

Conflict Quicksand

February 21, 2019

It generally starts with blame. Someone sends an email that tells you that you're making poor decisions, and those decisions have negatively impacted them. In their opinion, they are right. More importantly, they are also righteous. If you reply defending your position and decisions, you will have deflected blame from yourself, and the cycle has officially begun. You are now engaged in a conflict escalation trap in which hurt feelings and damaged relationships are the eventuality. Your relationship is sinking in *Conflict Quicksand*.

Now, imagine you are an explorer. While on an expedition, you notice some quicksand. One option is to act as you did with the scenario above, ignoring the dangers. You can try walking through the quicksand but unfortunately, there will be a similar outcome. You put yourself at risk of harm, and will get trapped waiting for some external force to save you. A safer option however is to acknowledge the quicksand for what it is, and walk around it. By choosing the second option, you avoid the dangers and continue your day with the knowledge that you made a wise decision. These same principles apply to relationships and conflict.

Although death by quicksand is an urban myth, relationship death by conflict quicksand is a reality. Humans are emotional beings, and many of our reactions are emotionally based. When someone says or does something negative towards us, our instincts are to defend ourselves. Oftentimes, our defensive comments attempt to absolve us of blame, and place blame on others; typically the person who initiated the conversation. It doesn't take long before you are stuck and once the words leave your mouth or screen, they cannot be taken back.

Avoiding Conflict Quicksand requires three steps:

1. Identify - Acknowledge that the dialogue has begun, and negative replies have the potential to escalate the situation.
2. Assess - Assess the level of threat (ie blame) intended in the original comments, and determine your level of participation.
3. Manage - Be strategic in your level of participation, and create a thoughtful response using Bill Eddy's BIFF (Brief - Informative - Friendly - Firm) Responses. Your response should be cerebral; not emotional.

Although you cannot control for others who are stuck in their own perpetual conflict quicksand, you can protect yourself from drowning with them. Also, your refusal to engage may help that other person find solid footing on how to interact with others, and deal with issues constructively. As a result, you may help them escape their own quicksand on a deeper level.

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