A Dream in Peril

Syed and I hadn’t spoken in years.

I had coached him when he was a young rising star at a Silicon Valley tech giant. I had enjoyed my time with Syed. I found him to be an interesting thinker. He had no modesty about what he didn’t know. In those days, he was hungry to learn about leading teams and how to manage up. Our conversations were fast-paced and engaging.

That was fifteen years ago.

Now, he reached out to me with a thoughtful email. He brought me up to speed about his life. His two boys, who’d been very young when he and I had worked together, were on the brink of adulthood. His wife had risen to be a leader in her hospital system.

And he brought me up to speed about his work.

Syed had stayed at the tech giant, ultimately rising to senior vice-president. He expressed gratitude for those years.
He left because he had a dream about creating a startup. Eager to learn first-hand, he joined the leadership teams of two different startups. He drank from firehoses, knowing he was building strength for the day he would lead his own company.

Finally, three years ago, he made the leap. He and one of his best friends created a company where before there had been none. It was not all smooth sailing. There were tumultuous storms. But they had survived, even thrived. Now, however, he felt the ship breaking on the rocks. He wondered if I could help.

The issue was with his co-founder and best friend, Peter. Peter and Syed had first become friends during their MBA program. Over the years, Peter had listened so often to Syed dreaming about the startup, it had become his dream, too. They had dreamed together. There was never any question but they would be co-founders.

Now, a crossroads was coming that would force the company down one road or the other. There weren't enough resources to travel both paths. Peter wanted one road, Syed the other. There could be only one winner.

He closed his email, writing, “We’re both dug in on our positions. It’s awful. I’m afraid this could not only kill the business, it could kill our friendship. I hope you can help.”

Everyone Rich

Soon after his email, Syed and I got on a call. It took me a minute to adjust the portrait I had of him in my head. In my mind, he still had the flush of youth. The person who popped onto the screen had the depth of age.

I could see immediately, Syed was raw. When I asked him how he was, he shook his head. “I can barely sleep, Tom.”

He explained that the path Peter favored had been a viable option once, but now, given the current situation, that path was a death march.

He said, “His way, we won’t be here in five years. My way, I think we triple in five years.”

We both paused.

Quietly, I asked, “Syed, if everything could be perfect, what would you want? What would a good outcome be?”

“That he stop thinking as if it was two years ago. That we follow the path that’s going to
allow us to grow the company.”

“Okay. Got it. And what do you want for the people around you?”

He said, “I want them all to win. Everyone who’s part of the company – there are just under two hundred now – I hope they all get rich.”

“What do you want for Peter?”

“I want him to get rich, too! Hell, him most of all. It’s his dream, too. Or it was. But, uhhh.....” For the first time, Syed ran out of steam. His chest collapsed and his chin dropped.

I waited.

Finally, he drew in a breath and began to lift up. “That was helpful. Thinking about what I want for people. I’m not as angry as I was. Thanks.”

I nodded.

He said, “I hear him talking to people and can’t believe what he’s saying. When I call him on it, he gets all angry. We’re fighting all the time and we never used to fight. Not ever.”

“That sounds hard for you both,” I said.

“Those questions – thinking about what do I want for people – that calmed me down for the first time in a while. Thanks. What other tools do you have?”

**The Conflict Resolution Wheel**

I said, “Funny you should ask. Those questions about your wants are one part of a tool I use called The Conflict Resolution Wheel. The Wheel has five wedges, and one of the wedges is ‘Wants.’ When you’re working in that wedge, you ask yourself, ‘What do I want for the business? What do I want for others? What do I want for myself?’ And, I agree, it can be soothing.”

He asked, “What did you mean when you said ‘you’re working on a wedge? What’s that?’

“Well, the premise of the The Wheel is that conflicts stir us up. And while we’re stirred up, it’s hard to resolve a conflict. The Wheel helps us sort ourselves out. It asks you to think about your
experiences and put them in these five wedges. When you’re ‘working on a wedge,’ you’re retrieving the data from that particular wedge.”

“Are they in some order?” he asked.

“They don’t have to be, no. Start where you like. The whole purpose is for you to get some distance. Stop being so stirred up. That way, when you and he talk, you’ll bring a different perspective.”

“That’d be a help,” he said. “This thing has me so turned around I can’t figure out what to do next. I hate that feeling. Okay. Thanks. I’ll give it a try.”

“Great,” I said. “I’ll send you the PDF. It’s pretty self-explanatory. But can I tell you a way to use The Wheel that can go a long way in resolving the conflict?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Both of you do it,” I said. “You and Peter each fill out your own Wheels. Then come together and share what you each wrote.”

He gave a nervous laugh, like he was looking over a ledge. “Sounds like the staging ground for a war.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because it’s personal. One of us is going to lose. Publicly. So we’re enemies.”

“Ugh, Syed. I’m so sorry. My hope is that The Wheel, or something like it, can put some structure around this really difficult conversation. The structure helps make it safe. If the conversation gets heated, you can always bring it back to The Wheel. That can calm things down.”

“Like thinking about ‘Wants’ calmed me down,” he said.

“Yes,” I agreed.

He asked, “So what’re the others?”

The Other Four Wedges

I took a breath and ticked on my fingers. “The other four wedges are Sensory Data, Thoughts, Feelings and Actions.”

“Go on,” he said.
“Sensory Data is all the input we take in. Verbal. Non-verbal. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, everything. You have a ton of data inside you that relates to this conflict. That’s important, but it doesn’t mean anything yet. It’s just data. It’s video playback.

“The way we give meaning to data is with our thoughts. And that’s the next wedge. Thoughts. What do we think about that data? ‘What do I think that phone call meant?’ ‘What do I think about what I saw?’ You analyze things. You’re logical. And you create meaning. That’s the Thought wedge.

“Which leads us to the Feelings wedge. It’s inevitable, conflict stirs us up. Look at you. You’re fighting to keep your dream alive. How could you not have feelings about that? In this wedge you write them all down. The good, the bad and the ugly.”

“I’m not even sure I know all the things I’m feeling,” he said.

“Not unusual,” I said.

He said, “Sorry. Go on. We have one to go, right?”

“Right. This wedge is Actions.”

“As in, what am I going to do next?” he said.

“That’s one way to think about actions, absolutely. ‘What am I willing to commit to? What’s in the future?’ Another way to think about actions is in the past. ‘What have I said and done during this whole ordeal?’ And there’s the present. ‘What am I doing and saying now?’ In this wedge you think about all three: past, present and future.”

“That’s some serious accountability,” he said. “I notice you’re not mentioning him and his actions in there. Don’t I get to write about those in my Action wedge?”

I laughed. “Fraid not. Sharing each other’s ‘What Happened’ stories is a different conversation. It’s probably important, too. But that conversation is not the purpose of The Wheel. The Wheel is forward-looking. The Wheel wants to move both of you from talking about ‘him’ and ‘me’ to talking about ‘us.’ Rehashing actions from the past won’t get you there like The Wheel will.”

“Even so,” he said, “this is not going to be easy.”

I nodded, agreeing. “Conflict is uncomfortable.”

“Which won’t stop me,” he said.
Although Peter and Syed each wrote at length about their five wedges, they were reluctant to come together. Peter asked if I'd facilitate their conversation. I was happy to help.

To my delight, Peter turned out to be as articulate and mature as Syed. Once I provided some ground rules, they didn't need much help. I was grateful to witness such a terrific display of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

*The model in this episode is based on “The Information Wheel” created by Dr. Sherod Miller for the Couple Communication course.*

This installment prepares you to write about your experiences. To learn skills that'll allow you to have a productive conflict resolution conversation, listen to the full episode of *“The Conflict Resolution Wheel,” episode #235* of The Look & Sound of Leadership podcast.
Core Concepts

- Conflicts stir us up. Difficult conversations get easier when there's calm.
- Writing about The Wheel's five wedges gives you distance, which creates calm.
- Invite your partner-in-conflict to complete their own Wheel.
- Recognize that neither of your Wheels are right. They're just 'yours.'
- As you share, listen to learn, not to win.

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