

ROTARY DISTRICT 5440 PEACEBUILDER
NEWSLETTER WINTER 2018 NUMBER 6

MEEK, HUMBLE, YET ASSERTIVE?

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and
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Peacemaking is everyone's business, but it is not easy and requires commitment, passion, love, and thoughtfulness. Our hope is that this newsletter will provide new ideas, suggestions and possibilities for all Rotarians to participate. We welcome your ideas on how to promote and encourage conflict resolution. In this 6th newsletter we contrast how being both assertive and yet meek and humble contribute to better relationships.

WHO ARE THE BEST PEACEMAKERS?

**William M. Timpson
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Many of the skills of peacemaking have emerged from work with at-risk populations. Assertiveness training can help anyone—students, teachers, parents, community and business leaders, professionals and average citizens and others—distinguish between actions that are aggressive and those that could be considered submissive. These differences can be important when considering actions and attitudes that are, instead, driven by ego, for example. Here is where humility and meekness, together with a commitment to assertive communication, offer an alternative to power, control and violence.

Invariably, it is when people let their emotions fuel their aggressive tendencies that violence can erupt. Unfortunately, it can also be true that retreating to a submissive state can undermine a democratic process that benefits from everyone's participation. Humility and weakness married to assertiveness can help people take the necessary initiative to address real problems and move toward sustainable solutions.

It is that place in between aggressive and submissive responses where the assertive response lies, delivered with confidence, usually face to face and with direct eye contact, behaviors that even the truly humble and meek can learn to express. As such it offers the clearest and most effective communication, a foundation for peacebuilding.

At one end of this continuum, anyone of us can become hostile. We can get angry, adopt a negative attitude or become aggressive. We can blame someone else—a colleague, the students or their parents, the culture.

On the other end of this continuum, we can play a submissive role, allow others to dominate or some injustice to continue. At times it may just be inertia that wins. Or we let our confusions paralyze us. We may suffer in silence or look for excuses. We may define ourselves as introverts and be uncomfortable out front on issues. We may feel overwhelmed by events that seem too big, too dangerous or too far away.

Taking some time to discuss and practice assertive responses can help people take more responsibility for their own actions, especially when they're involved in group projects where success often builds on everyone's contributions. For peacebuilding efforts to endure, grassroots efforts usually require everyone involved to be willing to take some initiative and assume a share of the responsibility.

On any task, we can help others with the following:

- Being more direct in their communication, expressing clearly and concisely what they want, how they feel and what they need.
- Focusing on honesty in communication.
- Being more empathetic toward others and working toward understanding those with different opinions.
- Being more persistent in their requests by, for example, making eye contact when appropriate.

Guidelines for training

All that may sound straightforward enough, but time and guidance are often required as people shift from either submissive or aggressive responses. So here are some additional recommendations that can help people make more assertive responses:

- (1) Before individuals act, have them reflect some on the problem they are having and develop a clear definition for themselves of what they think is wrong.
- (2) Help people plan for a preferred response. They can start by clarifying what they want. Help these people take some initiative, doing or saying something constructive.
- (3) Before they attempt to put a plan into practice, many are helped with a visualization, how they think a situation would play out with different responses?
- (4) Now it's time to practice on others—classmates, friends, co-workers or family members.
- (5) Finally, have these people put a new plan into action and evaluate the results.

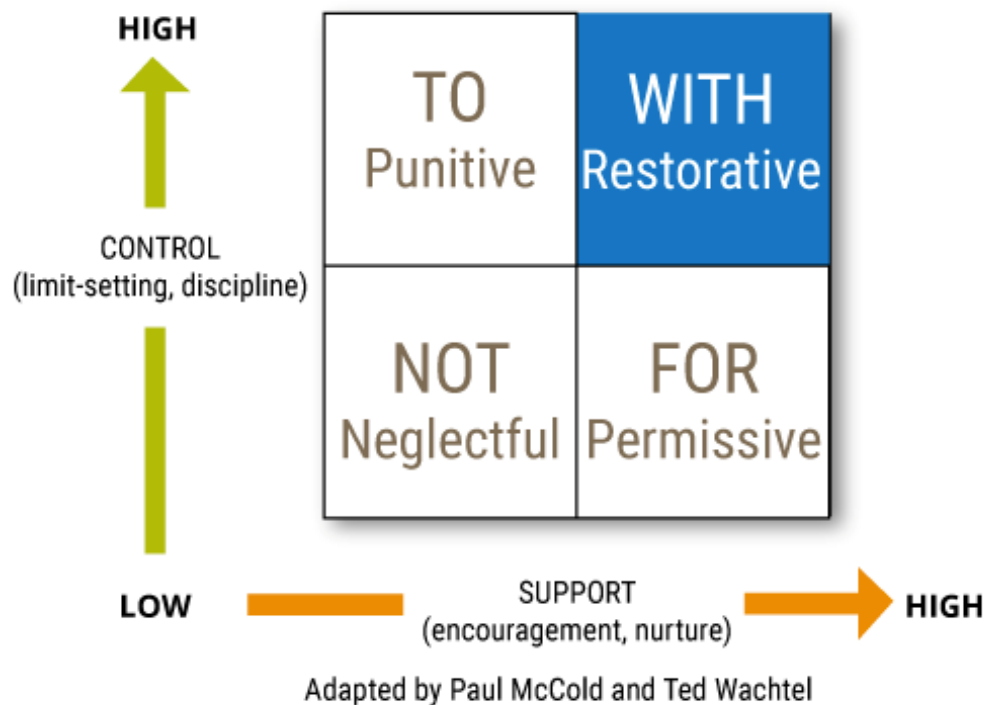
These guidelines are not just for addressing problems, however. People can use the same principles and practices to express appreciation to someone who is sensitive to their needs, to a group member who comes on time and is ready to work, to someone who puts a stimulating challenge out there for them to meet, or to those who are pushing to end violence and promote peacebuilding.

Adapted from William M. Timpson's (2002) *Teaching and Learning Peace* (Madison, WI: Atwood).

LEARNING TO WORK “WITH”

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“Human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them.” – Ted Wachtel



The Social Discipline Window describes four basic approaches to addressing behavior that needs to be changed. Restorative practitioners use this tool to gauge the best response to a specific incident or ongoing issue. The four strategies are represented as different combinations of high or low control and high or low support. The word “control” never seems like quite the right fit to me, so I instead use “expectations of behavior” or “accountability.” The restorative domain combines high expectations of behavior and high support and is characterized by doing things *with* people, rather than *to* them or *for* them. A restorative approach allows us to address the problematic behavior, while also practicing empathy and maintaining a strong relationship.

Take, for example, a student who is repeatedly disruptive in class, speaking over the teacher and making loud comments and jokes.

The **Neglectful** strategy is to *not* do anything, to hope that the student will just eventually stop.

The **Punitive** strategy is punishment, doing something *to* the person who is misbehaving. The teacher might give the student detention or remove privileges like being able to come on a field trip. The strategy holds the student to a high expectation of behavior, but has very little support. This strategy may result in animosity between the teacher and student, and will not address the core issues or needs contributing to the problematic behavior.

The **Permissive** strategy is when we do things *for* someone. We accept their excuses or make excuses for them. The teacher might tell herself that the student is just trying to be liked by the other students because he has been having trouble making friends, or that his unrestrained enthusiasm is a sign that he is enjoying the class. A possible outcome is that other students, seeing that a high expectation of behavior is not upheld, will similarly begin to speak out of turn, and the teacher will slowly lose the respect of the class and the ability to facilitate an effective learning space.

The **Restorative** strategy is when we work *with* the person to resolve the issue. The teacher would speak with the disruptive student one-on-one, explain the impacts his disruptive behavior, and respectfully ask the student about his experience and what is going on. This keeps communication open and allows the teacher to find out what needs are contributing to the student's misbehavior. Is the student having trouble making friends? Are there troubles at home that are impacting the student's behavior at school? Are there other more productive ways that the student would like to be an outgoing leader in the classroom? Does the student need additional material to challenge him and keep him on task? The teacher and student would work together to understand what are the barriers to meeting the behavior expectations and how can those barriers be addressed.

What strikes me about the restorative strategy for addressing behavior issues is the humility it requires on the part of the teacher, facilitator, parent or other person of authority. Rather than thinking that we know best and approaching the problem with an already formed answer (as is the case in both the punitive and the permissive strategies), the restorative strategy approaches the issue by asking questions, with a humble and compassionate desire to better understand. It is the only strategy that allows us to actually get to the core of the issue.

There are a few strategies you can use to address conflicts and issues in your own life restoratively.

1. Ask questions! Don't assume that you know why a person is doing something, what their needs are, or the best strategy for making things right. Remember to make questions open-ended (so they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no") and to use a tone of respect and non-judgment.
2. Try using:
 - What
 - Why
 - How
 - Tell me more about...

3. In approaching an issue, follow the framework of the three central restorative questions.
 1. What happened?
 2. Who was affected and how?
 3. What is needed to repair the harms and make things right?
4. Commit some time to self-reflection and identify which strategy in the Social Discipline Window is your default response. Are you prone to avoiding conflict and doing nothing, to jumping straight to punishment, or to making or accepting excuses for poor behavior? Knowing this about yourself will help you to know which direction you need to push yourself. Do you need to remind yourself to hold high expectations of behavior with the people in your life or do you need to remember to take a step back and show support?

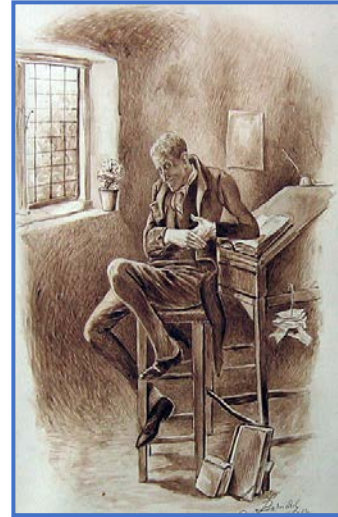
In each of the communities and interactions that make up our lives, the Social Discipline Window offers us a tool for thinking about how to approach issues and conflicts more restoratively.

MEEK = WIMP HUMBLE = PUSHOVER

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“Humble” is one of those words that have contradictory meanings in modern use. For some the word means not-pretentious, unassuming, not proud or arrogant, and modest, certainly praiseworthy traits. But for many the word suggests lower, degraded, trifling, not respectable, and often is found synonymous with chameleon like behavior or low character.

Sadly, for me the word “humble” will often be associated with the Charles Dickens character, Uriah Heep in his novel *David Copperfield*. If you recall, Heep is one of the main antagonists of the novel... a truly despicable person who constantly asserts he is a “umble” man. His character is notable for his cloying humility, obsequiousness, and insincerity, making frequent references to his own “umbleness”. His name has become synonymous with sycophancy.¹



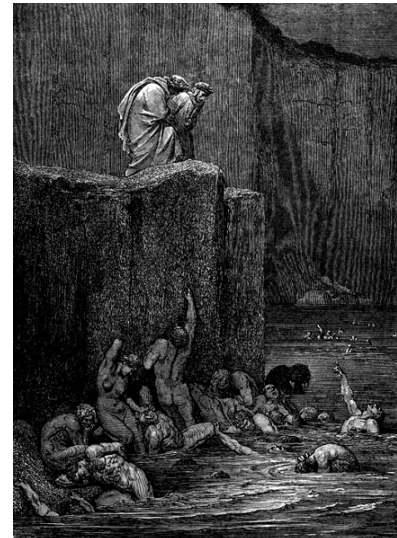
Illustrated by Frederick Barnard

Sandro Botticelli's illustration of *Dante's Inferno* shows insincere flatterers and sycophants groveling in excrement in the second pit of the eighth circle.² Gustav Dore, William Blake, and Salvador Dali also illustrated the fate of sinners and flatterers in the *Inferno*.



<< Sandro Botticelli's
Inferno: Canto XVIII,
 8th Circle, 2nd Pit of
 excrement.

Gustav Dore – Fate of
 Flatterers >>



¹ Sycophancy is flattery that is excessive and servile, a bootlicker, fawning, groveling, and kowtowing in nature.

² In Dante's *Inferno* the eighth circle contains all those who commit fraud against humanity, and the second pit is filled with stinking filth where those guilty of flattery are plunged.

With such unsavory examples it was difficult for me to admire a “humble” man, and then as a young man I had my own personal lesson in humility. My father was one of those people who always seemed to fade into the background. He was quiet, unpretentious, and rarely expressed strong opinions. Of course, he was also kind, faithful, honest, and hard-working, but these qualities were not immediately apparent. Indeed, I recall one college friend who observed on visiting my family, *“your father is the meekest man I ever met.”*

When my father died, a number of people at his funeral approached me to reflect on his life. One person revealed my father supported him financially when he was in need. Another testified my father counseled he and his wife when their marriage was in trouble, others testified to his work as a peacemaker...and so on. I was in my 20s, yet I had no idea of this side of his life. Suddenly, “meek” and “humble” became words completely transformed in my understanding, and I also learned what it was to feel humble myself.

Meekness has sometimes been contrasted with humility or humbleness as referring to behavior toward others, whereas humility refers to one’s attitude about oneself. Thus, the two qualities are interwoven. A meek person will restrain one’s own power or control in order for others to thrive, achieve, and obtain recognition.

In situations which require conciliation, compromise, and cooperation, peace and resolution are more likely to be achieved when participants acknowledge their own limitations of understanding and righteousness (activating humility) and the often-unacknowledged point of view of others (apply meekness). If even one person in an argument can apply these character traits, it is much more likely that the other will respond favorably, and conflict can be avoided.

So how can you learn to be humble/meek? You can start by appreciating others:

- Appreciate and acknowledge the talents and qualities of others,
- Avoid comparing yourself to others, don’t brag,
- Be prepared to defer to other’s judgement,
- Remain teachable,
- Go last,
- Compliment others,
- Don’t take all the credit,
- Accept your own limitations,
- Be prepared to make mistakes, and
- Admit your mistakes and apologize.

In the Christian Bible, Matthew 5.9, one finds the third and seventh of the Beatitudes: *“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth,”* and *“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”*

These seem worthy rewards.

[//http://www2.connectseward.org/chu/stv/beatitudes.htm](http://www2.connectseward.org/chu/stv/beatitudes.htm)