

David and Goliath, A 21st Century Version

By Cheryl Crumb

I remember the story of David and Goliath as a little girl going to Sunday school. While probably not what the clergy intended, my recollection centered around the giant as the Big Bad Wolf (I always got fairy tales and biblical tales intertwined) and his victim was Michelangelo's breathtaking statue....(I also got art and fairy tales confused). In effect, an uneven match.

That's often what we envision when we're embroiled in a conflict situation with a member of management, someone who has more power and influence, someone who signs the salary cheque, someone who whispers, "My wish is your command". When we find ourselves in a disagreement with a powerful person, we tend to err in one of three predictive ways: Some of us refuse to fight knowing that it will be futile anyway, we crouch in a ball and figuratively disappear. Picture the Wicked Witch of the West from the Wizard of Oz being doused with water and fading into a pile of striped socks. Let's call this an Avoidance Response. Others tentatively offer their viewpoint, but when challenged immediately fall back in an obedient pose. Picture a 150-year old slave dressed in livery red saying "Yes Master". Call this an Accommodating Response. Foolhardy others put up the dukes and figuratively beat the boss into submission. Picture the Incredible Hulk holding a scrawny neck in his green mitts. Call this a Competing Response.

Without training, psychologists say most people will revert to habitual self-defeating behaviours in a conflict, even when those approaches have been unsuccessful in the past. These practices rooted in our personalities are the automatic responses to the stress of a work conflict situation.

Is there a way to "win" when in conflict with a boss? Yes, as long as "win" for one doesn't mean "lose" for the other. Taking on a boss is a high-risk venture.

In the first article in the series we addressed the Seven Sins of Conflict and substituted an approach espousing respect + understanding + offering. In the last issue we introduced the Six Step Model to achieve collaboration. To avoid a power struggle and resultant unemployment or transfer to Siberia, we'll complement those words of wisdom with a recipe for Subordinate Street Smarts.

The first ingredient is Courage. It's exemplified by the belief that a modern

organization will fail if it is run by a few people who think and many people who do what they are told. It is a cry to challenge "truth". Courage in action is assertiveness, which is authenticity, refusing to fake in order to avoid someone's disapproval, and being willing to stand up for our ideas and ourselves in appropriate ways. It's telling the Emperor that he's naked. However, remember that naked bosses can fire you so it's not just a one-ingredient dish.

The second essential is Personal Communication. Notice that personal means face to face or ear to ear...not electronic emails, voice messages or faxes. Conflicts require communication, listening, processing, asking, sharing, offering, exchanging, supposing, and signaling that demonstrates intent to make something work for both sides. A conversation is a choreographed blend of give and take, lead and follow, where each partner has the opportunity to demonstrate creative moves.

The third ingredient is Know Your Boss. Stand back from the situation and objectively assess the individual. What is his style during conflict situations? What are the behaviours you've seen him demonstrate? What's important to him in this situation? What's at stake for him? Consider his emotional energy. What else is going on in his life that could affect the outcome? Put yourself in his position. What might he see that you don't? What are his interests, concerns, priorities and options?

The fourth ingredient is Preparation. Before you begin, ask yourself some tough questions: "What exactly is bothering me? What do I want the other person to do or not do? Are my feelings in proportion to the issue? What are the outcomes that could be acceptable to me? Be aware that there are some pitfalls to preparing in the conventional sense. It's not about the memorization of your best argument. Pushing your approach usually leads to equal resistance. So, preparation here is honest reflection.

Finally, to this mélange add a healthy cup of flexibility. Throw out any vestige of righteousness. Enter the arena with an open mind.

Consider the approach fostered by Dr. George Bach called "Fair

Fighting". It's scheduled in advance and its elements include an initiator (you), a fight partner (your boss), the engagement, mutual consent and agree-upon conditions.

Here's how it might sound:

Courageous David: Mr. Goliath, I'd like to schedule a meeting to talk to you about the new system that management wants to implement on floor rotation.

Goliath: Sure, Davey, let's talk now.

David (who knows his boss): Well, Mr. Goliath, I think we need more time than the few minutes you have before your next meeting. Because I'd like to share some concerns and ideas, as well as talk with you about some new approaches, I think we should set aside about 30 minutes. How would Monday afternoon work for you since that's normally a pretty slow time. Say, 2:00?

Goliath: Ah, 3:00 would be better. Concerns, you say?

Prepared David: It will be an opportunity for us to look at how we can make the company more effective. I've been putting a lot of thought into it, and I'm glad that you're the kind of boss who encourages people to contribute ideas. So, why don't we meet at that small conference room on the floor so we can view the layout? Looking forward to it Mr. Goliath. See you at 3 p.m. Monday.

That wasn't so hard, was it? You've reflected, you're assertive, you've prepared and you've set the stage. Will you win? Who knows, but you have the best bag of slingshots available, and you're going into the arena a more powerful person.

Fair Fighting

- Initiator
- Fight partner
- Engagement
- Mutual consent
- Agreed-upon conditions



Consider first

- Emotional energy
- Attendees
- Best time
- Best place

