Feature

Ed Gelbstein, Ph.D., 1940–2015, worked in IS/IT in the private and public sectors in various countries for more than 50 years. Gelbstein did analog and digital development in the 1960s, incorporated digital computers in the control systems for continuous process in the late '60s and early '70s, and managed projects of increasing size and complexity until the early 1990s. In the 1990s, he became an executive at the preprivatized British Railways and then the United Nations global computing and data communications provider. Following his (semi) retirement from the UN, he joined the audit teams of the UN Board of Auditors and the French National Audit Office. Gelbstein also taught postgraduate courses on business management of information systems. His column will continue to be published in the *ISACA Journal*.

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The Soft Skills Challenge, Part 3

Dealing With Conflict

An auditor will sooner or later be faced with two kinds of conflicts: conflict of interest and interpersonal conflict.

This column will not discuss conflict of interest, i.e., situations that may adversely impact the auditor's independence and objectivity. This is a matter to explore, whenever it appears, with the chief audit executive. Failure to address it may have serious consequences for the reputation and credibility of the audit function.

Interpersonal conflict is not unusual and may begin with the auditors not being welcome by the auditees. Audits are usually imposed on auditees and the timing is rarely ideal, as it disrupts their work. Add to this the perception that the auditors are there to find fault with what they do and how they do it, and the scene for confrontation is set. It can also arise from discussions and negotiations on audit findings and/or reports that fail to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned.

The basic laws of physics state that:

- When two objects come into contact, the result is friction.
- For every action there is an equal (in size) and opposite (in direction) reaction.

Is there a good reason to believe that these laws do not apply to interpersonal contact?

It is good to remember that anyone can turn into a difficult person despite everyone's best intentions to be cooperative, open minded, helpful and so on. Just try interrupting someone who is in deep concentration dealing with a complex task. Timing is one of many elements to consider.

"Difficult" can take many forms and range from a temporary, and in the end, inconsequential, difference of opinion to, in extreme cases, acute stress, physical violence and, possibly, sickness. People who are difficult all the time (and they do exist) can be defined at best as "delicate" or, at worst, as "toxic." Both can severely disrupt the work environment. Their discussion falls outside the scope of this column.

Five Common Situations With the Potential to Lead to Conflict:

- **Differences in style**—Thanks to the mix of nature and nurture, each of us is a unique individual. Culture may bring a certain degree of homogeneity to how we speak and act, the values we share, and many other things we describe with the global and ambiguous term "culture." The uniqueness, however, makes us act in certain ways we consider to be normal, but could irritate others. A controlling personality may not interact well with a person who values their initiative and independence. Over time, such differences can escalate into personality clashes.
- **Disagreements**—Another common situation, its root causes can usually be traced to issues of who, when and how. When the parties involved have enough goodwill, a solution to the issue can be reached without too much difficulty by accommodating, compromising or collaborating.[1]
- **Incompatible objectives**—Arising from organizational politics, these may be rooted in intense competition for visibility or promotion and are harder to resolve. Avoidance is an easy strategy to apply, but implies that one party gives up on the matter. Compromising is a better strategy that requires good negotiating skills and a certain level of emotional maturity.
- **Blame**—This can arise legitimately in situations where there are interdependencies. The inability of one party to complete a task that is a prerequisite for the next stage of activity can easily result in blamestorming. An unpleasant experience for all concerned, its consequences can be mitigated by giving advance notice of a problem affecting the interdependency and offering assistance to find ways to reduce the impact of the problem.
- **Personality clashes**—These are arguably the most serious as, depending on the personalities of the individuals concerned, they can escalate to an unsustainable level. The four

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previous situations involve the rational brain, in other words, emotional control and thinking. In clashes, **figure 1** shows how the rational brain shuts down and allows the reptile brain to take over—the drive to dominate, assert territory and, ultimately, fight or flee.

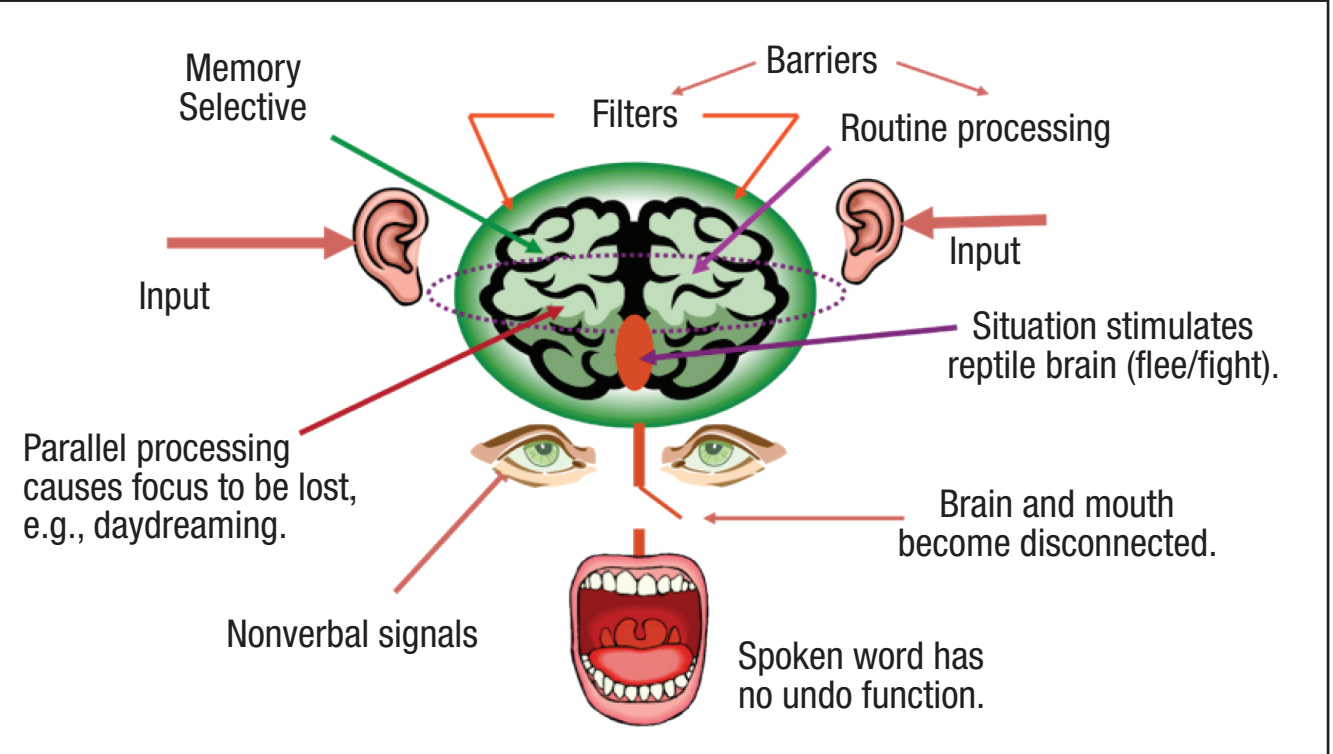
Having met several emotionally incontinent people who showed this syndrome by saying things they should not and who clashed with many others, I learned that conflict can escalate rapidly. Some of these people also helped me collect two amusing databases of emails they should not have sent. I labeled them "nastygrams" and "stupidgrams."

RESPONDING TO A CONFLICT

In the perfect world, one would hope never to have to do this. But the world is not perfect and neither are people. The hints that follow may help you prepare for such a day.

1. **Assess your emotional intelligence**,[2] also referred to as interpersonal intelligence. This includes the ability to perceive emotions, understand them, harness them and manage your own. This is a valuable tool to develop social skills, in particular empathy, and while not something that can be learned quickly, it is a worthwhile investment. Remember that "Know Thyself" was believed to be an inscription at the entrance of the Temple of Apollo in ancient Greece.
2. **You may be able to change yourself, but you cannot change others.** Some years ago I saw an off-Broadway show entitled, "I Love You, You Are Perfect, Now Change." It must have struck a chord with many as it won numerous critical awards and ran for more than 5,000 performances. While you can influence behavior in others, their personality is so deeply ingrained that it is prudent to assume that it cannot be rewired.
3. **Listen carefully.** There are two sides to every story and while disagreements may be inevitable, when they arise, both sides may have valid points. These should be examined together and used to seek a mutually agreed upon way forward. However, as previous columns on soft skills stated, listening is a difficult skill to acquire.
4. **Pick your battles.** While the optimum way forward is to collaborate to find a suitable solution, this requires the rational brain to be fully engaged and personalities that

Figure 1—The (Dis)Connection Between the Rational Brain and the Mouth



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are willing to be open minded. Other strategies are to accommodate the other party (the auditee), which, on a significant issue, may not be possible; seek an intermediate or compromise solution; or go to battle and force the issue. While the last of these may be good for the organization, it creates a situation that may make the next cycle of audit more difficult than it need be.

5. **Separate the issue from the person.** Focusing on the issue, the facts collected and the extent to which the other party is satisfied that those facts are accurate and complete should definitely be of help. People are sensitive and an open challenge can be seen by the reptile brain as an attack that is worth fighting in most cases. While physical violence in the workplace is rare and sufficient cause for a summary dismissal, verbal violence is unlikely to ever be forgotten.
6. **Find honorable exits from the situation.** This is essential to preserve an effective working relationship until the parties involved leave the organization. A win-lose relationship is detrimental for everyone and an inability to reach a workable agreement is always a setback (just look at what is happening in international relations and diplomacy). The need to work together toward a solution never goes away.

CONCLUSION

Working as an auditor is likely to lead to conflicting views and, therefore, the collection and documentation of evidence supporting findings, observations and recommendations is critical.

When different views emerge, the auditor should:

- Understand the auditees and their perspective ("stand in their shoes"). Ask yourself if their argument is valid and, if so, for what reasons?
- Is there an alternative way to reach a good enough solution?
- Ensure that the recommendation or challenged finding can be supported in terms of a business need (and not that it is mentioned in section NN, paragraph T, footnote iii in some set of guidelines).

ENDNOTES

[1] Thomas–Kilmann, *Conflict Mode Instrument*, USA, 1975

[2] Goleman, D.; *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam, USA, 1998

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