learned pattern of a perceived threat is sensed, the 'fight' reaction cuts in. Sometime later – a few seconds or a few hours later – rational thought may be sufficiently powerful to override the need to 'fight' but it always lags the instantaneous emotional reaction.

These emotional reactions are why it is possible to train people in one community to 'hate' everyone from another defined community (including innocent people they have never met), and why some people immediately become aggressive the second they see someone else they are programmed to react to.

The key to solving these problems within your work and social groups lays in the fact emotional reactions are based on learning, either from 'social training' or from personal experience, and frequently involve reacting to a 'stereotype'.

The easiest of these to manage is where a stereotype is directly involved; you simply have to distinguish the specific person from the overall stereotyping. Yes, everyone from the PMO is an interfering bureaucrat focused on wasting time by gathering excessive detail..... But Mary from the PMO is different; she is really a 'project manager' and can help you learn to use this tool to make your job easy. In this scenario, Mary has been reclassified as a 'project manager' and taken out of the 'PMO stereotype'. This is always easy to do because there are no positive stereotypes; you simply need to highlight the positives in the individual.

Where the 'fight' is more personal your task is much harder, particularly if you are involved in the 'fight'. The key is still to remove the emotion to make room for rational considerations but removing deeply felt emotions can be very difficult.

A starting point is to remember emotions are instinctive, rational though needs work. Factors such as tiredness, stress and other emotional events can all shift the balance of power towards the instinctive emotional reaction of 'fight'. Reducing any of these can help rational thinking.

¹ For more on **problem solving** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf

The next factor is emotions are driven by chemical reactions and the body will slowly return to neutral. Taking 'time out' to cool down will allow rational thinking to cut in, provided the emotions are not triggered again as soon as the other person is brought back into the discussion. This process can be encouraged by diversionary tactics such as changing the focus of discussion, changing the place of discussion or doing something completely different (it's a good time to go down the pub...). Even simply dimming the lights helps – research shows emotions are stronger in bright light – a quiet dimly lighted space really does sooth the emotions....

Mediators use a number of tactics to start a rational negotiation in this type of situation, one is to encourage each of the parties to a dispute to 'let it all out' and vent their anger in a controlled environment, once a person has done this it is very difficult to maintain the rage. Another is to hold one-on-one discussions and carry messages back and forth for a while between the parties so that the trigger for fighting (the other person) is taken out of the equation and the messages can be heard. Then if there is any common ground, rational debate can start and with luck and good management continue once the parties are face to face.

The *PMBOK® Guide* advocates keeping disagreements professional and based on rational discussions of information, and ultimately any agreed solution to a problem will be reached by rational discussion (including mediation and negotiation).

However, whilst this is desirable, we are all people with emotions and sometimes our emotions will take over. A good manager recognises this and uses social skills² to allow time for the emotions to settle before using more proactive negotiating tactics to bring rational debate back into play.

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² For more on **conflict management** see:
https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041_Managing_Conflict.pdf

