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life advice

The Fallacy of Control

Using control as a means of getting what you want isn't the way to go if you want something done.

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Don't try controlling your spouse, there are better ways to do things.

The traffic is awful. Nothing's moving. So, you start railing at the cars in front of you, telling them how to drive, which of course does no good and you're just beside yourself by the time you do get home.

Then you come home to a disaster. The house is a mess, the baby's crying, your spouse looks up bleary-eyed at you from the couch and dinner hasn't even been considered, much less started. You explode: "Is it too much to ask, to have a half-way clean house, the baby pacified and dinner started by 6:30?" You storm off to the bedroom, furious, shutting the door hard behind you.

And tomorrow is the same story. It seems that no matter how hard you try to get your wife to do things the way you want her to, it never sticks—just like no matter how loudly you tell other drivers how they should drive, it never works.

When we can't control our environment, we try to control people. Controlling people never works. Umpteen rebellions, revolutions, uprisings and homicides have resulted from people trying to control people. Short term, it often seems like a workable solution. Long term, it always fails.

So what does work? Cooperating with your mate, negotiating with her, understanding her, and working with her. The problem is, cooperating and working with others to get what you want takes a willingness many of us lack.

"Hey, I'm willing," you say. "Other people just don't want to do things the right way." What you mean by "the right way," however, is your way. Wanting things done your way is just another way of saying you want to control people. You must be willing to give up the idea that your way is "the right way" and instead, open up to the idea that there are many "right ways" to get things done.

"Great," you groan, "So you're saying I'm wrong and my wife is always right?" Of course not, and that's not what "working with" others is about. The idea is for you to agree on a common goal then figure out how to best reach that goal given your individual talents and preferences.

Let's say you sit down with your spouse and agree that a common goal is a clean house. A clean house is more pleasant to live in, smells better and everybody can find their stuff more easily. So far, so good. As the primary clean-obsessed partner, you draw up a list of what you think it takes to keep a house clean. Then you ask what your wife thinks about your list of "clean house" requirements. Your spouse agrees with most of the items on your list, although she thinks less frequency is better. You compromise. Floors will be washed once a week, not twice a week.

Now comes the part you dread. Who will clean what? No problem—just ask! Don't impose, ask: "What are you willing to do? We've agreed to accomplish everything on the list, so please choose one." Give your wife first dibs, then pick one item from the list and keep passing the list back and forth until all items are chosen.

Your wife and you then get to clean the way each prefers. No, things won't necessarily get done "your way"—but they'll get done, and you'll find that your home environment comes gently under control, even when you can't control the people in it.

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