CHAPTER 12

Time

Time is a gift. It is your friend. In a smartphone and social networking crazed world, a world that is driven by instant messages and immediate access, this idea defies all logic. What could possibly be useful about taking time in dealing with conflict? We don't have time for that!

Patience Is a Virtue

When we talk about time in the context of a conflict, we are mostly talking about patience. Here is an example: In January, my company completed work on a project for one of our favorite clients. Back in the office, after a job well done—the client agreed on that—we submitted an invoice. Just like we always do. The phone rang in March. "So sorry, there has been a mix-up with the contracting vehicle; it's going to take us a couple more weeks to sort this out." We are now well into the middle of May—those bare branches of winter were in the full green leaf of spring—and we still had not been paid. Somewhere in the maze of cubi-

Dear Lord, give me patience. And I want it right now.

cles in that organization, three duplicate invoices are drifting about, between desks. The frustration has built up to boiling in my office. Passersby can watch the steam coming out of my ears after each phone call. Losing my patience—or my temper—with them is not an option. We need their cooperation—and we want to be able to continue working with them on other projects.

Time allows us to cool off emotionally and have a different kind of conversation.

Time allows people to change their (our) minds.

Time allows wounds to heal.

Time allows an apology to sink in, and allows us to forgive.

Time allows us to save face.

Time allows us to check to be certain the solutions we are proposing are actually possible.

Patience may be a virtue. I've certainly been told that all my life. I wish I had it, but many times I don't. Sometimes all I can do is pretend to be patient. When my mind is spinning over a disagreement or argument, I can use a variety of patient-like strategies. A few conscious deep breaths help me get off the treadmill of thoughts. I look for distracting tasks that can get me through the moment. Maybe I can walk out to get the mail. Or check my to-do list for simple jobs that require little thought but that continue to linger, waiting to be completed. I may divert my attention by balancing the accounts or cleaning out the old folders on my computer. I might pick up the phone and connect with a friend, or find a few moments to write my thoughts in a journal.

When you remove time, you are subject to the lowest-quality intuitive reaction.

—GAVIN DE BECKER

If I can find some task that pulls my mind away from this moment, this urgency, this anxiety, I can give myself time to reconsider my initial reaction. On the other side of the simple task, my mind is clear. The moment of anxiety has faded. Not only is the stack of papers filed or the account balanced but I can also put the disagreement into better perspective and often find a more productive way through it.

Your computer gives that familiar ping. A new e-mail is waiting for you. Interrupting your work, you open it up. Your heart races as you read. One of your employees has accused you of botching the report on a major account. How could he dare accuse you like this? *And* how could he have copied your boss on this? Every cell in your brain seems to be screaming, "Let's set the record straight right now!"

Time could be your best friend in this moment. Yes, you could type out an angry response, telling him all that he needs to know about where he really fits in the world and how right you were on this point—and maybe every other point you have made in the last six months. But you remember this: Time is my friend. You resist all of the urges to hit the send button. You save it as a draft e-mail. You wait. You reopen the message the next day and reread it—you might even ask someone you trust to read it as well. *Does my message really convey my meaning? Will the recipient understand the key points I am trying to make? Or will he only hear the venom and respond in kind, his own fingers pounding the keyboard in self-defense?*

Patience is the ability to idle your motor when you feel like stripping your gears.

—**Barbara Johnson**

There is some news that's best let into your mind gradually. I have learned that, when I receive an e-mail that stirs up a hot reaction, I manage it better if I read it once, close it, move on to something else, and then come back to it a little later, to reread and consider it again. Invariably, when I slow down the process, and relax my reaction time, the news is much easier to take and my response is the better for it. What I felt in that first moment was like a huge, searing red coal that turned out to be no more than a few sparks that floated away on the updraft. Try it, try the pause that refreshes, and see if this doesn't work for you, as well.

The Perry Mason Effect

How do people change their minds, especially when you believe they are

wrong? That old *Perry Mason* program on television gave us the wrong idea. The show hasn't been on for years, but the lesson persists. A long time ago, my family sat each week in front of the black-and-white TV to watch the show. Life was simpler then, with only three channels and no remote, picking a program to watch was easy.

Now that I look back on it, I realize that every week of *Perry Mason* was really the same show. Each episode Raymond Burr (as defense attorney Perry Mason) spent the first forty-five minutes developing the case. Then, in the last fifteen minutes, he put a witness on the stand and badgered this person until he or she collapsed. "You're right," she would sob, "I killed them all." The next week, my family gathered eagerly in the living room again, to watch the same scenario with different actors and a different stage set. Another witness would take the stand, and again, Perry Mason would bear down on this person until he crumpled with another confession. Looking back, I realize what this routine taught us about how to change someone's mind: keep at it until the person collapses in exhaustion and agrees with you.

But our minds really don't work that way. We need time to process new information, to reflect, to decide what makes sense and to let go of old beliefs. People are much more likely to hear what you have to say and incorporate new thinking if you give them time to think it through for themselves. Talk it out, listen to what they have to say, say what needs to be said from your perspective, and take a break. Come back later to see what shifts may have taken place in their thinking. Or maybe even in your own.

Perhaps you have heard this advice, "If you want an answer right away, the answer is no. If you can give me a chance to think about it, the answer is maybe." Most of us don't think in a linear fashion. We are much more like cartoon characters (I think of Billy in the *Family Circus*, or Jeremy in *Zits*), who wander out the back door on the way to wherever and meander all through the neighborhood before getting there. Moment by moment, our brains are subject to all kinds of thoughts. Taking time to pause, to process, allows the choppy waves of thought for calm and clarity to appear.

Time Heals Wounds—Yours as Well as Theirs

Allow yourself or others time to recover from hurts or from ego injuries.

When the pain or the slight is fresh, accept that time may help to create some space for healing.

Particularly, when you offer an apology, give people time to think over what you have said and decide whether to accept it. Forgiveness doesn't come in a minute or an hour or even a day. It can help to give the other person permission upfront not to respond. "I want to tell you something. I really don't need any kind of answer from you right away. It's just something to think about."

And when someone apologizes to you, you may not feel an immediate rush of forgiveness. That's okay. Let the conversation seep in, allow yourself time to consider what has been said. You may find, reflecting on the conversation a day or so later, that you can let go of some of the pain or disruption that was created, and forgiveness begins to germinate. What had seemed so important has melted away, like the snowball you stuck in the freezer last winter to throw at Frankie at the Fourth of July picnic. Where did it go?

Johnna and her boss Karl came into the mediation at odds. She had a list of complaints: how she had been overlooked for assignments and projects, how she was out of the loop for important communications within the office. Johnna talked. Karl listened. Then Karl spoke: "I realize now that I could have done things differently. I could have been more open and forthcoming with you. I felt like you didn't trust me, and so I couldn't bring myself to talk to you more directly. And for that, I want you to know I am sorry."

The mediator heard a sincere, genuine apology. Johnna didn't. She refused to believe it and tossed it aside, saying, "You're just trying to play me for a fool." The mediation ended without the apology's being accepted. The employee was allowed to go on administrative leave for two weeks with pay and then resign. While an agreement was reached to address the tangible concerns that were raised, the hurts between the two lived on. Afterwards, Johnna talked to the mediator: "I got what I wanted but it doesn't feel good."

The mediator asked, "Was there something that you needed

that you did not get, or was there anything offered that you did not accept?"

Johnna didn't answer. A few days later, Johnna sent the mediator an e-mail. "Now, I understand what you meant when you asked 'Was there something I was offered and did not accept?' There was, and now I have accepted it." She went on to say that she was ready to write her boss to say thank you, and that she, too, would apologize.[1]

Time to Process Feedback

When someone criticizes you or your work, take time to think about what you have heard before you respond. Criticism and complaints often sting, so our first reactions are usually defensive. We swing into retort mode: self-justifications, or shifting the blame to somebody or something else, or making a joke out of it, or making assumptions about their negative intentions. We'll do anything to keep from taking in the words and processing them, thinking about them, deciding which ones we want to keep and which we'll throw away. But this is where significant change can occur if we let it. Allow yourself time to respond.

Never be afraid to sit awhile and think.

—**Lorraine Hansberry**

Few of us have the grace to say "thank you" in the face of criticism, but thank you may be just what is in order. "Thank you for letting me know." "Thank you for coming to me with this information." In other words, "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to improve." Or that noxious phrase, "Thanks for sharing." Then you back away from the conversation to consider what has been said. Is it true? How much of it is true? How much of this is about me? How much might be about the other person?

Keep in mind that your most objectionable traits are the ones about which you may be the most defensive.

Grieving Takes Time

Most of us are familiar with the five stages of grief when dealing with death and dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. They go something like this:

Denial: "This can't be happening." "It can't be true."

Anger: "How can this happen to me?" "It's not fair!" "Whose fault is this?"

Bargaining: "Just give me one more chance."

Depression: "I just can't go on."

Acceptance: "All right, then. It is what it is. I can handle it."

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross introduced us to these stages and refined her understanding as she worked with people through terminal illnesses. She pointed out that people don't always go through these stages in linear, one-through-five order. Some will only go through two or three. Others will loop back through some of these stages several times over many years.

We go through these stages when we face all kinds of losses, not just loss of life. You can see this in so many situations in the workplace: the promotion she didn't get, a lower evaluation than he expected, the loss of teammates during a reorganization, a difficult conflict with a peer, an uncomfortable reprimand. The ups and downs of life always bring losses, as well as gains. The grieving process is how we work through those losses.

What can we do with this information? We can allow ourselves and others time and space to grieve when bad news comes, rather than demanding a "happy face" as an immediate response. We can realize that most people will work through these stages and arrive at acceptance. For example, if someone is angry, give the person some time to live through that feeling and to cool down. It is okay to have those feelings and work through them without the anger controlling the outcome. If someone is depressed, listening to the individual may be helpful. Telling or expecting him or her to simply cheer up will not do it. To give up these feelings can also be a loss that may require letting go—and grieving.

Ben, a man in his sixties, had filed an EEO complaint against his employer. He claimed discrimination against him due to his age, race, and religion. From the agency's point of view, he had been given every chance—he had been on three Individual

Development Plans (IDPs)—and the agency was increasingly frustrated with his job performance, or lack of it.

The agency representative came to the mediation with a new offer: The agency would give him a "clean record"—they would raise all his performance ratings from minimally successful to highly successful, remove all references to the performance plans, and give him a neutral letter of recommendation. In return, he was asked to withdraw his complaint, resign or retire, and never apply for another position with the agency. Everyone else at the meeting, including his attorney, considered this a sweet deal. To everyone's amazement, Ben said no—and not just no but "Hell, no!" He then turned and fired his attorney.

On reflection, the mediator realized what was missing. (Even mediators need a little time to think.) Ben had just returned from burying his brother, aged seventy-two. He had mentioned it ever so briefly during the discussion. Everyone present already knew about this—the mediation had been postponed so that he could attend the funeral. Ben was dealing with loss: the loss of his brother, the loss of his career, his loss of status. The mediator asked himself the question, *Why would a reasonable, rational, logical person turn down such an offer from the agency? What was it that I missed?*

In an instant, the mediator understood. What was never given time or space in this meeting was all of the losses Ben was dealing with. The agency's offer did nothing to address his multiple sense of loss. The discussion had been all about the tangibles of severance. In the mediator's words, "In the rush to settle, the emotional reality was never dealt with. I believe that had we taken time to address the loss issue we may have been closer to a real resolution."

Time as a Face-Saving Tool

In the previous example, the two parties had dug into their positions. One was adamant in his demand. The other refused to budge. They had each held their position so loudly and for so long that neither can back

down without feeling defeated. They are stuck, committed to being stuck and staying stuck.

Admitting you may be wrong, allowing another person's needs or opinions or demands any latitude of acceptability, can be really difficult. Giving in feels like losing. So, I usually call a break: "Let's come back after lunch" … or maybe tomorrow. It still surprises me how often, when they have had the chance to withdraw, even for a short break from each other, the parties to a dispute come back to the next meeting ready to move on. Those brain chemicals I mentioned in the last chapter have had time to dissipate. One side will say, "I've thought about it, and in the interest of moving forward I'm willing to offer. . . . " The break has given them both time to reconsider. And time to find the words that allow them both to change their minds without losing face.

Time to Check It Out

Decision making in an organization takes time. The bigger the organization, the longer it can take to make decisions. Earlier in the book, I described midlevel managers as the "knees" of the organization, absorbing the pressures from staff and managing the expectations of those above. When managers are making decisions for the company or in any bureaucracy, everyone needs to allow time for the decision-making process to move up the chain, with your own boss and sometimes between your boss and her boss. The more layers that need or expect to have some authority in decision making, the more time this will take. The bigger the question, and the more complex the decision making, the longer it will take.

Headquarters was installing new software for case tracking. Rudy's office, intimately involved in all issues regarding case tracking, was in direct line for lots of confusion and questions from other offices. While he did have a budget for training his staff and the authority to allocate it as he saw the need, these new demands were more than the training budget could accommodate. Rudy met with his boss to get the additional funding. His boss, Jessica, said, "I'll get back to you." At the same time she was

also juggling multiple demands for her time from her own boss and from other departments. While Rudy waited for an answer, his employees were also impatient, waiting for some word from him.

Employees sometimes become irritated because they cannot see the many levels of decision making that are required to get a final answer, even on what seems to be a fairly obvious need. People who don't have this understanding of the decision-making chain may think that the boss is stonewalling or being indecisive, when in fact he or she has done everything possible and is waiting for others higher up to respond. The boss's job at this point may be to manage the staff's expectations about how much time the decision may take.

The Right Time

Here's something else to think about: when is the right time to raise an issue or discuss a difficult topic? Sometimes the force is almost overwhelming. You have had a thought and you are bursting with energy to address it right now. What do you do?

Slow down and think first. Where are they? What might they be in the middle of, or on their way to? If the other person is working on a project or against a deadline, now is not the best time to talk. Maybe he hasn't had a cup of coffee yet. Maybe she's not a morning person. Or maybe she is. Or is it right before he's about to head out the door for lunch or at the end of the day? You simply won't have the attention that you want or that the topic deserves if the person involved is too preoccupied and can't take in the information and respond.

Maybe you've got an issue with an employee and you decide to raise it at the staff meeting. Putting someone on the spot in the middle of a meeting is no way to get a reasoned, reasonable discussion going. You are just about guaranteed a negative response—defensiveness, counterattack—or no response at all. Embarrassing someone in a meeting is a setup for disaster. Maybe you know what I mean because this has happened to you. No, you are likely to have a much better response if you

mention it when the time is right—if it's at a time that works for others' schedules as well as your own.

This advice applies to information going in the other direction, as well. If someone storms into your office with a blast on an issue, step back a moment. Is this something that requires an immediate response? If it's a life-or-death question, the answer is yes. If it's not, in most cases you can set a time to talk that works for your schedule and for the other person's, a time that will allow each of you to think more calmly about the matter at hand. Maybe you want to sleep on that last point. (There is more on this in Chapter 13.)

Note

1. Thanks to Michael West for this story.

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