

It's the Principle!

by Douglas Noll
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“It's not about the money, it's about the principle of the thing!”

“I would rather pay my lawyer \$250,000, than pay that scum a dime!”

“I want them to hurt. I don't care how much I have to pay in lawyer's fees, I want them to feel pain!”

“Those guys jerked me around! I am going to jerk their chain right back!”

“If he was in the street, I wouldn't swerve to miss him!”

These are the types of comments I often hear in difficult relationship conflicts. They indicate a high stage of escalation, high emotionality, and a deep sense of injustice. When people are in this frame of mind, talking rationally simply does not work. How, as a peacemaker, do I approach these people?

The first step is in understanding that, clinically, these people are suffering from some degree of narcissistic wound. That's a technical term for emotional injury, usually caused by an attack on identity. Attacks on identity can arise from betrayal of trust, deceit, disrespect, neglect or abandonment by people to whom the injured party has a relational bond. Because the relationship is close, such as a business partner, the injured party creates a large part of his or her identity out of the relationship. When the relationship breaks, the injured party experiences a deep threat to identity, which is translated in the brain as a threat to survival. Narcissistic wounding results with defended behaviors designed to minimize the hurt and protect the identity from further attack.

I have observed three levels of wounding. Each level of intensity relates to the depth of the relationship and the extent of the betrayal. The first level manifests as annoyance, pique, and a sense of unfairness. Usually, the relationship is not intense. Typical relationships would include business associates, but not partners, employer-supervisor, and friendly neighbors. The wound is not deep and people will generally listen to reason. They are able to separate out their indignation from the pragmatic need to resolve the conflict peacefully.

The second level manifests as wounded pride, indignity, insult, or disrespect. The relationship is more intense and expectations about behaviors within the relationship are greater. Sometimes, the expectations are implicit and unstated, which leads to wounding when the expectations are not met.

These cases are challenging because the injured party imputes intentionality on the part of the offending party. E.g., “You knew that I wanted that promotion, and you intentionally blocked me

from it so you could get it yourself.” I have rarely seen overt, intentionally malicious behavior, but I see people assuming and inferring it all the time.

At level two, the wound is moderately deep. People have a hard time listening to reason. They have a sense of entitlement and expectancy that has been denied, and they want it fulfilled. They will transmute their wound into a demand for money that often has no relationship to the actual economic injury. Thus, a terminated employee might demand \$100,000 for a claim that might have an economic value of \$5,000. The challenge with these injuries is that because money symbolizes identity, negotiating is not about making a deal. Instead, it is about validating one’s self esteem and self worth. This is why people will be insulted by first offers that are perceived as too low.

Level three wounds are the most difficult and challenging. They manifest as a deep and abiding sense of injustice, darkest betrayal, repudiation of fundamental values, and abuse. If the wound is sufficiently severe, the injured party can suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome and its associated symptoms. People experiencing this wound seem to be stuck emotionally on the injury and its cause. They retell the experience leading to the injury over and over again. It seems as if they can never get off this merry-go-round of insult. The offending party can apologize sincerely and fully, but that has no meaning to the injured party. If the injured party is approached from a rational perspective, he or she may see that type of persuasion as disrespectful of the pain. These parties need to be listened to patiently and with great empathy.

I have seen these wounds in clergy sexual abuse cases, disputes between business partners that go to the same church or share similar religious values, and in cases where there was severe sexual harassment by a supervisor. At this level, the injured party needs clinical help from a therapist. The peacemaker must create a safe, secure environment for the parties to talk about the injury. The injured party must sense that he or she will be protected and not re-victimized.

Understanding when people have been wounded and how deep the wound has been experienced can give you insight into the conflict. Narcissistic wounds require the peacemaker to be non-judgmental and to show loving kindness and compassion. If the offending party can also be compassionate, appropriately remorseful, and empathic, the injured party can usually start on a healing journey to forgiveness.