Imagine the amount of energy required to light up Times Square. Now, imagine harnessing the energy spent by people reacting to contrary events.

For example, students tell me:
“Our professor didn’t tell us that would be on the test!”
“My roommate keeps taking my stuff.”
“My parents aren’t fair…”
“A person in my project group didn’t do his part—it’s not my fault!”

If the emotional energy involved could be channeled into a power cell, perhaps we could light up Times Square for free, or perhaps even solve the world’s energy crisis—and feel at peace as a population.

A simple way to learn how you respond to challenge/conflict is to hold up a fist and have someone push against it. What did you do?
Most people automatically push back. In fact, that is what most people tend to do when their personal space or ideas are challenged—they push against the invader or challenger. The push may be an obvious external outburst or an internal knot in the gut, but it’s all the same—there’s an expense of energy to work against something we oppose.

Try pushing your fists together in front of you. Figuratively speaking, some people walk around all day like this, reacting to every little thing. It’s exhausting and it doesn’t usually resolve anything. Often it makes the issue worse.

This response is based on Newton’s Third Law of Cause and Effect: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. We learn this in grade school science and have, therefore, known this concept since childhood. It’s also interesting to note the root of the word conflict—if you look in most any dictionary, you’ll find that it means “strike together.” People often think of conflict as a difference in opinion. Conflict isn’t a difference in opinion; it is our choice as to how to respond to differences. Striking together is just one choice.

Although science has moved dramatically forward, our communication skills have lagged painfully behind. We tend towards patterned behaviors and habituated responses. Einstein’s discovery of quantum theory showed us that for every action there are a multitude of possible reactions, Newton’s Third Law being just one of them. Following this logic, does it not seem at least plausible that there could be more than one way of responding to an upset or difference of opinion?

Emotional Versus Intellectual

“Seek first to understand” is excellent guidance from Steven Covey. But why is it so difficult to do? None of the student remarks from above are seeking first to understand. They are knee-jerk emotional reactions based on Newton’s Third Law. Intellectual advice on dealing with conflict is limited. Mainly, when we have conflict we usually aren’t thinking, we are reacting out of emotions.

Are you interested in learning a different way to respond? Is it possible?

Reacting with force against force is a learned behavior. Several years ago I traveled to Peru, South America. I experienced a culture in the rain forest that had a corporative and supportive lifestyle. In one week, I never witnessed reactive communication between children or adults. The accepted mode of response was very playful and helpful. This proved to me it is possible for human beings to respond differently!

A Model

I have practiced aikido, the Japanese art of reconciliation, for 13 years. It is a great model for how to respond to conflict creatively. Unlike most other martial arts, aikido reflects the desire of its founder, Morithei Ueshiba, to resolve conflict in a way that honors rather than destroys life.
Although science has moved dramatically forward, our communication skills have lagged painfully behind. We tend towards patterned behaviors and habituated responses.

In aikido, when you are attacked, instead of going directly against it—say in Newton’s Third Law—you move out of the direct line of attack and toward the attacker. This diffuses the attack. From this position you can influence your attacker and see things from his perspective. Often it causes the attacker to lose his balance because he is expecting you to react. You cannot change other people. But your response to them will change their behavior toward you.

I occasionally hear the term “verbal aikido.” Aikido cannot be done verbally. The art requires integration of body/mind/spirit to truly be effective, just as truly resolving a verbal conflict requires integration of the mind/body/spirit.

Have you ever experienced someone saying all the “right” nice words, but you still felt like you were being punched with them? This is an example of being incongruent with words and intentions. This is why the verbal piece alone does not work. Research shows 90% or more of emotional communication is nonverbal (Goleman, 1997).

Making It Work

The concepts from aikido sound like good ideas, but how do you really use them in daily life? Without the appropriate skills it becomes just another intellectual concept to discuss. As I mentioned before, in order for aikido to work, there needs to be a mind/body/spirit component. There are two basic skills essential for aikido to work effectively in helping resolve any conflict.

• Centering—Balancing Yourself
When I ask a group what it means to be “centered,” I receive many responses: balanced, knowing who you are, acting from my values, calm, etc. All these answers are correct. To respond creatively to potential conflict you must first check your own “state of being.” A centered state of being will give you more perspective than an emotional one.

When the student approaches the professor with, “You didn’t tell us that would be on the test!”, the likelihood of getting a productive response is pretty low. Energetically, the student has punched the professor, and unless the professor is a highly enlightened being, he will not budge from his position. More likely, he will push back with his response.

If the student centers himself, he can begin to look for solutions to his situation. One of those solutions could be approaching the professor with “I didn’t understand that would be on this test. Is there a way I can make this up?” Or, the student may recognize he dropped the ball and needs to take responsibility for his lack of preparation.

Regardless of what the student says, if he says it from a “centered” state of being, the professor will not feel emotionally punched. He will likely be more receptive to helping the student out or owning his error. No guarantees, though!

• Practicing centering
Just like any skill at which we want to
When a student feels her parents are not fair, it is to her advantage to have a sincere (centered) interest in connecting and acknowledging them as a beginning point. Possibilities are: "How are things at home?" "Tell me what you’ve been up to." "I miss you all you did for me when I was home." "I know sending me to school is a stretch for you. I want you to know I appreciate it." It is imperative this be a sincere communication and not a manipulation.

Bringing It All Together

On one level, it would be nice if everyone always agreed, but it would make things pretty dull. It is because of our differences that we move forward as a world, country, university, or individual. If I am content with how things are, it makes me complacent. I don’t grow and things don’t improve when I am complacent.

The trick is to learn to channel the energy toward creativity rather than battle. To summarize how to use conflict creatively:

- Notice when you are struggling with something or someone. STOP immediately and get centered. This may take some time.
- Physically position yourself so you are looking in the same general direction as your opponent, e.g., try going for a walk or a drive, sit next to rather than across from each other. If the struggle is with yourself, take a break and talk with someone or journal (write) to get perspective.
- Listen to and acknowledge the other person. Ask questions to clarify your understanding. Be sincere in your interest. Otherwise, you are manipulating and that will backfire.
- Express the situation from center as it impacts you, e.g., "I am uncomfortable with any things being borrowed without asking. Would you please check with me in the future?"

I challenge you to stop wasting your energy in struggle. Focus your energy looking for solutions!

"Communication creates movement; stillness fosters clarity; to be clear and moving, this is true power."

References


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About the Author

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