

What's a relationship without an issue?! Relationships within our work teams; relationships with our customers and suppliers; relationships with our managers; and of course our relationships in our personal lives *all* encounter issues. When we boil it down, we often end up pointing to a "lack of communication" as the source of the problem.

And so the issue gets left there, continuing to fester between people. As a coach, I've had the opportunity to see the results of a seemingly simple, yet powerful exercise that involves placing the problem out in front, instead of between, the people in the relationship. Frankly, when I first heard about the exercise, it sounded rather silly and far too "scripted" to me, but hey...

First we use a small object as a physical representation of the issue and then literally move it out from between the two people to a table out in front at some distance. The two people with the issue are then asked to move their chairs so that they are sitting side by side. From this more distant and shared perspective on the object, they are encouraged to work together to solve the issue.

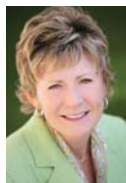
Interesting. Think about the last time you had an argument with someone. What did it look like? Were each of you standing on either side of an issue and arguing your respective positions from *your* perspective? Imagine how things might be different if you instead defined the problem together and then sat side by side to examine the *same* problem. Isn't it fascinating how often arguments between two people who are firmly entrenched in their respective "opposite" positions end up simply being about two people defining the

REAL LIFE: REAL WORK

Getting the issue



BY SUE EDWARDS



same issue in different ways?

Recently I had the joy of witnessing two of three company owners wrestling with a very core and sensitive issue between them. They struggled to name the issue and then, boom... the third partner crisply and cleanly called it out. He named the thing in the middle of the table, and he was exactly right. The relief in the room created by naming the issue was palpable.

Full problem-resolution didn't come in that first discussion, but the burden was lightened, and since then the three have been able to move to a deeper discussion of ways to address the issue.

Simple, but oh so big!

There's also something that shifts in the dynamics of a conversation when we are side by side instead of "across." Think of the times when you've had your best conversations with your boss >

(particularly if your boss is a male, but that's a topic for another article!). If your memories are like most, you will recall an opportunity for a drive or even a plane ride together. Think of some of the best conversations you've had with your spouse or even your difficult-to-reach-teenager. I'll bet that most of those conversations happened while side by side in a car or on a walk together.

So, next time you find yourself wrestling with something ambiguous

between you and another person at work – or you are on a team that is struggling with something that is weighing them down – try moving the issue where it can be addressed more objectively; *out in front.* •

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