



Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 4): *Taking charge of our humanity.*

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Summary of Part 3

Part 3 of this series expands on the idea that regaining trust requires effort. It specifically reviewed cognitive dissonance theory and recommended that dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) be added to everyone's toolkit daily. The article continued to stress the importance of distinguishing between conflict resolution tactics and conflict resolution strategies and, ultimately, the importance of gaining time to gain time to rebuild trust.

The Nature of Humanity

In Part 3 of this series, we discussed cognitive dissonance and how our inability to control our emotions often prevents us from thinking clearly during escalating tension. While practicing DBT techniques can help prevent conflict escalation, it does not fully explain why humans behave the way they do. To better understand this, we need to discuss the nature of being human.

At its core, being human is defined by how we engage with the world to meet our needs, desires, and aspirations, all within the framework of complex—and often contradictory—social norms. As social animals, our survival has depended on problem-solving, cooperation, competition, and the ever-present drive to control our environment. These fundamental

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Taking charge of our humanity

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aspects of human nature reveal a dynamic and interdependent relationship between individuals, groups, and the environments in which they live.

We all derive our livelihoods from solving our own or others' problems. Regardless of circumstance, vocation, or avocation, humans develop or discover skills that are valued by others. Human societies are built upon the necessity of solving both personal and collective problems by mobilizing collective skills that are of intrinsic value to the social order at any given time and place.

However, this collective problem-solving does not occur in a vacuum. We are constantly cooperating or competing with others to solve our own—or our group's—problems. In every social setting—whether in a workplace, a family, or a nation—individuals and groups often work together to solve problems. However, they are also competing to fulfill their own personal and subgroup interests.

Cooperation is essential for addressing large-scale challenges, such as building a bridge or mobilizing a community to prevent a destructive flood, where the needs of different groups must align to find a resolution. This balance between cooperation and competition is equally important in smaller-scale contexts, such as workplace dynamics or family interactions. Even within cooperative efforts, there is often an undercurrent of competition. Groups vie for resources, influence, and recognition while navigating the complex balance of shared and divergent interests.

We continually work to build coalitions and alliances to influence others toward our goals. Lastly, we all attempt to control our personal space and environment to the extent we believe we can. Humans have a fundamental need to secure and maintain control over their immediate surroundings. This need for control manifests in various ways, from how we organize our homes to how we interact with broader social and political structures. People seek autonomy and agency, striving to protect their personal space—physical, emotional, and psychological—against perceived threats, whether they are external forces or internal uncertainties.

Ultimately, the interplay of cooperation, competition, coalition-building, and the quest for control forms the backbone of human society. Whether through solving problems, aligning with others, or asserting control over our surroundings, humanity is constantly negotiating its place in a world that is both interconnected and competitive. This constant dynamic shapes the human experience, propelling individuals and groups toward progress, conflict, and, ultimately, the ever-shifting balance of power.

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Taking charge of our humanity

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Our Inadequate Conflict Knowledge

Most of us, most of the time, emotionally react to the predictions our brains create about our immediate circumstances. We navigate a jungle of our own making, reacting to stimuli of all sorts.

Countries like Finland, Norway, Sweden, Japan, Canada, South Africa, Switzerland, Singapore, and New Zealand have integrated conflict resolution into their societal frameworks. Peaceful communication, restorative practices, and community-based solutions are prioritized as part of social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks, which aim to nurture academic success, emotional well-being, and social harmony. By embedding these skills in early education and social environments, these countries create systems that actively reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation and promote healthier, more cooperative communities.

In contrast, the United States often falls short in its approach to conflict resolution. While there are pockets of effort within educational and community settings, the overall approach is inconsistent. Often, what is taught about conflict directly contradicts other values promoted in society.

In the U.S., the norms of social behavior often conflict with one another, creating confusion about how conflicts should be handled, as expectations vary between families, workplaces, and communities. For instance, while self-reliance is a core social value, Americans are also taught to depend on authority figures—such as law enforcement or the legal system—to resolve conflicts. However, this reliance on authority can create tensions, especially in communities where seeking help from outside parties is seen as a weakness or a betrayal.

When individuals are faced with disputes that cannot be resolved by authority figures, or when authority fails to act, the situation can become even more problematic. In such instances, conflicts may go “underground,” with informal and potentially harmful tactics—such as manipulation or coercion—used to settle differences.

The reliance on power dynamics to enforce win-lose settlements further complicates the resolution process. This plays out in many ways, from workplace power struggles to legal disputes, where the outcome often involves costly, adversarial settlements that have both social and emotional consequences. In many cases, the outcomes are expensive—not just financially, but also in terms of social and emotional costs. Individuals or groups that “win” may do so at the expense of others’ well-being, perpetuating cycles of resentment and division.

This adversarial approach can strain relationships and undermine social cohesion. The result is

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Taking charge of our humanity

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a society where conflict resolution becomes a zero-sum game, and cooperation or compromise is an afterthought. Furthermore, when power is the primary tool for resolving disputes, it fosters a climate where individuals are less likely to engage in open communication or restorative practices, as the focus is solely on winning.

The disconnect between social norms, behavioral expectations, and conflict resolution strategies creates significant challenges in fostering true collaboration, equity, and well-being across diverse communities in the U.S.

We Must Transform Ourselves

Ultimately, individuals' perceptions of reality are shaped by their internal motivations, external influences, and the communication structures they navigate. These factors determine how they engage with others through collaboration, competition, or conflict and significantly affect the outcomes of interpersonal interactions and societal dynamics.

Humans are among the most successful species on the planet. Our ability to innovate, adapt, and persevere has brought us to extraordinary heights, enabling us to build complex societies and transform our environment. However, these same qualities have also made us dangerous—to others, our environments, and ourselves. This duality is particularly evident in our interpersonal and workplace relationships, where unresolved conflicts, unchecked ambition, and poor communication often lead to dysfunction. At the same time, systemic factors such as unclear expectations or lack of resources can also contribute to dysfunction.

To thrive in both our personal and professional lives, we must confront a fundamental truth: we are inherently capable of harm. Recognizing this truth is the first step toward improving how we interact with others and creating environments where collaboration and respect can flourish.

In the workplace, humans often bring the same traits that once helped us survive as a species: competitiveness, resilience, and a drive to dominate. While valuable in some contexts, these qualities can be destructive when misapplied. For instance, excessive competition can undermine teamwork, and unchecked ambition can lead to toxic environments where trust erodes.

Improving workplace relationships doesn't mean adopting unrealistic ideals or avoiding difficult conversations. It's not about 'playing nice' all the time or pretending that everyone will get along perfectly, nor is it about suppressing assertiveness or ambition. It's about understanding

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Taking charge of our humanity

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that realistic accommodation, compromise, and exploring new cooperative solutions are better alternatives to emotional outbursts that escalate unnecessary conflict.

We must take responsibility for managing our behavior. Waiting for leadership or organizational culture to change is often futile. While systemic changes in the workplace are important, real progress begins at the individual level. Each person has the power to influence their environment through their own actions and choices.

By recognizing that we are inherently capable of harm and choosing to act differently, we can create healthier dynamics and more productive environments. Change doesn't happen overnight, but small, intentional actions—combined with sustained effort over time—can lead to meaningful transformations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the interplay of cooperation, competition, coalition-building, and the drive for control forms the backbone of human society. These fundamental aspects of human behavior influence how we interact, solve problems, and navigate our environments. While our inherent tendencies often lead to conflict, they also fuel innovation, collaboration, and societal progress. Societies that emphasize conflict resolution, as seen in countries that integrate empathy, tolerance, and restorative practices into their educational and cultural frameworks, are more likely to foster peaceful, cooperative communities.

By recognizing our capacity for harm and embracing self-awareness, individuals can work toward transforming interpersonal and workplace dynamics. Rather than waiting for systemic change, we must take responsibility for our behavior and manage our tendencies consciously. Small, intentional actions—focused on empathy, collaboration, and respect—can help build healthier relationships, promote productive environments, and create lasting positive change in both personal and professional spheres.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:

https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/resolving_issues_with_your_boss_part4.pdf

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Taking charge of our humanity

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