

Paralysis: When Issues Fester, How Does One Get Started?

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Who will fix social security, the third-rail of American politics? Millions of Baby Boomers are entering retirement and the social safety net is torn. No one agrees on what to do.

Who will settle the face-off between Red and Blue America with different attitudes about the future of the country and its values?

Who will resolve longstanding arguments over abortion in the US? The issue divides citizen against citizen.

Who will forge peace between Palestinians and Israelis, between Pakistan and India, among Serbs, Croats and Albanians, between Russia and Chechnya, between China and Taiwan?

A list of irreconcilable, festering issues is long. PR practitioners can discuss relationship building, but they should acknowledge there are knotty arguments about which relationships cannot be built – not at this time anyway. There is major corporate, cultural, political and international dissension that needs resolution, but opposing groups fracture along many lines and messages to one rile the other.

So how does one get started toward relationship and resolution in the face of paralysis? Or, can one get started at all? Are some relationship barriers futile or just extraordinarily difficult?

Working on paralyzed disagreements can be thankless. It is like a marriage therapist confronting quarreling mates. The therapist tries to get a positive response about the relationship. Perhaps from one nice comment a mate can move toward renewed relationship. Chances are, however, one or both mates have had enough, or they use therapy to avoid issues. They complain at length or express anxiety without facing what needs to be done.

Communication must be possible and probable. There must be a possibility of communicating and the probability of doing so. You can write someone an e-mail or letter and know it has been delivered, but the other person need never read it nor respond. You can show up at a house and knock at the door, but no one need open it. Relationship demands communication. When a party refuses to talk, it is impossible to cross the barrier. That is why PR practitioners should spend more time studying individuals and psychology than messages or media.

Paralysis and the human barrier

Lack of will to send or listen to a message is a psychological barrier beyond psychology. A husband and wife should get along but they don't. Palestinians and Israelis should live together, but they won't. Taiwan and China should come to an accommodation, but they refuse. Chechnyans and Russians should realize the horrors they visit upon one another, but they look another way.

Even with intervention of diplomats, psychologists and experts, opposed individuals and groups fight or deceive one another. They hold irreconcilable assumptions that each grips and cannot, or will not, yield. They will not let the past rest, and they demand justice for real or imagined wrongs. They speak but do not listen. They talk to themselves and to those of like opinion and recruit new supporters. They regard opponents as evil and not individuals with a different point of view. They have no tolerance.

There are times when there is no justification for what another says or does. Citizens need not understand a sociopath's justification for random killing or a pederast's defense of boys as sex objects. Some self-interest and beliefs are inimical to civilization. A government dedicated to the destruction of another culture and its beliefs, as the Soviet Union avowed it would do to democracy, does not merit accommodation, except for the power it possesses. The West negotiated with the Soviets because it had to do so. The Soviets had the Bomb. But if an alien were to observe earthlings, it is likely the extraterrestrial would be baffled by quarreling between and among individuals and nations. There seems to be little pragmatism in ways humans think and perceive. They confront rather than cooperate and shout past one another.

Paralysis and opportunity – or lack of it

To cross or penetrate a human barrier, one must find and exploit a point of contact. To some that means escalating communications to principles on which all agree. (The terror of Mutually Assured Destruction by nuclear bombing was a point on which both the US and the Soviet Union could agree to stop aggression.) To others that means devolving communications to a point where one can talk to another in spite of disagreement. Ronald Reagan said he could associate after hours with his enemy in Congress, House Speaker Tip O'Neill.

However, neither tactic is guaranteed. Diplomats from the Soviet Union and the US talked for decades and never reached fundamental agreement until the Soviet Union disintegrated. Tip O'Neill proved a bitter enemy of Reagan until O'Neill died.

A standoff with fixed views has no opening. A standoff with shifting points of view might offer opportunity to initiate conversation. The key is how views shift. If opposed forces continuously find new ways to detest each other, they are

deepening hatred and ensuring its continuation. The centuries-long enmity between the Irish and English is a case in which each side nursed and amplified injury without room for accommodation. Thomas Jefferson, along with most Southerners, considered slaves “sub-human” at the same time his contemporary, Alexander Hamilton, was a leader of New York City abolitionists. Yet, Jefferson believed in democracy wholeheartedly, and Hamilton feared the uncontrolled mob. A double irony is that Jefferson apparently co-habited with a “sub-human” and produced progeny. The inability of Jefferson to see his double standard was extraordinary, especially when George Washington, a fellow Virginia planter, freed his slaves. So too, decades after abolishing the caste system in India, “Untouchables” are still relegated to menial jobs the rest of Indian society shuns.

There is, however, a possibility of using a right moment or of building to a right moment to breach paralysis. A right moment is an event that shows individuals the *status quo* is no longer relevant. They are usually shocking events that create extraordinary opportunities for someone to project a point of view. There have been a number of right moments in modern history – the bombing of Pearl Harbor, explosion of the first atomic bombs over Nagasaki and Hiroshima, erection of the Iron Curtain, the fall of the Berlin Wall and destruction of the World Trade Towers on 9/11. But such moments are few and limited in scope. They may change views about some aspects of culture or policy but not all. Decades, even centuries, can pass without an event that precipitates an opportunity for change in points of view. Creationists hew to a belief the world was created in six days and evidence from evolution is wrong. Bitterness between Croats and Serbs has not diminished in spite of wrecking their nation.

Building to a right moment is an effort to speed the future. It is a systematic approach to foster, grow and achieve a realization that things are not working as they are and must be changed. It is a public relations campaign but success may take decades rather than years, and ultimately, it might require generational change. There may be a chance to influence the young before they are captured by their milieu and in the lyrics of the musical, *South Pacific*:

You've got to be taught
To hate and fear,
You've got to be taught
From year to year,
It's got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught.

Ultimately, it appears that most shattering of paralysis comes from building to a right moment and a moment itself. Franklin Roosevelt knew America had to go to war to support England, but he couldn't act publicly until after Pearl Harbor.

American presidents since the late 1980s watched and warned about the rise of Muslim terrorists but they could not get backing until three planes loaded with passengers dove into US buildings. Although it is uncertain how social security will be repaired in the US, it is likely to fester until the fund is empty and payments are on the edge of being stopped. Then a general swelling of discontent and demand to “do something” will break the paralysis.

Breaking paralysis starts with assumptions

Messages and paralysis come from assumptions, the way individuals and groups view others and events around them. Some assumptions are at variance with facts. Others are not and are reasonable interpretations of the environment and individuals’ intentions. Some are imperfect or contradictory.

Credibility, or lack of it, is an assumption. One chooses to trust or not another based on perceptions of an individual’s words and action, or based on a larger framework tied to race, culture and creed. One can also be inconsistent, such as “I distrust Jews, but I love this Jewish person.”

Given the possibilities for how individuals perceive, the communicator’s first task is to explore whether assumptions can be challenged or modified. In some cases, they can be, and in others there is no room for maneuver. With paralysis, it is likely there is no evident opening for a change because if there were, it would have been used. Facts are likely to be useless, because a person or group assumes truth in spite of evidence.

Communicators should not only immerse themselves in individuals’ thinking and milieu but use specialists in human observation, such as anthropologists, psychologists and longtime observers of the individuals, in order to gain as much knowledge as possible about attitudes and perceptions leading to paralysis. However, understanding mindsets does not guarantee an answer to communicating. It might only open an avenue for developing messages – messages that might be acts rather than words. If an American Indian tribe believes the government unfairly confiscated land, which the tribe held by treaty, a first act would be to give the land back. A second act might be to compensate the tribe for lands that cannot be returned. The least credible act would be to tell the tribe “the government shares your pain.”

Assumptions are of two kinds –considered and not. Individuals with considered beliefs think about alternatives. It might be possible to get them to look again at reasons for why they assume what they do, but the emphasis is on “might.” Individuals with unconsidered beliefs hold fast to viewpoints without reasons for doing so. It might be possible to get such individuals to reflect, but unlikely. Close-mindedness is usually beyond reach even when it exists in the realm of the fantastic. For example, it is easy to believe this justification for the Flat Earth Society is tongue-in-cheek, but someone might believe the earth has edges.

The Flat Earth Society is a nonpartisan, non-profit and nondenominational membership organisation dedicated to improving the understanding of the nature of reality through pataphysical inquiry, empirical investigation and the exchange of ideas.

While the Society is not a "crackpot" group, it is opposed to the fashionable, politically correct Spherical Earth theory, which is expounded every day by so-called "scientists", the media and political leaders. The Society asserts that the Earth is flat and has five sides, that all places in the Universe named Springfield are merely links in higher-dimensional space to one place, and that all assertions are true in some sense, false in some sense, meaningless in some sense, true and false in some sense, true and meaningless in some sense, false and meaningless in some sense, and true false and meaningless in some sense. (From Flatearth.org: <http://www.flat-earth.org/society/about.html>)

The perception and understanding of individuals can be limited and vast at the same time. The African Bushman in the film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, has no more understanding of a Coca-Cola bottle falling from the sky than most laypersons do of quantum chromodynamics. On the other hand, the Bushman knows how to survive in the deserts of Africa when others cannot, and laypersons do not have to be physicists to succeed.

Communicators facing a void of experience and understanding must concentrate first on increasing individuals' knowledge to a point where one can discuss assumptions. For the Bushman, this might start by showing how an airplane flies and how a passing pilot dropped a bottle from it. For laypersons, this might be illustrations and nonmathematical explanations of subatomic forces. Feasibility, however, can only be determined through interaction with individuals to whom one is trying to communicate.

Where to Begin -- Face to Face

Fracturing paralysis and building to consensus starts with face-to-face contact and action and not with media campaigns. That is why the US State Department's effort to generate goodwill through a \$15 million advertising campaign was futile to Muslims to whom it was directed and led to the resignation of advertising guru Charlotte Beers. Muslims outside the US rejected images of Muslims living happily in the US. As another advertising executive said, public diplomacy is not about ads but about actions. Muslims distrust the US because of its support for Israel, and its invasion of Iraq. Imagery is not enough to overcome a lack of credibility.

Unfortunately, grand gestures and mind-shaking actions are rare and often, politically and culturally impossible to achieve – even in the corporate world. Therefore, face-to-face communication, convincing one person at a time, is the

more likely avenue a communicator will take until there is a critical number on whom one can rely. This is ground pounding at its most difficult.

There was a case in which a successful executive was embroiled in a sexual harassment suit. A grand gesture would have been to fire the executive who admitted to “fooling around.” But dismissing the person would have cost the company millions in separation fees and contractual payments. The CEO felt he had no choice and kept the executive. Despite high-minded notions, accommodation happens more often than not. Prudent CEOs guard their organizations first and resort to daily persuasion and arm-twisting to make their points.

One-on-one discussion may go nowhere as diplomats well know, but it might also be a basis of a quasi-rapprochement in which two parties remain enemies but trust each other enough to know one will not attack the other without warning or through deceit. On the other hand, one-on-one discussion might also forge a consensus that allows one to find an avenue for action without resolving the paralysis. We cannot agree on X but we can agree on Y. Hence, we will do Y and someday return to X. That in essence was the basis for agreement between the Soviet Union and the US to avoid Mutually Assured Destruction by nuclear missiles and bombs. Small movement, even if misdirected, creates an opening for communication. It doesn't end paralysis but it allows for interaction that might provide a way to resolution. That is better than nothing: Pragmatic communicators take what they can get.

Nor do communicators have to be transparent about what they are doing in their effort to open lines of communication. Transparency might foreclose initial conversation, and silence about one's goal might well be preferable to openness. For example, boy wants to marry girl who won't talk to him. Boy initiates stratagem to bump into girl at desirable places and times. Boy befriends girl without mentioning his desire. Over time, if successful, girl finds boy handsome and acceptable, and they fall in love. Marriage ensues. Anything can be used as an opening in communications paralysis – sports, restaurants, music, butterfly collections, etc. The goal is to initiate conversation.

If one is successful in establishing a basis for communication and perhaps, action, one can begin coalition building toward an issue no one wants to discuss. This may take decades and be the product of multiple actions, some of which an opponent will condemn. Radio Free Europe and Voice of America through careful news reporting rather than *Pravda* spin became levers through which millions behind the Iron Curtain could get a sense of what the rest of the world was like. On the other hand, modern China with an all-out push for industrialization still has a vice-like party grip on government and speech. The Chinese have mastered capitalism and Marxism to form an odd alliance with democratic countries. Communism versus democracy has not been resolved, but China is bound so closely by commerce to other nations that all look the

other way. At some point, there may be a political crisis in China as citizens demand greater freedoms. On the other hand, from a communications point of view, the US-China alliance today is far better than the Red Guard period during which the country turned on and against itself and purged millions of its intellectuals and artists. It is unlikely that can happen again given the communication between the countries and China's desires to advance.

Worth Doing?

Few commercial entities can or should afford the time, commitment and persistence needed to break through communications paralysis unless there is economic benefit for doing so. CEOs negotiated for years to open up markets like Russia in order to reap the rewards of being there. But, in China is it worth CEOs talking democracy to Beijing, if one can invest and profit? The answer is probably not. American companies with factories in China are not concerned about political issues unless they prevent the companies from operating. They work within political strictures and move forward. Issues such as free speech and the right to congregate are better left to political entities. The companies have no credibility in discussing democracy versus totalitarianism. Commerce thrives under both constructs and can subvert both when it is in the interest of a company to do so. By definition, an economic point of view is limited and self-limiting.

Tackling paralysis is best left to entities designated to handle the issues and focused on solving them. They tend to have the most credibility and expertise in understanding barriers and finding ways to penetrate them. That is why governments are so involved in disputes. They guard the larger interests of their citizens. On the other hand, governments cannot and should not get involved in every face-off. Troubles that Germany, France, the U.K. and Japan have had with restive labor unions and productivity are of no concern to the US other than their impact on commerce. The US has no business offering to help the French government communicate to its railway unions unless a railway shutdown directly impacts US economic and political interests.

For many embedded issues that have paralyzed communications, only non-profit organizations will devote time, energy and persistence into finding a path to resolution. Such organizations usually do not have resources to make a large impact nor the leverage to make a grand gesture. They nibble at the problem for decades. They tend to be candles rather than klieg lights. They make their own assessments whether tackling such paralysis is worth doing, and they commit to a long haul, knowing that failure is common. But they also know that if they are persistent, and if they support those who accept change, they have a chance to start an unstoppable bandwagon. That is what happened over 30 years with antismoking campaigns and may happen with the current anti-obesity drive.

Many communicators will not deal with communications paralysis in their careers because there is no time, resources or will to do so. But, if they should happen to be assigned the “impossible task,” there are ways to analyze it and to determine if a solution is possible.

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