

Conflict at Work

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Excerpt: Chapter 10

*The Aiki Breakthrough
Change Method*



Chapter 10

Aiki Breakthrough Change Method

“Help, please” was the opening line on Jacob’s email. “I’m between a rock and a hard place, can I stop by this afternoon?” was the rest of the message. “Of course, I’m open any time after 3,” was my reply.

When Jacob arrived, he looked worn out. “Tell me, what’s going on?” I asked him. He responded, “Taylor has told me to hold some information back on a report I am preparing. If I do that, I will be in violation of company policy.”

Taylor, Jacob’s supervisor, had run into some trouble with the CEO the previous month, and I could guess that the information he wanted held back was just going to deepen his problems. Even knowing this, I was concerned that perhaps Jacob was overreacting. “How do you know that holding back that information would violate company policy?” I asked.

“I confirmed it with Taylor. I asked him, ‘Are you sure you want me to write the report that way?’ I even reminded him that holding back critical information would violate our integrity code. He said he didn’t care about the integrity code and that he didn’t want the information shared. So, I followed up with an email asking him to confirm that he wanted the information held back and he never answered.”

“Are you concerned that if you do as he tells you to and anyone finds out, you will be held accountable?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied emphatically. “Last year he made me do something which I knew was against policy. I got written up for it and he denied telling me to do it. If I don’t do as he says, he will write me up for insubordination! I just can’t win on this one.”

Are you stuck?

Some conflicts feel as though there is just no way out. Have you ever been in a situation like Jacob’s? When you feel caught up in an either/or dilemma and neither direction is good, the world can look very bleak. Perhaps your situation is not quite like Jacob’s but one in which it feels as though the conflict is so big that you just don’t know where to start. Or, maybe, the conflict has been going on for years and you have tried everything you can think of and you just can’t resolve it. Sometimes you might think that you have fixed a conflict and then it rears

its ugly head again, when you least expect it. At other times, it feels as though the problem just can't be fixed, and you resign yourself to accepting a bad situation.

If you are experiencing any of these scenarios, it's time for a radically different approach. That's where the Aiki Breakthrough Change (ABC) method can help.

Doing the wrong thing and thinking it's right

When a new driver or a driver new to northern weather finds their car stuck in snow, they do exactly the wrong thing and they rev their motor. Intuitively it makes sense that if you are stuck you should just give the car more gas and then, with the extra energy, you will get a grip and be able to move your car. The problem with this approach is that it is exactly the wrong thing to do. What you are in fact doing when you rev your engine in the snow is digging the wheels deeper into the snow. At the same time, you are also heating things up just enough to create a film of moisture that immediately freezes. Now, you're deeper into the snow and you are trying to get a grip on ice. That just doesn't work!

The same thing happens when we are stuck in a conflict. We try, and try, and try, if not in actual behavior, at least in our head. We rev our brains trying to find a solution and, just as it doesn't work well in the snow, it isn't getting us anywhere with our conflict. If anything, we are digging ourselves deeper and deeper. When you are struggling with a conflict that feels bigger than you are, you may begin to ruminate on it. You try to let it go but you find your mind wandering back to it, repeatedly. As time passes, you get angrier or more depressed, or both. That feeling of helplessness begins to color everything and robs you of the pleasure that you might otherwise feel in other activities. This is no way to live.

When you are in this "stuck" phase, a well-meaning friend might offer some ideas or invite you to brainstorm solutions. You might respond with an exasperated, "Yes, but..." to their ideas or with a list of all the things you have tried already. Or you might explain to the friend all the things which you have thought of trying and why they won't work. It's time to change your focus because staring at the problem is not moving you forward.

The Aiki tool provides a way to break through the spinning wheels in your mind and make change easy. With this tool, you can recruit both the conscious and subconscious brain and, when you do this, it's like taking the super-highway to your destination instead of the less direct and slower two-lane road. The Aiki approach allows the subconscious mind, with all its creativity, to be fully engaged in the problem-solving process while lulling the conscious brain into seeing the entire exercise as a fun game.

The science behind doing the wrong thing

When you persistently fail in your effort to achieve a goal or resolve a conflict, you begin to believe that you have no control over the situation. Once this is how you feel, you will probably give up on any further effort. After all, what's the point? You are trapped and no amount of effort will change that situation. Your self-efficacy is trickling away. Have you ever felt like this?

When you reach this state it almost feels as though you have forgotten, or maybe never knew, how to help yourself. In Chapter 4, I explained that the functions of the hippocampus include managing short-term memory and learning, and also turning off the stress response. These functions are eroded when the hippocampus is continually exposed to high levels of cortisol. When you are dealing with a problem or a conflict that you just can't break through, your fight-or-flight response is constantly engaged and your ability to think about new solutions has been marginalized. Worse, you are not able to turn off the cortisol by slowing the fight-or-flight response. In fact, you are dumbed down!

The emotional brain, already activated by the desire to make something unpleasant go away, notes the lack of success. Fear that the problem will not be resolved starts to set in. The problem grows in the person's mind. It's getting bigger and, with each new solution attempted, the belief that the problem is unsolvable grows stronger. This further reduces the person's ability to effectively execute another strategy, offering even more evidence that the situation is hopeless and that they are helpless in effecting the desired change. In Jacob's case, his memory of how poorly this same situation turned out in the past adds to his sense of helplessness and hopelessness. It's easy to see how this is creating a downward spiral to despair.

The standard approach of asking you what change you would like or how you would like to feel instead of the way you are currently feeling just feeds the current "stuck" situation. These questions will just remind you that you are not in control and the probability of your being able to answer with anything that will be useful to the situation is pretty low.

Hebb's Law and Long-Term Potentiation (LTP) come into play when trying to guide a person to make changes while they are in this "stuck" state. When a neuron fires and neurotransmitters travel to a second neuron, that neuron might also fire but something extra happens. The second neuron opens neurotransmitter receptors that were previously closed, and this then makes the second neuron more sensitive to the firing of the first neuron. It's as if the second neuron is expecting a further signal from the first neuron. This is the phenomenon of LTP (Carson & Tiers, 2014)¹¹. With repetition, this expectancy becomes cemented and according to Hebb's Law, neurons that fire together, become wired together.

Applying this to Jacob, the more he pays attention to his feelings of helplessness and views

his situation as out of his control and unsolvable, the more the problem persists. The frequently cited quote from Henry Ford, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t...you’re right” sadly applies perfectly to this situation. When we ask Jacob what change he does want or how he would like to think or feel differently, we are just refocusing him on his problem state in the same way that he himself has been focusing on it. As he attempts to focus on a different future, it fires the program in his head which tells him that he has failed several times in the past. Any action that is initiated under these conditions has a high probability of meeting the same fate as all his previous attempts at change. The difference is that now Jacob has additional evidence that the situation is hopeless!

The way out of this downward spiral is to interrupt the pattern. We can’t reinforce the existing pattern if we want to help the person who is defining themselves as a victim or helpless; we must do something differently.

Aiki philosophy

Years ago, I attended an Aikido demonstration with my son who was then seven years old. I watched in awe as my little boy flipped a six-foot man after just a few minutes of instruction. I asked the instructor how this could be possible, and he explained that in the Aikido martial art, it’s all about leverage, taking control of your opponent’s energy and re-directing it for your own purpose. It seemed to me that this approach could be applied to persistent problems in the same way.

Aikido, which is often translated as “the way of harmony” is a relatively new martial art that has only defensive moves. Developed in Japan around 1920 by Morihei Ueshiba, the purpose of Aikido is to provide the practitioner with a method of defending themselves without harming the aggressor. The word “aikido” is formed of three kanji:

- joining, unifying, combining, fitting
- ki – spirit, energy, mood, morale
- dō – way, path

Most physical or verbal conflict is linear in its attack. The aggressor moves directly towards the target. The target’s natural response to either a physical or a verbal attack is to defend themselves or to push back against the aggressor. The proverbial fight-or-flight response is activated in the target who then resists/fights or escapes/flees. When the target’s response to the attack does not get the desired result, the subconscious or emotional brain, which is already activated by the fight-or-flight response, takes note and increases the intensity of its fight-or-flight. It also begins to question whether the situation can be stabilized, and fear grows.

The aggressor and the target are now in a downward spiraling dance. In response to the tar-

get's fight-or-flight response the aggressor escalates its energy towards the target. This clash of responses continues the downward spiral of anger and fear and both participants in this dance suffer harm. Regardless of whether it is a physical or a verbal attack, the aggressor's determination for dominance is fueled by a sense of alienation from the target. Losing ground to the target will represent proof of failure and loss of standing in, or respect from, their peer group. A similar dynamic is operating for the target. Pushing back and coming out of the altercation as the victor is critical to self-identity, self-esteem, and acceptance within the tribe. Loss aversion, our drive to hold on to what we have and to not allow others to take what we see as ours adds to the downward spiral as we slip further and further away from connection to the other person. The violence, both real and symbolic, escalates. Neither side will come out of this situation whole.

The Aikido approach for responding to conflict seeks to harmonize with the attacker and to resolve the situation without either party being harmed. It does this by converting the linear motion of the attack into a circular flow of energy and thereby flipping its direction. In doing so, the practitioner of Aikido takes control and uses the attacker's energy for their own purpose. By joining with the attacker instead of confronting them, the energy is now working in the target's favor and against the attacker.

Applying the Aiki philosophy to interpersonal conflict

We can use the Aikido philosophy as a metaphor for gaining a better understanding of Jacob's situation. With this better understanding, those in a similar situation can be guided toward a better result. Jacob was focused on what he didn't want. He was taking a linear, direct approach to make what he didn't want to go away. Given what he didn't want, he implemented what should have been a solution; he tried to talk Taylor out of holding back information. The solution he tried didn't make the issue go away and he invested more energy into fighting the problem or finding ways to avoid the problem. In Jacob's case, he sent me an urgent email for help.

Using an Aiki approach, we can do something differently. While we focus on a problem, including all its pain and frustration, all our energy is usually being spent on finding an escape. With the Aiki approach, rather than escaping, the individual is asked to lean into the problem. This is decidedly counter-intuitive. It takes the energy that is currently focused on the problem but instead of working to escape the problem, it is accepted. The Aiki approach even prescribes that more energy resources should be devoted to the problem but now, in a different direction.

When my boys were young, to register their protest and to show me that they were in control, they each attempted slamming a door or stomping up the stairs. My response was to take control of the situation by insisting that if they were going to slam a door or stomp up the

stairs, they needed to do it right. I would then make them practice the behavior several times. My response took the power away from the behavior. Clearly, they were not in control, I was! It was also funny, and they would end up laughing as they repeated the behavior. More importantly, they didn't slam a door or stomp up the stairs the next time they were upset with me. This was an Aiki move!

With the Aiki approach, instead of escaping the problem, you are encouraged to think about stabilizing it at its current level or even increasing it. This is reminiscent of the "prescribing the symptom" which was introduced by the famed hypnotist and therapist, Milton Erickson. Erickson had the client engage in the very behavior they wanted help in eliminating, but they engaged in it with a small difference - they were now supposed to engage in the behavior. This small difference made all the difference. Milton Erickson pointed out that a small hole in a dam would weaken the entire structure and being required to engage in the very behavior they were trying to change was the small hole.

This is the key to the Aiki approach. It invites the person to engage in the very outcome they are trying to change. Instead of devoting energy to escaping the situation, the energy is now redirected towards immersing in the challenge. Instead of using energy to reduce or eliminate the problem, the energy is being used to figure out how to make the challenge bigger.

With Aiki, the individual is asked, "What are all the actions or strategies you can put into play to ensure that [the problem] never improves or even gets worse?" When confronted with this question, the individual is invariably taken aback. The question often needs to be repeated. It is exactly opposite to what they thought you would ask. This counter-intuitive perspective jolts their thinking and serves as the pattern interrupt which forces them to think about their challenge in a completely different way. It is common to get a laugh when the question is repeated and the brainstorming that follows is frequently done tongue-in-cheek. That works because they are now throwing out all kinds of unedited, "crazy" ideas.

In most cases, the individual's subconscious really does know what is needed. The conscious, rational, logical brain steps aside when you pose the Aiki question because the question is not logical or rational. The act of brainstorming about how to make a problem remain the same or get worse is totally opposite to what the individual wants, and therefore, the exercise is not taken seriously - it's goofy. The conscious, logical, rational brain can step aside because its services are just not needed!

Truth telling can now surface. Within the list of brainstormed ideas are some actions that have been contributing towards maintaining the problem. That individual had not previously admitted to themselves that these actions played a role in causing the problem or they had simply been completely unaware of it. As a result of brainstorming the Aiki question, the thought is out there. It's been verbalized and has usually been written down on paper. There is an ah-ha moment and following this the path forward is now clear. Reverse one or more of the actions

that are maintaining the problem and the situation will change dramatically.

Steps of the Aiki approach

1. Identify the actual conflict you want resolved. Explain it in detail so that you are very clear what it is you really want as an outcome. It's easy to get confused and focus only on a symptom of the bigger problem. In Jacob's case, he could be thinking he wants his boss to let him put the complete information in the report. What Jacob really wants is a relationship with his boss that is based on mutual respect and trust.
2. Write down at least ten things you could do to ensure that you will not achieve or have what you really want. Be creative and go well beyond ten if the ideas are coming easily. In Jacob's case, one idea might be to simply quit his job.
3. Once you have your ideas written down, look them over carefully and identify which of these things you are already doing. Place a check mark beside them. This is a time for complete honesty. When you are struggling with an ongoing conflict or one that feels too big to even begin to address, you will often discover, if you are being truly honest with yourself, that you are engaging in some counter-productive behaviors.
4. Create a plan to change those behaviors which you now recognize as having contributed to the problem.
5. Review the list again to see if there are any items that you might be able to reverse. One item on Jacob's list was, "Never engage in any small talk with Taylor." Jacob realized that he and Taylor were virtually strangers to each other. Their only relationship was their work relationship. It's hard to build trust when you don't really know someone. Small talk won't solve the whole problem, but it could bring a solution one step closer. Add this one small step to a couple of other steps, and you could make some progress.
6. Execute the plan! Once you've identified what you could do differently, it isn't worth the paper it's written on if you don't act. Monitor your progress as you implement your plan and, if necessary, adjust or repeat the process. Above all, don't give up!

Aiki Worksheet

✓		How can I ensure that the problem does not improve or even gets worse?
	1.	
	2.	
	3.	
	4.	
	5.	
	6.	
	7.	
	8.	
	9.	
	10.	

My plan to stop doing the things that are contributing to the problem
(*items checked off in step 3*):

Things I could start doing to improve the situation:

Conflict at Work

The Companion Workbook

Written by a leading expert in performance management with over 40 years of experience



Dr. M. Paula Daoust has a doctorate in Behavior Psychology and is an expert in helping people find and maintain their peak performance. She is also a certified hypnotherapist and seamlessly blends these tools into her coaching to help people easily achieve lasting change. Over a period of 25 years, she has taught hundreds of master-level students how to be more persuasive and influential, and how to successfully manage conflict.

Dr. M. Paula Daoust is the expert other leaders look to for help in finding their peak performance. She has taught workshops and spoken at events all over North America on subjects such as conflict, change management, storytelling, influence and power, anxiety and stress at work and peak performance.

Do you have a group that would benefit from better conflict management skills? Dr. Daoust is available for keynote presentations or workshops tailored specifically to your needs.

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