

By Louise Phipps Senft

The negotiating table

Turning problems into opportunities

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Conflict and Negotiation Lessons Learned from the Recent Snow

Snowmageddon, Snowpocalypse, Snowtastrophe, Snownarok- whatever you want to call it, the recent snow onslaught left Baltimore in a crisis situation. It's true that there was some panic in the air. Hours before the first flake fell onto Baltimore streets, supermarkets and superstores were packed tightly with rushed shoppers hurrying to grab as much food as they could before the massive storm. Others made sure to head home early, turned on the weather on the radio, and sat and listened to doom prophets spread their word of the upcoming aerial attack of the white stuff. No matter what your pre-snowstorm ritual was, there was no doubt that preparation was necessary in this time of region-wide crisis. When the snow finally stopped, there was a whole other crisis – getting rid of it.

The snow crisis is very similar to many other crises we face in our lives, and can remind us of the best lessons on how to deal with them. Whether small or large, events that we are not fully prepared for, or that we are prepared for, yet they throw us off our course or throw a wrench in our familiar routine or expectations, are really daily examples of mini or large “conflict crises”. As such, when we first see the task at hand, it can seem daunting and overwhelming. It is understandable if, after the first look at the snow on the lawn, you might turn right around and head back under the covers. It is also understandable that you might want to take on the task of removing the snow by yourself, and set out to do battle armed only with a hand shovel. This is similar to other problems we face. First instincts may be to avoid the problem and just hope it goes away. Other instincts might be to anticipate and plan in advance, although planning does not remove

the experience. And still other instincts might propel us to attack the problem head on, only to have effort wasted and pride hurt (or your back) because, though you were capable, the task at hand was too large to do on your own.

The neighborhoods that fared the best during the snow storms were the ones that worked together. It seems like the real highlights for success stories that emerged from the recent snowpocalypse were of neighbors banding together, helping each other clear the road, digging cars out, and making their neighborhoods safe to traverse. In fact, if you were to hear them talk about the recent snowdumps, those who joined with their neighborhood to deal with the force of nature had admitted that it was actually a good experience to bond with their neighbors.

The landscape of crises is the terrain where unsung heroes emerge, where the Loyola College soccer team, for instance, donated hundreds of hours of their time shoveling for older folks. Young families helped shovel for older neighbors, and those who were not able to shovel offered refreshments to the tired. I salute these unsung heroes, not only for their selflessness but more importantly for the upstream effects that such acts on behalf of others do to strengthen community, and to make future dialogue about difficult matters in the future easier.

One of the lessons to be learned from this snowstorm is that there is no shame in asking others for help when trying to get through a tough time. Whether it is 2 feet of snow on your front porch, a divorce, a lawsuit, or a foreclosure, it is ok to ask for help when you need it. Crises may be unavoidable, but they will become worse if they're left alone. For example, if you were one of the ones to go back to bed when you saw the snow, you may be sorry you did. Snow gets heavier as it sets. Divorce, lawsuits or health problems can get worse if you don't get help, either from peers, mentors, lawyers, mental, spiritual, financial or legal experts or mediators.

Another lesson to be learned from snowmageddon is the importance and appreciation of good willed people who think of others first. In the snow, thinking of others and helping out is what cleared the path for people to walk and drive. Neighborhoods that had clean streets and unearthed cars could be proud of their accomplishments together. There are many negotiation lessons to be learned from the actions of others during the recent snow storms such as what to do and what not to do

with longer lasting positive effects, as well as strengthened interactions. Let me draw some analogies here.

And still another timeless lesson for negotiators to be learned from the snow crisis is patience. Slowing down when passing a pedestrian on a narrow street, rather than seizing your “right” to drive the speed limit, or yielding to another car turning into a narrow, snow buried street, rather than forging ahead because you were “there first” or “had the right of way” are good examples of choice points for us when we negotiate difficult problems with others. These are not just gracious acts, they are wise acts. They build relationships and respect, and gratefulness. They avoid injuries generally, and, you still get where you need to go. Being proactive in dealing with events yourself and with the others affected, finding ways that each can contribute to an acceptable result, having patience and resisting assuming the worst about the other person are wonderful lessons to be reminded of how we might choose to negotiate in our daily lives. It goes to show you that out of any crisis can emerge something very, truly rewarding. Better process...better outcome.

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