

On Compromise

Have you (been) compromised? Certainly not something that you want to happen, or is it?

There is a lot of ambiguity around the meaning of compromise. You can either understand it positively, as a settlement of a dispute that is reached by each side making concessions or you see it negatively, as the acceptance of standards that are lower than desirable.

If we go back to the Latin roots of the word compromise, “compromissum” stood for a mutual promise to abide by a judgement of a mediator.



Failure to do so, would lead to penalties. I tend to lean towards a similar definition of compromise as a mutual agreement to leave conflict behind.

Hence, in this article I would like to explain why compromise, however it may be reached, should be revived as a prime way to resolve conflict. In a world that is shifting to extremes where stark statements dominate, populism and me-first rhetoric gain popularity, I see compromise as a gift. To me this is equally valid in private life as in business or politics.

Don't get me wrong: I do think that having an own, and ideally clear, opinion is important. However, having an opinion is one thing. Sticking to it stubbornly against all arguments and reason is another. People who do so often adhere to the false believe that conflicts are zero-sum games where one side wins what the other side loses. This is certainly not true – and not every conflict is a matter of principle or as complicated to resolve as the Gaza-Israel conflict. So, move away from a 100% perfect solution for you and consider other views.

When talking of compromise, I am also not talking of lame or weak compromises, but real compromises that force you to step back and search for a true middle ground. In other words, this means that you rather need to see the 50 shades of grey instead of a black or white world. It means that you need to leave your own position ... and find a new one. It also means that you try to understand the other side, their beliefs and most importantly their desire.

I think that the mentality needed to compromise is build on some of the key skills that every strong leader and team player needs to have:

- Empathy: to understand the other side.
- Flexibility: to make concessions and see past the current conflict.
- Learning: to convince and be convinced.
- Creativity: to find new perspectives and positions.
- Positivity: To see the greater good and value of long-term relations.

So, let me conclude with the old story that presents the dilemma of the orange. A brother and a sister rush to their mum fighting over the last available orange in the house. Both cry out: “It is mine”. How can this conflict be resolved? Split it in half is an obvious, yet, not too creative solution as each of the children would get half an orange. However, when the wise and kind mother takes the orange away and asked both of her children: “Why do you need it?”, the answers were interesting. The mother learned that the son came back from playing football and wanted to quench his thirst with some orange juice. The daughter replied that she was baking a birthday cake and needed to shave the peel into the recipe. At the end the children, with the help of their mother, compromise. By allowing the brother to make all the juice he wants, the sister gets the leftover peel intact and usable for her birthday cake recipe. Both are therefore satisfied.

But can we reach compromise in that meaning without mediator or arbitrator, you may ask? I believe, yes, if we keep our minds open and place understanding over ego.

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