



ARTICLE 20: My way or yours? Win or lose?

When the roll of toilet paper runs out in your household, who changes it? If it is you, which way do you hang it – roll coming forward ‘over the top’ to hang loose at the front; or do you hang it so it goes ‘over the back’ and underneath? Have you ever thought about why you hang it ‘your’ way? Have you ever asked anyone else why they hang the toilet roll ‘their’ way?

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Many years ago I shared a house with someone who hung the toilet roll ‘over the back’. I would change it to ‘my’ way which was ‘over the top’. They would change it to their way. We got annoyed with each other; each changed it round to our own way and would find the other turned it back again. We fought about it – each believing ‘my way is THE right way; the best way’. And then one day, as I was perched on the toilet, in a moment of mature curiosity rather than childish irritation, I asked myself that simple question. Why do I hang it my way? I thought about it and realized that what I was valuing was ‘quick, easy’ access to the end of the roll – in short I was valuing ‘efficiency’. I decided to ask my housemate. She said that her way was ‘neater’. She considered her way was more aesthetic. I didn’t particularly agree that her way was more aesthetic than mine – but I saw that she was simply seeing it differently to me and judging it in a particular way according to her frame of reference, her ‘values’ or her intention. What a revelation that was to me!

We both realized that neither way was fundamentally right or wrong; better or worse. We finally understood what was really playing out and came up with a simple solution that worked for both of us: whoever hung the new toilet roll got to have it their way and the other agreed not to change it round! No more fights and no more petty behaviour about the toilet roll.

Following on from my toilet roll revelation, the more I reflected on my other actions and behaviours, the more I saw how much of what I do favours efficiency: the route I cycle to the train station; the choice of transport I take depending on the time of day, weather, distance of my journey (cycle, bus, car, train, plane). And it is not about speed; it’s about my own personal assessment of what equates as ‘efficiency’. I came to realise, that I am always making unconscious ‘judgments’ about the most efficient way to do things – I don’t like doing over and over again, something I find boring or that I don’t enjoy. Sometimes, to an observer, it doesn’t look like I am doing things efficiently. Like when I spend hours creating a spreadsheet with equations and interdependencies; for me the efficiency about doing this is so I only have to ‘think’ once about how to do each calculation. Someone else I know does her calculations scribbled on paper – and might keep doing them over and over that way, each time a variable changes. THAT to me is inefficient AND boring AND frustrating. To her, my way is inefficient because the time setting up the system takes ‘so long’. She doesn’t see that I am seeking efficiency over a longer time frame AND I am freeing myself up to do things I LOVE rather than spending hours re-hashing the numbers. I invest in the system (which I enjoy) so that I don’t have to keep re-doing a numerical calculation from scratch (which I hate). But she loves the numbers so she is having FUN re-working the calculations. We both value enjoying what we are doing – but enjoying ourselves sometimes means doing very different things. When we don’t appreciate each other’s underlying drivers, we are more likely to find ourselves in conflict.

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And this matters because...?

When I am working with managers and leaders around organizational culture, I continue to have fun asking the toilet roll question. I have been surprised about the varied interpretations that people place on either option. Apparently some folk think that over the top is neater than over the back; whilst others, like my former house mate, see this the other way round. Gerry, a manager in a global corporation, believes that over the back is definitely the best option. Why? To avoid toddlers spinning the roll and unraveling into piles of paper onto the floor, of course! But what if the said toddler discovers a different game where finding the loose end of the roll (front or back) is part of the fun, and is the preamble to starting to ‘pull and run’? Suddenly neither way is toddler-proof! When his toddler discovers ‘pull and run’, Gerry might find himself shocked and annoyed at the piles of wasted toilet roll all over the house. His annoyance may be triggered because in his sense-making, unconsciously or consciously he will be concluding that something important to him (a need, value or intention) will have been violated or dishonoured. These are strong emotive words. A little over the top, perhaps? But just for a moment, reflect on what makes YOU really mad? Think of some seemingly trivial thing that someone does differently to you – it could be the way your partner loads the dishwasher? Perhaps someone leaves things lying around rather than puts them away? Do you sort things for recycling while someone else puts everything into the bin? Do you ‘do detail’ whilst someone else does ‘broad brush’?

When differences show up and things don’t happen as we expect or want them to happen, we may get annoyed, disappointed, even despairing. And with these kinds of emotions, we lose our ability to think clearly. We find ourselves in conflict. We get fixated on a specific action, behaviour, or way of doing something, thinking IT is THE only way or THE problem, rather than concerning ourselves with its real outcomes – its benefits or dis-benefits. Back to the toilet roll – can it serve its fundamental purpose whichever way it is hung; whether or not it is hung up at all? Of course it can! What is most important is that it is THERE (at least for those of us who, rather than washing our nether regions each time, use toilet paper for the purpose for which it was intended). And for the pre-potty trained toddler, the purposes of that toilet roll might be simply to have FUN, to discover something new, to experience the power of acting on the world – all of which won’t be conscious to our wee toddler.



Actions can be key to illuminating the meanings we each make. How we make meaning gives us a line of sight into what we value or need or some purpose we are seeking to fulfill. Not recognizing nor appreciating our different meaning-making is what gets us into strife with each other. When we understand this, we can move beyond blindly fighting over a clash of unrecognised meanings, to considering whether or not particular actions serve a useful purpose. And as we get better at this kind of exploration, we quickly discover that there can be many equally valid ways to achieve something. This appreciation eases us to a place of being able to choose together, a best-fit option that arises from consideration from more perspectives.

And so the point of all this is....?

And so the point of the toilet roll story - here and with my clients – is to reveal that no single view point or meaning or interpretation or value or purpose is fundamentally right or better than any other. They are merely different; and each may be a better fit in varying contexts. When friction or conflict arises, we can see this as a time to dig our heels in and fight to have it our way – simultaneously creating winners and losers AND the seeds of the next battle. Or as Danaan Parry once wrote, we can see conflict as ‘a struggle for intimacy’. What he meant by this, is to see conflict as an invitation to connect – to enquire into another’s perspective, to seek to understand and share and discover what brings and holds us together. The original derivation of ‘con’ means ‘with’, not ‘against’. Conflict means strike together. When we strike flint together, it creates a spark capable of igniting fire that makes all sorts of things possible. In coming together with people different to ourselves we open the space for sparks of creativity. It is a place full of potential for new possibilities to arise out of old solutions. It can be ‘exciting and connecting’ or ‘frightening and separating’. We choose our meaning and we reap the outcomes of our interpretations – at home, at work at play.

And my invitation....?

As we move into 2012, I wonder what transformations might emerge if more of us chose an intention to explore the meaning-making behind the frictions that arise between ourselves and the people in our lives – at home, at work, in the street, in our communities? What might we discover? Who might become an integral part of our lives? What might we come to create together?

Louie is the only certified Human Systems Dynamics Consultant in Scotland and one of only 15 in the UK

To explore how Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) can support you, your teams and organisations, feel free to contact her:

louie.gardiner@potent6.co.uk www.potent6.co.uk
<http://www.hsdinstitute.org/>

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