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About Reducing Friction

ONE OF THE SAD THINGS about business, community and family life is that friction may be nibbling like termites at their foundations unseen and unnoticed. Friction does not have to be screechy, like an ungreased wagon wheel, or throwing off smoke, like a railroad car hot-box, to be dangerous and evil.

One little bit of friction can trigger chain reactions and shake the whole delicate balance of office or workshop or home.

In physics, it is easy to ascertain the frictional force tending to hold back or chafe moving bodies, but friction between people cannot be statistically measured. There are too many human variables.

If ever there was a case where prevention is better and easier than cure, this is it. Skill in working and living with other people must become a natural, continuous, activity. It demands sensitivity in day-to-day contacts. It requires awareness that other people's lives are just as important to them as ours are to us.

Friction can develop between friends, between employer and worker, between clerk and customer, between the public and public servants; it may manifest itself through attitudes, conversation, letters, telephone messages, and even through facial expressions.

Often friction has a personal cause: it is friction between what is inside of us and what is outside of us. Life is, for everyone, an unceasing adjustment of internal relations to external relations.

Physical friction is easy to define. When two bodies rub on each other there is a force where the rubbing occurs called friction, which resists motion. It is caused by the interlocking of tiny irregularities on the two surfaces that are in contact.

Between human beings, friction takes many forms. Look at the friction caused by late-comers to a concert. They make whole rows of people stand, they block the view of the stage, they annoy and insult the conductor, the orchestra and the artists. Why did Eugene Ormandy ask women to check their noisy charm bracelets before entering the Academy of Music in Philadelphia? Because their jangling rubbed people the wrong way, raising the urge to do mayhem.

Friction in a workshop may be caused by the habitual sloppiness of a worker whose inadequacies have to be made up by others; in an office it may arise from such a simple thing as leaving a cigarette smoldering in an ash tray; in the home it may stem from untidiness.

Useful and wasteful friction

There are uses for friction in mechanics and physics. The cave-man found that when two sticks are rubbed together the resulting friction generates heat and starts a fire. You can make a friction drive, in which one wheel causes rotation of a second wheel with which it is pressed into contact. A locomotive can pull a train because there is friction between its wheels and the rails. Nails are held in place by friction.

These are useful applications of friction, but friction between people who are living and working together is wasteful of their efficiency, disturbing to their happiness, and it erodes their hope of fulfilling their purposes in life.

The effects of friction between things can be decreased in given cases by various means. A barber lathers a man's face before shaving him; the sliding surfaces in a machine may have some of their projecting points smoothed down; a file may be pushed across an edge diagonally instead of at a right angle; oil or grease forms a layer on surfaces, thus protecting the surface irregularities from one another; rollers or wheels — man's greatest achievement in combating friction — reduce friction between moving surfaces.

When it comes to dealing with friction between people, adaptations of these physical treatments may be effective in the short run and in some cases, but the problem is different because men are intrinsically different from inanimate metal.

What causes friction?

What causes friction in a workshop or in an office? Before a dispute breaks out there must be both a specific grievance and a general background of discontent. If the friction of discontent can be kept low, all parties are in much better position to handle

grievances constructively. Therefore, the time to use soft soap is before a worker gets the chance to think he has had a dirty deal.

This applies in all areas of life. We should not wait for the squeak that tells us friction is present, but seek to anticipate so as to prevent the cause. A quality of understanding is needed, besides an intelligent interest in other people and their way of thinking.

It is remarkable the number of causes one finds for friction between people. All of us have personal vanities, grudges, quirks, and passions old and new. We are inclined to bicker when things seem to go contrary to our desires.

The dangerous person is the one who has that sickness which moves him to enjoy causing friction. He criticizes everything that is not to his taste, whether it matters or not. He is like Buck, the dog in Jack London's book *The Call of the Wild*, who kept the sled team in an uproar while he himself put up a bland front.

Nagging is one of the most prolific causes of friction between human beings. Some people do not seem to be able to let well enough alone, to say a thing once and let it stand. They drive fellow workers to distraction, or, at home, they make intimacy an excuse for rough manners. Count Leo Tolstoy's wife admitted to her daughters: "I was the cause of your father's death." Her constant complaining, her criticisms, and her nagging drove him to flee from her. Wandering in the snow, he caught pneumonia and died.

Friction can be caused by rumour, either deliberately planned to cause trouble or thoughtlessly spilled out in mischievous mood. We all know the office trouble-maker and the factory gossip, people who compensate for their own empty lives by setting other people at odds with one another. There are, in certain circumstances, groups of such people devoted to the spreading of fear and hatred. Religious and racist bigots are of this kind.

The dependable individual defense against rumour is to develop a healthy skepticism of all hearsay reports. We set our minds to preventing the obsessed or opportunistic trouble-maker from causing trouble. The corporate defense, in community, business and home, is to publish the truth before the rumour-makers can get up steam.

Suspicion and envy

Suspicion is a common cause of friction between people. The person who is always and unreasonably suspicious of the motives and actions of those around him is a repellent personality, causing trouble to people who have no intention to do him any harm. But more than that, he hurts himself. To be always clad in the burdensome armour of suspicion is more painful and depressing than to run the hazard of suffering now and then a transient injury.

Envy and jealousy sometimes run amok, even after thousands of years of civilizing influences. There is not much scope for modification of a species in four or five

hundred generations, and jealousy still causes the same friction between people as in cave-man days.

These faults, placed by the writer Dr. James Stalker among *The Seven Deadly Sins*, are malicious in the way they poison relationships. They show themselves in grief or displeasure at the success of other people, and delight and exultation in their failure. They creep out of hiding when a promotion is announced in business, when a public honour is bestowed, or when a prize is won in school.

The person striving for success, courting the applause of the world, may cause friction by not respecting the feelings of those with whom he is in competition. An obnoxious pushing for place is irritating and may cause a revolt.

Pride displayed upon attaining an objective antagonizes fellow workers. The man who is made happy by success does not need to make colleagues feel that he is a great deal more clever than they are. He will avoid friction by displaying manners, grace and generosity.

Last to be mentioned in this array of causes of friction is impatience. We need to apply reasonable patience when things are said which antagonize us. What is the person's intent? Perhaps he does not really mean to attack us or our plan, but is merely inept in his asking of questions or stating his point of view.

It is absurd to allow ourselves to be rubbed the wrong way by a man who does not perceive the force of our reasons, or gives weak ones of his own. We recall the philosopher who, when kicked by a mule, overlooked the insult on considering its source.

Patience is a virtue of the strong. It is largely a matter of adjusting our minds and spirits to the realities of a present situation, and then making ourselves as comfortable as possible. This is far from the namby-pamby attitude of giving in to everything. We remember that the patient Job turned upon his friends who, in their security and ease, could afford to indulge in artificial arguments far removed from the painful realities of Job's life.

Be your own trouble-shooter

Reducing and eliminating friction in life is largely an individual exercise. Some people like the idea of having a trouble-shooter in every workshop and office. You can picture him scurrying around with a pail of soft soap in one hand and an oilcan in the other. How much more sensible if every man and every woman carried a small individual supply of soft answers and the other means needed to overcome friction.

Having made sure that the friction does not arise from a thought in your own mind, you can tackle the job of smoothing out the other person.

The project requires that you make allowances for the misguided emotional responses to life of other people. They may suffer morbid fears or anxiety states; they may act as they do because it gives them a feeling

of being important; they may not be against their environment or you but waging a battle within themselves.

Your response should provide something substantial to replace deficiencies. You may find or contrive for the person who is causing friction some outlet that will give him purposeful activity. You may help him to get rid of his emotion-ridden fears.

A person living a well-balanced life finds little against which to express resentment. If he determines never to go outside the agreeable side of his character he is reducing friction within himself and is giving less cause to others to complain of friction. He holds his emotions in check, especially when they are of the negative type. He acts as if he liked the people who antagonize him, and comes to find that his own feelings toward them have changed. He puts whatever is said or done in its proper place. He continually readjusts himself to his environment, which means to other people.

Creating friction unnecessarily is ill-bred. Our structure of good manners is well-designed to make living together smooth, but we need to carry it into positive action. When we are considerate of others in little ways; when we take pains and some trouble to see that others are not neglected; when we make sure of doing nothing to cause others to lose face, we are contributing a plus value to mere courtesy.

Tolerance helps

Tolerance is a virtue closely akin to courtesy. When we are tolerant of other people's pleasures and peculiarities we win indulgence for our own, a sort of reciprocal elimination of friction. We can escape much friction by not blaming, not judging, and not emitting verdicts.

As Henry James wrote: "The first thing to learn in intercourse with others is noninterference with their own peculiar ways of being happy, provided those ways do not assume to interfere by violence with ours." Nothing is more friction-making than the complacency with which some people assume that what is good for them must be good for, and should be imposed upon, everyone else.

Tolerance is the cordial effort to understand another's beliefs, practices and habits without necessarily adopting them as our own. If a blind man bumped into you on the street, you would not be likely to become angry. You would know that he is unable to see the things you can see.

Carry this thought over into personal, business, social and political matters. You may still speak with conviction and sincerity, while making allowance for another point of view. There is no surer sign of imperfect development than giving way to the impulse to snigger at other people, or wanting to shout them down, because they seem different, or naive, or do not conform to our code or standards.

Men of narrow thoughts and fierce tempers are prolific causers of friction. They believe what they want to believe. They refuse to listen to any of the facts necessary to an intelligent judgment. They think that every other dog is barking up the wrong tree, without realizing that there are so many trees that any good dog should be allowed to choose his own.

The wise man will analyse his beliefs to make sure that he has not given the wrong meaning to something said or thought or done. Few things, however good, are without some disadvantages, and almost nothing, however bad, is without some trace of good. When Rastus was asked what kind of chickens he liked best, he replied: "The white ones are the easiest to find in the dark, but the black ones are the easiest to hide after you get them."

Listen to people

It is important to listen to people. Let them state their positions, and then you are free to agree or to disagree. If we are not to be arbitrary we must let the person complaining tell us where his shoe pinches.

Ask some questions: "Let us hear your side; what are your reasons for preferring this to that?" A cause of friction brought out into the open is less dangerous to you than one that is not expressed. Restate the case in your own words, clarifying it and giving evidence of attention.

Some things to avoid are satire, sarcasm and humour. To use satire may succeed in making a person feel ridiculous, but that is a narrow success. It hurts his pride, and when you damage pride you are doing something very hard to remedy. Sarcasm is a sharp, bitter or cutting expression, a bitter taunt or jibe. It is sure to leave a deep wound, and it will be remembered by the victim long after others who heard it dismissed it as a stroke of wit. Humour should be used carefully, because every joke must have a truth, and truth can hurt. The person seeking a cheap and easy reputation for wit is a past-master in creating friction.

If you are an opinionated person loving to make your beliefs known, you can learn to do so without "raising the hackles" of your audience. Avoid acute angles. If you have a superior case, and use a trained approach, you can win your point without causing friction.

The kind of argument which can be classified as calm constructive reasoning should not be confused with the argument which is verbal controversy. It may not always be easy to see where reasoning ends and arguing begins, but the moment when one feels a sense of excitement or anger influencing his words or his actions he can be pretty sure that an emotional argument has started.

The cause of friction may be this: you advanced the first notion that came into your mind, and now you feel that you have to defend it how you can. You started by stating your conclusions, and now you have to call

other ideas nonsense. Or you pursue a point farther than is needed. Once a debate has been won, stop talking.

When you enter a dispute, try conciliation first, then force remains possible; if you use force first, then conciliation is impossible. And always leave your opponent a way of escape. There is nothing worse that can be done to an individual than the destruction of his self-respect.

Management and friction

Managers and department heads run into many problems involving friction. In fact, the elimination of friction between workers is just as important as the easing of friction in machinery.

The manager is not an independent man working alone. He is part of an organization, receiving instructions, issuing instructions, working with others at both ends of the chain of responsibility. Management strength shows itself as much in restraint and manners as in domination and belligerence. Diplomacy, the art of negotiating, and tact, are the strong points in the manager's armoury.

The manager has a chain-of-command responsibility. He needs to make clear to all persons in his group: (1) what work is expected from each person, and (2) who will be in charge of the group when he is absent. The second is an obligation often neglected by management, with consequent damage through friction. It is not fair to assume that the senior person — senior by service or age — will automatically look after things. The manager must call his group together and say: "When I am not here, Bill will look after things, and I expect business to run as smoothly as if I were here."

A positive tool in the manager's work-box is the compliment. A compliment paid in its proper place is an excellent way of warding off friction.

Some people say, mistakenly, "Make people feel important." Instead, the manager need only honestly recognize the worker's person, his importance as an individual, and his qualities. The secret of winning the support of workers is to help them to sustain their ego.

If you cannot praise in honesty the job a man has done, at least show appreciation of effort. If you have to find fault, do it gently. Call attention to people's mistakes quietly. This is foreign to our present-day culture, which honours the act of blaming as being in some way a sign of virtue and righteousness.

Threats are ineffective in remedying bad conditions in an office or workshop, and they lead directly into continuing friction. We cannot, in business or private life, ride roughshod over the feelings of others.

Before issuing a threat, ask yourself whether the outcome really matters. An old-timer in the west warned a greenhorn: "Never show a gun unless you are prepared to shoot: otherwise leave it out of sight or it will only increase your danger."

Invite suggestions

Suggestion systems are widely used by both large and small factories and offices to build better employer-worker relations, prevent the forming of friction causes, and increase efficiency. A suggestion box shows employees that the firm is genuinely interested in receiving their comments. Making suggestions gives the workers a sense of participation.

Some suggestions will be critical of things as they are: how else, indeed, could ideas for improvement be brought forward? Analyse the suggestion for its worth, sincerely looking for a way to use it.

Four things are needed of the manager soliciting suggestions: (1) make clear that you really want suggestions from workers; (2) set up a way of evaluating ideas, preferably with an employee representative on the board; (3) provide suitable recognition for ideas that are accepted and suitable explanation for those that are not used; (4) follow through to see that good ideas are put into use. You cannot increase output, or cut costs, or eliminate friction, or build morale, with an idea that is approved and then lies in a file.

The mutual solution of difficult problems ties persons of healthy mind together, with bonds of mutual respect and trust in a common endeavour.

The French term "rapprochement" is a good one to have in mind. One of its meanings is "drawing closer, bringing together". Every person has some good points to back up what he believes, so why not eliminate friction by getting together as allies in a common cause?

To reduce or avoid friction between leaders of groups, confer with them. One of the best ways in which to win people's co-operation is to consult them on subjects in which they are interested. Men will willingly and enthusiastically apply rules or support a course of action which they themselves have worked out in a conference. Having helped to make the decision about what should be done, they will be concerned to see that the effort is successful.

An experience in non-friction

We can reduce friction by adjusting our behaviour to our universe as it is, by learning how it works. Part of this consists in looking favourably on the motives of those with whom we live and work, not attributing to them desires and actions which they do not have.

Making allowances for people's eccentricities is both an art and a necessity if we are to progress through private and working life without friction. We need to forget personalities and think of common interests, the plan to be made, the thing to be done, and the crisis to be met.

There is a certain deep-down satisfaction in bearing with people's humours, complying with the inclinations of those you converse with, assuming superiority over nobody. To do this for a day would be an exciting experience in non-friction.