

Planning for the Future: Conversation – The Art Of Truth

By William J. Goldsmith

Posted Apr 7, 2019 at 7:00 AM

As an advisor, my primary responsibility is to help my clients achieve their most important goals and to help them live the lives they want for themselves and their families. At times, this requires such skills as problem solving, asking the right questions and prioritizing conflicting objectives. But the most important skill above all is listening — actively listening so that I truly understand what is being said to the point I can restate it back to my clients for their confirmation. This is even more important when dealing with a couple. Because many times, one person in the relationship will dominate the conversation or is simply more comfortable voicing their opinion. But when working with couples, both voices need to be heard so that the goals of both individuals can be included in the plan. When both people buy into the plan, the probability of success improves. As a result, the goal of any client conversation is to get to the truth of what matters to each person.

I will be the first to admit, that I have not always held myself to this standard in conversations with my wife, brothers, friends and associates. Often, I have tried to convince them of my position rather than truly listen to their position and make sure that I understood it and then have an honest discourse with the objective of trying get to the truth and both of us emerging smarter and better off as a result.

The active listening approach is even more important when having conversations with people with whom we strongly disagree or may not get along. While I enjoy having conversations with like-minded individuals and enjoy the camaraderie we share, those conversations reinforce my beliefs rather than challenge them. If I engage with someone with different opinions or who may not like me, in either case, that person is going to challenge me. I may have to confront a flaw or weakness in my argument or behavior that a close friend or family member may not feel comfortable discussing with me. In addition, while I may disagree with 95% of what this person is saying to me, the other 5% might just teach me something new that helps me to strengthen my position, adjust it where necessary or stop me from charging head first into a wall and killing myself.

Recently, I was having dinner with a friend of mine. As always, we had a great conversation about many topics. But during our conversation he confided in me that if he were to share some of his opinions at work, he could lose his job. Whether this was true or not, he truly believed this to be the case. I too have been in conversations with clients when discussing their planning and the impact of governmental decisions on their planning where I was very concerned with displaying any political bias. This was due to a couple of conversations previously had with other clients where these clients assumed my opinions were aligned with theirs otherwise, they would not do business with me. These clients have worked with me for years and know my character, been very happy with my advice and enjoyed our relationship. Yet, had they known my position on certain issues, they would no longer work with me. How did we get here?

I look around today and am concerned by what I see. We are scared to have honest conversations for fear of being ostracized, minimized, belittled, degraded or for fear of offending someone. But we live in a time when honest conversations are more important than ever. We face serious issues as individuals, communities, families and as a nation. When discussing serious issues, there is no doubt that people will be offended. But that does not mean we should shy away from the conversations. That's the whole purpose of attacking the problem and not the individual. You can't have an important conversation without offending someone if there are enough people in the room who have a different opinion than yours. That's also a reason to

focus on the facts. Everyone is entitled to their opinions. They are not entitled to their own facts. That is why I truly believe that honest people of good faith can discuss difficult issues with the goal of getting to the truth and trying to develop intelligent solutions to the problems that face all of us.

In fact, it is our responsibility to speak honestly, precisely and in an intelligent manner. If we do not speak the truth as we see it and engage in difficult conversations, it becomes harder for the next person to do so. Imagine what that looks like as it spreads out into the community and the greater society. Taken to the extreme, this is in large part how totalitarian regimes come into existence. It wasn't just Hitler, Stalin or Mao, that caused the death of more than a hundred million people in the 20th century. It was also the ordinary people in these countries who through indifference, conformity, silence or active participation enabled such atrocities to take place. I am not suggesting that the United States is heading down the path of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia or Mao's China. But I am suggesting that to advance as individuals, families, communities and as a nation, we need to have honest and difficult conversations, to speak the truth as we see it based on facts not feelings, to think independently and critically and to ask good questions of ourselves and others. And, most important of all, we need to listen to each other, actively listen — especially to those with whom we disagree. I know that I need to do better. How about you?

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