

Cherish your enemy

Using conflicts as impulse for personal leadership development

Conflicts and troubled work relationships are important sources of stress and suffering. Especially when you have a problem with your boss, or someone else you are dependent on. The options to solve the problem may be limited or even non existing. You don't want to give up your role, because you like what you do. You may not have a sound alternative. You still want to grow further in this organisation. In higher management levels of larger and more complex organisations, these problems occur frequently.

When successful people are not able to solve the problem, despair creeps in. 'Why is he after me?' 'Why are my weaker points always focused on, instead of my successes?' 'Why is no action taken? Everyone sees that this person is incompetent!'

People in situations like these get 'poisoned'. The implicit or explicit problems start to dominate life. In their private life, the problems with the enemy are often the topic of discussion. Friends do sympathise, but cannot really help. Continued stress leads to decreased performance, decreasing happiness, and sometimes even burnout or another severe disease.

Years later, people who experienced such a situation often mention that this was a dark and difficult period in their life. Often they also say that in the end, it turned out to be a good thing. They have learned things about themselves they otherwise would not have learned. They have become a stronger person. And often, although not always, things turned out right.

In these situations, there is content and political tactics. However, in addition there are a few insights and mental exercises you can use to ensure you stay mentally healthy and equipped to deal with the situation constructively. If you are able to put these into practice, the likelihood of a positive outcome increases. The insights might help you to look at your own situation with a bit more distance and calmness, and to have your own behaviour less steered by negative emotions.

Change perspective

A very effective way to cope with these conflict situations is to look at them from a different perspective. A conflict will have a few elements that are positive, no matter how difficult the total situation is. The positive elements are often related to developing new insights, which you can use in the future.

Find positive characteristics of the person with whom you have a conflict

When we look at people with whom we have a serious conflict or issue, we tend to see someone who is only bad. This perception is false. There are no people who are only bad, just as there are no people who are only good.

Look at the other person and search for positive traits, characteristics, skills, behaviours. Search seriously. If, after trying hard, you still did not find anything positive, you can conclude that you are not able to see this person as he really is. Your negative emotions are still blurring your view. Step back, and try again later.

Reflect on what you learn about yourself

Conflicts typically do not bring out the best of people. It can, however, be very valuable to reflect on exactly these things. In conflicts, you often get confronted with sides of you that you don't like. Those are areas you are vulnerable. When everything is running smoothly, we are able to hide or compensate these areas. They are there! A conflict on which you have insufficient control therefore enables you to start working on these areas.

Cherish your enemy as your teacher

Patience and empathy are not the most developed traits of most successful leaders. Having an enemy who you can't beat for a longer period of time is a course to strengthen patience and empathy. The best person to practice patience on is someone who makes you very impatient.

Some people have difficulties to express clearly what they stand for, what they value, what they really want and what their boundaries are. These people often get into difficulties with people who don't respect their boundaries. Also in these situations the enemy is the teacher.

The insights mentioned in this article are easy to understand, but difficult to practice without the help of others. Maybe you do not have a conflict at work yourself; you may know someone who has. Share this article with this person and have a conversation about it.

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