

Heat and Humidity in Motown: The Role Of Physical Environment

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I survived the blackout of 2003! I was in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan outside of Detroit conducting advanced mediation training for a group of experienced Michigan mediators. About 4 pm on Thursday, the lights went out. This was not a big deal because large glass windows and doors looked out on a beautiful golf course and let in the light. Nevertheless, not much time passed before the room warmed up. We checked with the facilities manager and learned that the power was out. Oh, well. We finished the day and then learned how bad the power failure really was.

The next three days were pretty grim. Ninety percent humidity and around ninety degrees (at least it felt that way to me), no air conditioning, my hotel room dark with sealed windows, no hot water and very little food. The unexpected physical discomfort and upset to a well-planned training workshop set up an environment that could disturb the equanimity of the most centered peacemaker. Somehow I became conscious of the fact that I could let the environment control my attitude or I could control my attitude to the environment. As an experiment, I chose to exhibit serenity and peace no matter how uncomfortable I was. And, I observed how people around me managed the same environment.

As you might expect, normally civil people became surly after a few days. Tempers flared much more frequently than one would normally see in public places. Surprisingly, however, I saw far fewer tantrums than I expected. Many people were able to accept the situation with either aplomb or resignation and wait it out. I concentrated on remaining present in the moment, not focusing on the heat and humidity, and not wondering about the future (e.g., when would the power and the air conditioning be restored). I found that I sailed through all of the challenges without difficulty. I won't say that the experience was fun, but I was able to tolerate it without becoming grumpy.

This experience has caused me to reflect about the role of physical environments on peacemaking. In our modern world, we forget how much we control our living, working and traveling spaces for personal comfort. When climate control systems break down because of power failures, we can easily allow ourselves to react to the situation. This can lead to irritability, impatience, frustration, and, of course, conflict. Sometimes, the emotional discomfort compels us to act; to just do something. If we feel enough frustration, we will lash out.

Thus, our physical environment is an important and subtle part of peacemaking. If people are physically comfortable, they can spend less emotional and cognitive resources on their environment and more resources on their conflict work. Likewise, when people are physically uncomfortable, their tolerance and patience drop quickly. Minor discomfort is annoying and seems to accelerate irritation and frustration.

If you are dealing with a conflict, check out the environment. Is the temperature comfortable for everyone? Some people get cold if a space is over-chilled in the summer; others get hot easily. Is the light natural and diffused? Both incandescent and fluorescent lighting are prevalent in office

conference rooms, but are not nearly as calming as sunlight. Nevertheless, facing the sun blasting in through a window is not comfortable either. Is the space visually appealing? Windows looking out to views can relax people. Tasteful wall hangings, whether art work, photographs, or tapestries, can have the same calming effect. I have found that fresh cut flowers and indoor plants “smooth” out a conference room. Indoor water fountains and waterfalls provide a quiet white noise that masks outside sounds. If you have worked with feng shui, you will know what I mean.

One of the simplest peacemaking techniques I teach is to change the environment. If you are in an argument or conflict with someone, try moving somewhere else. Taking a walk or finding a secluded space can work wonders. First, the time it takes to get to the space slows down the escalation process. Second, moving to a new space symbolically permits a new start to the process.

Most importantly, take a lesson from my experience in Detroit. Choose your attitude to your environment; do not react to it. Consciously choose not to be irritated or annoyed at minor physical discomforts like heat, humidity, and perspiration. By being calm and centered yourself, you will create a space of peace around you that will allow others to feel the same way.