

Coercion—More Costly Than You Think

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Most people are exposed to coercion as their first conflict resolution process. What child has not been punished by banishment to her room or bed without dinner? Children quickly learn that personal autonomy is dependent upon personal power. The bigger, stronger person usually will get his or her way.

This lesson carries into adult life. Many people see power as the means to exerting their will over others. Instead of using collaborative processes, these people simply decree how conflicts will be resolved. Usually, the conversation is something like “My way or the highway.” Since no one likes to lose personal autonomy, and no one likes to be told what to do, conflict resolution by coercion is not received happily. Consequently, coercion tends to produce more conflict, not less.

I argue that coercion, except in emergency situations, is a very poor way to resolve conflicts. Using coercion effectively to get one’s way requires enormous resources. The Iraq war is perfect example of this point. Regardless of what one thinks about the war, imposition of American will on the resistant Iraqi elements has been and will continue to be very expensive.

Coercion can be thought of in terms of exchange theory. Mary has something that Kathleen needs, such the ability to hire or fire Kathleen. Kathleen is willing to bargain her time and effort in her job in order to satisfy Mary. Mary is willing to keep Kathleen employed so long as Kathleen provides diligent, efficient service. The exchange relationship sets up a power dynamic. If Kathleen values her job more than Mary values Kathleen in the job, Mary has power over Kathleen. Likewise, if Kathleen is the only person who can do the job and Mary needs the job done, Kathleen has power over Mary.

Let’s assume that Mary has power over Kathleen, and they get into a dispute. Mary wants her way and therefore dictates how the dispute will be resolved. Coercion will only be effective if a number of conditions are met.

First, Mary must be able to exercise her power. If the power is centered on Kathleen’s job retention, Mary should be able to fire Kathleen. Second, for coercion to be effective, Kathleen cannot retaliate against Mary. Retaliation is much more common than people in power think. Retaliation can occur by being passive-aggressive, by sabotage (blowing up the Iraqi oil pipelines come to mind), by forming a coalition with co-workers thereby gaining more power, by taking legal action, or by protesting actions up the chain of command. Any of these actions, if effective, will render coercion ineffective.

Third, Mary must control sufficient resources to supervise Kathleen. For coercion to work, the person being coerced must be monitored for compliance. If compliance to an order cannot be assured, coercion will fail. Thus, Mary must devote her personal time or direct other resources to enforcing Kathleen’s obedience.

Fourth, Mary's power base with Kathleen must be deep. Kathleen can change the power balance with Mary by simply deciding that her job is not worth the cost of coercion. Once Kathleen makes that choice, she can remain in her job with impunity to Mary's threats. If Mary fires Kathleen, Kathleen is fine. If Mary does not fire Kathleen, Kathleen becomes impervious to Mary's coercion. In either case, Mary has paid a high cost for resolving the dispute. Mary can only have confidence in her coercive power if Kathleen is completely dependent upon Mary.

I learned about the importance of dependency in power relationships from my friend John. John was a senior partner in an accounting firm in San Jose. John had been with the firm for 30 years. He and the managing partner Robert entered into a philosophical dispute about business practices. As a result, Robert entered John's office one Friday and declared that John would not receive a paycheck from the firm until he agreed to Robert's business philosophy. John thanked Robert. The following Monday, John walked into Robert's office and resigned effective the following Friday. John opened his own firm the following Monday. Within three months, John was making more money than he had ever earned at his old firm. The moral of the story is that dependency is in the eye of the beholder. Robert, dependent upon the firm for his livelihood, believed John was too. Since Robert was the managing partner, he thought he could use John's dependency to compel obedience. John chose not to be dependent and left the relationship, taking a large revenue base with him. Coercion in this dispute was costly.

While collaboration and cooperation seem to take more time, in the long run, they are faster and less costly. Use them instead of coercion to get your way.