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Ain't It Awful/What I Really Want

A great little tool for working with groups experiencing conflict

compliments of

Jim Taylor

I wish I could claim this as an original, but I can't, and neither can I remember where I came across it. (Thanks to whoever invented it!) Suffice it to say that I have found this to be a very powerful tool for getting groups in conflict to shift their thinking away from an adversarial mindset to one which is more open to finding solutions. Here's how I use it.

I give people the work sheet (page 3) folded in half with the "Ain't It Awful" side up and ask them not to turn over the page. Then I ask them to write down all the aspects of the situation that are wrong to them, or that they don't like. (If they are really entrenched in the conflict, they take to this task with glee, enthusiastically writing down all the bad things they can think of about the "other side.")

When they have finished, I tell them the following story.

When Johnny's dad drives home from work, he finds that Johnny has left his bicycle in the middle of the driveway, so he has to get out of his car and move it before he can park. At supper he says: "Johnny, please don't leave your bike in the middle of the driveway because when I come home tired at the end of the day, I have to move it before I can drive into the garage." And Johnny, being a cooperative and obedient son, never leaves it in the middle of the driveway again. He leaves it in the middle of the sidewalk, in the flower beds, or leans it up against the aluminum siding where it falls down and scrapes off the paint. In short, Johnny finds a whole bunch of places to leave his bike that create problems for his dad, *even though he is obedient and cooperative!*

If his father had said: "Johnny, when you aren't riding your bike, I want you to put it *here*" and indicated an appropriate place to park it, Johnny could have got it right the first time. The problem lies in the fact that his dad told him what he *didn't want*, instead of what he *wanted*.

At this point I ask the people to open up their papers and look at the "What I Really Want" side, and to translate all of their "Ain't It Awful" statements into expressions of what they really want. To illustrate this, I use the examples on the next page. The examples show them that it is indeed possible to translate *every* "Ain't It Awful" statement into an expression of what is really wanted.

Once they have translated all their statements, I ask them to tear the sheet down the middle on the fold, to crumple up the “Ain’t It Awful” part and throw it away keeping only the half that deals with what they really want. (I usually hold up a large waste basket for them to aim their paper balls at when they throw them.) The reason for doing this, I say, is that the “Ain’t It Awful” mindset is a dead end, full of blame and recrimination, and that you can’t get somewhere positive from such a mindset. The physical act of throwing away the “Ain’t It Awful” stuff symbolizes their willingness to cast out their own negativity without surrendering *any* of their commitment to their issues. *All* of their issues of concern, I reassure them, are still on the table, up for discussion and resolution. The only difference is that we are now going to approach them from a mindset that allows for the possibility of finding solutions.

I have used this process with several groups in conflict, and always found its impact quite profound.

I think there are good reasons why it works so well. People who are angry and in conflict don’t want to be told to “think positively” and they are often concerned that whenever some outside consultant comes to “help” them, that *their* concerns will never be addressed, and the “real” conflict will be given a whitewash. The “Ain’t It Awful/What I Really Want” process, combined with the story and the examples, reassures them that the “real” issues will *indeed* be addressed. At the same time, the process of working through the exercise shifts their thinking in a way that is helpful for finding a resolution of the conflict.

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Transforming “Ain’t It Awful” to “What I Really Want”

(I created the examples below for a workshop on Creative Problem Solving for managers of one of the province’s health regions at a time of government cutbacks in funding to the sector. Several of the managers suggested I must have been a “mole” inside their organizational culture because some of the “Ain’t It Awful” statements so closely matched the issues they were facing.)

Ain’t It Awful . . .

My new manager is a real dictator, s/he hoards information and makes decisions without consulting the people affected.

S/he must think I’m a mushroom because s/he keeps me in the dark and feeds me BS.

S/he’s constantly throwing new demands at me that come out of the blue. I never know what’s coming next.

S/he never tells me what s/he thinks of my work; I don’t know if s/he thinks I’m doing a good job or not.

The people I supervise direct a lot of their anger at me because I’m the one who has to carry the bad news about cutbacks and layoffs.

Our work place is becoming a depressing place to work. Everyone feels stressed out and worried about the future.

I’m tired of trying to squeeze more work out of fewer people. Piling more work on people who have accepted wage rollbacks just isn’t fair.

What I Really Want Is . . .

. . . to be involved in decisions that affect me and my staff. I need to know the information upon which decisions are being made.

. . . to be given good information. I need to understand “the big picture”.

. . . to know the reasons for the new demands. I need some advance indication of new demands on my time. I need greater predictability.

. . . specific feedback on my performance; recognition for work well done, and a clear indication of where changes are wanted.

. . . some support in relaying bad news. I also need to learn not to take my staff’s anger personally.

. . . a happier work place where people are helped to deal with their stress and where there is some optimism about the future.

. . . more people to do the job, or a cut back in the amount of work expected. I need to feel that I can treat my people fairly.

