

Clarity vs. Popularity - how being clear brings rewards that popularity can never deliver

How much easier it is to avoid having to be clear with others such as colleagues and clients, or with yourself. Why put your cards on the table, set the record straight or do or say anything that might lead to conflict of any sort? Isn't it better to leave it to another day, avoid unpleasantness, and be somehow kind by not dealing with the issue now or at all? Why be risk being unpopular? Well, I hope to persuade you that clarity beats popularity any day and no mistake.

The central issues around which the challenge to be clear and the desire to be popular revolve are those of boundaries and emotionality:

- Boundaries are what delineate and demarcate our relationships with others, often varying according to the nature of the individual relationship. They represent how far others may go in their conduct and actions and what we will tolerate in the context of the particular relationship. Our sense of self-worth and respect are important factors in setting our boundaries with others.
- Emotionality is a condition of physical and psychological experience that shapes our feelings about things and so often drives our actions. Epictetus pointed out in the 6th Century BC that "people are not disturbed by things, only the view they take of them" and that remains fundamentally true. Fear of the emotional consequences of being clear in any given situation is never far from our minds.

When we are 'being clear' about something we are usually concerned with not only establishing the facts but also addressing the consequences of those facts in whatever respect they are relevant to the relationship. For example, a Partner may need to discuss with an Associate the way in which a matter or client situation has been handled; a firm may need to address the quality of service it has been receiving from a sub-contractor; you may need to speak to your flat mate about sharing the cleaning duties. So many circumstances arise constantly in which we face having to deal with issues that are not comfortable or easy. What is likely to be involved is some need for change failing which the relationship will have to change.

How then to deal with issues before they become problems or reach crisis point and how can we cause the least possible harm to ourselves or to others in the process? The answers to these questions are to be clear and to allow others to experience such emotions and make such choices as they may, for that is their right.

So how can we be clear about anything? Being clear is not simply about knowing the facts but also how those facts impact on your personal boundaries. How you perceive a situation can be based on reason and understanding; or, it can be based in fear and resentment in which case it is driven by emotionality. It is not possible to be clear within yourself or with others until you have dispelled all emotionality. You find a place of clarity within yourself only once there is no longer any emotional activation; there is then only the question of how to communicate that clarity with the other in the most skilful way possible. Being clear is an act of respect towards your self and is respectful towards others. Setting boundaries also engages responsibility in that you may choose to accept without rancour the consequences of any change in relationship.

Directness and honesty are, as is so often said, refreshing. Once you have found clarity, or found the peace of mind and emotional calm needed to seek clarity, then you may find that the whole process and the other's response is not as bad as you might have imagined. Most people are sensitive to criticism, whatever they may say or pretend otherwise, and can tend to become defensive and argumentative when they feel that they are being 'made wrong', not least because we generally do not like to fail or fail others. One can aim to handle each situation with the intention not to diminish the other or to suggest that an individual is somehow a 'bad person' or that a firm is a 'bad firm' - such judgments are invidious and odious and if we harbour them we can expect others to know that however we dress it up.

So what of popularity? When at the expense of clarity the price is, in my view, too high. The postponement of issues so often leads to precisely the confrontation, resentment and relationship damage you were seeking to avoid. Behaving in a way that is essentially designed to make others like you is disingenuous and only leads to problems later when your patience may be stretched to the point where clarity and calm are replaced by frustration and fury. By contrast, being clear promotes mutuality and trust and so establishes strong foundations for lasting and rewarding relationships.

Next time you catch yourself not wanting to ask a question or raise a matter, ask yourself "Do I want clarity or popularity?"