

Choose Your Battles

Trying to Win or Trying to Make a Difference?



As a leader in an organization, you may feel that it is your obligation to resolve every argument that comes your way. But, you don't have to act on every conflict that arises. Some battles are not worth the fight. To decide if it is worth fighting or not, define which is the greater risk, the unresolved issue or the possible negative outcomes of fighting the battle.

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Introduction

Not all battles are worth fighting (or winning)

As a leader in an organization, you may feel that it is your obligation to resolve every argument that comes your way. But, you don't have to act on every conflict that arises. Some battles are not worth the fight. To decide if it is worth fighting or not, define which is the greater risk, the unresolved issue or the possible negative outcomes of fighting the battle. You may end up finding that there is a greater risk taking on a battle rather than leaving it to shrivel up and die. You may find that the issue is not extremely important or fighting the battle will not make a difference because the problem cannot be resolved. Some battles are won by doing absolutely nothing at all.

You must consider all the options before pursuing a battle. Ask yourself what is important. Will my trying to debate this issue make a difference? Is the issue significant? What will have to change as a result? Answering all of these questions about confronting an issue is not an easy thing to do.

Perhaps you should consider that winning may not be the most important outcome. Doing the right thing is most important. You are trying to make a difference, not just to win for the sake of winning. You can't pretend that winning is not your ultimate goal; it is something you just can't fake. You either have the organization's best interest at heart or not. It's that simple.

Ask yourself what it's worth

Find out what good will come out of fighting a battle. Fighting a battle may actually result in an improved relationship with a colleague. You may find that a strong business partnership has developed as a result of going to battle. Communicate your goal clearly from the very beginning. Explain how the goal can be reached and that it may not be immediate. You and your opponent may come to a point where both of you agree upon a common goal for mutual benefit.

You may feel passionate about an issue but you could be the only one who does. Moving forward without the support of others may result in a quick death. Ask for feedback from a several colleagues to get another's prospective. You could also receive feedback by sending a survey to your staff or those who would be affected by the change. Research other comparable organizations to see what they are doing. A battle is not worth fighting if there is only one person against a multitude of others.

Detach, detach, detach

When going up against your opponent, you may be tempted to say things out of anger that you probably wouldn't say if you were in a normal state of mind. You will perform much better under pressure when you are not mad. You can be objective and think more clearly once you have calmed down. Do whatever it takes to detach before you go face to face with someone. Your opponent will only see anger and will not hear anything you have to say when you are upset. Confronting someone when you're angry will label you as "emotional" and "out of control".

Remaining calm under pressure is half the battle. Never let them see you sweat. To prepare yourself to stay focused during a battle, write an outline on a legal pad. Bring it to your meeting and keep it on your lap. Write just enough to jog your memory about what you want to say. Make notes throughout your meeting about what is being said.

You may need these notes for follow up purposes at a later date. Think of your outline as your security blanket.

You may be detached, but what if your opponent is not? You have permission to call the meeting to an end if you see that things are out of control. Confront your opponent with kindness by telling him that the situation is clearly too emotional and that it would be best to postpone this meeting to a later time, then leave. It's tough to do, but it shows that you are in control of your emotions and that you just simply don't have time to waste witnessing emotional outbursts.

Is this the hill you want to die on?

Fighting a battle could result in damage to your credibility. Ask yourself if this fight is so important that you are willing to risk everything to win. A lot could be at stake taking on a battle. You could risk losing the support of the organization's stakeholders and your team. If you're not sure that you have the slightest chance to make a positive difference, this fight may not be the hill you're willing to die on.

If you are causing your opponent a great deal of stress and pain, reconsider your position on the matter. You may negatively affect more than one person; perhaps an entire department is being affected. If you roll out a new process without taking the proper steps, you may receive a multitude of negative reactions on the issue. Be considerate and put yourself in their shoes for a moment. Re-think your process; ask for suggestions, then try again.

Just because you think it is the right thing to do may not justify your position. You will need to take a step back and analyze the matter from the beginning. You may have had quite a few success stories in the past but each situation calls for different measures. Before you take on an issue ask yourself if this is the hill you're willing to die on.

Taking the high road

As a leader, you are always on stage with your staff as the audience. Set an example for others to imitate. Moments when you are under pressure to act are an opportunity to show others what you are made of. When you find yourself under pressure, consider doing nothing. Your inaction may speak louder than words. Be situational and willing to roll with the punches. If you are reactional and upset, others will sense your nervousness and will act uneasy as well. As a leader, you set the mood for others to follow.

As a leader you don't want others to perceive you as uncaring or dismissive. When you fear inappropriate comments are within earshot, address them immediately. Ask what evidence

they have to support their comments. Nine times out of ten, they will not have any evidence. Some examples of inappropriate comments might be insults to your superior, gossip or putting down the company in front of customers. Put an abrupt stop to it immediately by confronting them.

As a leader you may have knowledge of something that may not be shared with others. When your staff asks you to share confidential information, kindly tell them you are sorry and that you are not at liberty to discuss it with them. You will be tested almost daily as a leader. When in a questionable situation, follow your gut feeling. When you know it is wrong, take the high road.

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Be prepared to make the case

Taking on a controversial issue requires the support of others. Rallying support for your cause is comparable to working in sales and marketing. Think of it as marketing your idea to others. Sell them on the benefits of why you are taking on a battle and what beneficial changes will result. Ask for their expert opinion on the situation. If you have support from the stakeholders, you have nothing to worry about.

Ask for a meeting by calling your opponent directly. Tell him you have some issues to discuss and would like 30 minutes of his time. Try not to get into the details just yet if you can help it. You could explain that you want to discuss "staffing issues" or "compliance concerns." Your opponent may take offense and demand that a witness be present. Comply with his request and don't worry because you have the evidence and support you need to back you up. Go to your meeting with a clear mind and follow your outline. Take notes. Remember, you are there to make a difference.

Investigate the issue before you meet with your opponent. Interview the involved parties and make notes. Ask the involved parties for their support because they will be confronted later by your opponent when you are not around. A written statement from those involved can be beneficial. Provide specific examples to your opponent to back up what you are

saying. Bring any documentation that you have gathered. You will need credible evidence to support your claims.

Get a sounding board

Sit down with someone who knows you and ask for permission to vent about your concerns and issues. Once permission is granted, go for it! You can say anything at this moment because you are just venting. You will have a sense of relief in getting out all of your pent-up frustrations. Once you have finished venting, take a deep breath and exhale. Now you can start thinking clearly and figure out what to do about the situation on hand.

Brainstorm ideas about what might be said during your upcoming battle. Make sure you can back up what you're saying with specific examples. To combat your nervousness, ask an associate to role-play. You play yourself and your associate can play the part of your opponent. This can be fun. Pretend you are in the middle of a battle and speak like you would if you were face to face. Be willing to accept constructive criticism as your colleague critiques you. When it comes time to meet with your real opponent, you will feel much more confident and prepared for the goals you want to accomplish during the meeting.

Once you have met with your opponent and have successfully reached your goals, it is best to document the events immediately while the thoughts are fresh in your memory. Revisit with your colleague on what happened to gather feedback on what you may do differently the next time, if anything. Chances are both of you could learn from the experience, whether it is pleasant or horrific. The basic building blocks of a good team start with working off each other's ideas. When you succeed, your team succeeds.

Practice on the easy ones

You will have endless opportunities to discuss issues or concerns with someone who is always unhappy. An unhappy person is constantly complaining about something or someone, therefore you will never run out of issues to discuss.

You are gaining valuable knowledge and experience with each instance that you interact with them. Think of each session as practice. You are preparing for the

really big battles that may occur in the future. Always keep your superiors in the loop about the issues you discuss with an unhappy or risky individual. You can always assume that the unhappy person will complain to your superior about you. More than likely, you are not going to be able to make an unhappy person satisfied no matter what you try to do for him. You can bet that this individual probably doesn't hold much credibility with his peers either. This type of person is commonly labeled as a "short-timer." Practicing on this type of personality allows room for mistakes and will help to make you stronger at addressing the really tough issues down the road.

I have no dog in this fight

There are some very good reasons why you should not get involved in someone else's battle. Stay out of it if it does not have any impact on you or your department. Stay out of it if you can not offer any benefit to either one of the involved parties. Your advice may be harmful to others if you don't know all the facts of the situation. It is difficult to play referee with people you don't know. You will be viewed as an outsider and not taken seriously by another department's employees with whom you don't have a relationship.

Should someone come to you and ask for your advice, refer them to someone else who may be able to help them. Tell them that you are interested in learning about the outcome. Be honest with yourself and realize you are not an expert on everything. If you really want to offer your assistance, volunteer as a witness only during the confrontation but don't offer any opinions on the situation. You can learn from their mistakes. You can gain valuable insight to others' problems and apply them to your future negotiations.

Call a cease fire and then negotiate

Discussing hard-hitting issues with someone can be challenging to manage. Just in case things should get out of hand, one should always expect the unexpected and have a few backup strategies in mind. You don't want to be caught off guard in the middle of a heated battle with nowhere to turn.

You may find yourself in a scenario where things are getting out of control. The conversation suddenly transforms into a dispute where none of the objectives are being met. Request an end to the meeting first. Suggest a later time to continue the conversation when your challenger is not so emotionally aroused. Ending a dispute in this manner is not an easy thing to do. It is risky and is only recommended when things are clearly unmanageable and the situation can not be recovered.

Call a cease-fire if both you and your challenger have made a good case and there are clear benefits that are worth considering. Negotiate with your challenger to meet you halfway. Give a little and take a little. Both parties win when you consider others' ideas beside your own.

Damage control

If you come to realize that taking on a specific battle was definitely the wrong thing to do, quickly try to recover the situation. First change the direction of the conversation by admitting that you clearly used poor judgment. Take ownership of your mistakes. Take ownership of your staff's mistakes too. As a leader, you are responsible for the end result, good or bad. Don't try to cover your back by telling little white lies or blaming others. It will only make the situation worse.

Secondly, ask for assistance in what your next steps should be. Ask your challenger what you can do for him or her to rectify the situation, then do it quickly. Be careful to not promise something you can't deliver. It may take a while to rebuild credibility with this individual. Just be sure in the future to follow through with what you say you're going to do. Update them often on the status of your progress by sending a quick e-mail or drop a short note in their mailbox. Once you have successfully met your goal, thank them for allowing you the opportunity to learn from the experience.

Don't leave too many dead soldiers

It takes a leader with a strong staff to succeed in today's work environment. Many business cultures today are asking us to do more with less. You will need to depend on those around you to help get the work accomplished. You just can't do it alone.

Don't clobber your partners to win a battle. Naming others to get yourself off of the hook is only a short-term solution. It may come back to haunt you some day. You may need their support sometime down the road. Be careful whom you take down to make yourself look good.

Many people will distinguish you from others who are successful leaders. With a bad reputation, it will be easier said than done to regain the trust of those you will so desperately need.

Often times, you may come up against someone who will do almost anything to get ahead to get a promotion. They

may take credit for other's accomplishments or try to be the gatekeeper of information that others may need to function in the day to day operations. You may find that they want complete control of many projects. They want others to perceive them as the one with power. You will want to be cautious of these types of individuals. You may find yourself a soldier in their army only to be left dead.

It's okay to lose

A fight has left you realizing that your opponent has made a very good argument and had some ideas that are worth considering. Now what do you do? Tell your opponent what a good impression he has made on you! Express your excitement in sharing his ideas. Scratch your previous agenda and start a new mission. Take notes from your opponent and listen carefully. Come up with an action plan with due dates and meet often to discuss any progress on your new mission.

During a heated battle, be careful not to place your relationship on the line with your opponent. Perhaps fighting this battle was not such a good idea after all. Your opponent may have a large fan club and may have many faithful followers with among his peers. You could receive a lot of bad press from this battle. Back down immediately once you have realized what has happened. If you are faced with a battle from which no good can come, then it is okay to lose.

Win gracefully

Once you have successfully followed your agenda and you have accomplished your ultimate goal as a result of fighting your battle, claim your prize gracefully by ending the meeting gracefully. You can do this by sincerely thanking your opponent for allowing you to make your case. Reiterate to them the benefits they will gain as a result of taking your side of the battle.

Implementing changes throughout your department as a result of winning the battle with your opponent can be obtained smoothly by giving credit to your opponent. Announce that you and your opponent have developed a partnership on this issue and have decided as a team to implement this change together. You want others to perceive you and your opponent as a team. If your staff senses that there is a conflict between the two of you, they may try to play one against the other. You will need to come off as a united front.

Your peers may ask you how you won the battle with such a tough opponent. Take the high road and compliment your opponent on the willingness to be flexible. Compliment your

opponent to your peers. Spreading bad publicity about your opponent does not set a good example as a leader. You may have to sell your newfound partnership to your peers and staff.

What did you learn?

If you are not making any mistakes, then you are not doing anything. Mistakes are part of life. Making mistakes helps to grow and develop us into strong leaders. Learn from your shortcomings. Discuss the mistakes you made with others who are eager to succeed. Share your experience with your mentor, too. The two of you may be able to

develop a plan of what you will do differently next time. Keep a journal of your experiences and revisit it often. You may find a bit of humor in past crisis. At the time, it was a crisis for you. But now that you have grown into a seasoned leader, looking back on those experiences will seem humorous. Each of us goes through crises each and every day. How you handle your daily crises paints a picture of the type of leader you are and the type of leader you are becoming. Leaders today are situational, calm, optimistically cautious and altogether confident. As you go through your day-to-day life as a leader, stop and think before you choose your next battle. Good luck!

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