HIGH CONFLICT INSTITUTE

Making Proposals

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Any problem in the past can be turned into a proposal about the future. Proposals don't have to be complicated. You can just blurt one out during a conversation with anyone or during a meeting with any group. Proposals get attention, because they are solutions to past problems by focusing on the future. Most of us are relieved to talk about the future, rather than what we've done wrong in the past. On the other hand, most of us easily slip into talking about the past – or even get stuck talking about the past – including what everyone else has done wrong. This article focuses on how to make proposals in a way that is easy and can be done at any time.

WHAT'S IN A PROPOSAL?

Ideally, proposals will include: ***Who** does*

What

***When** and*

Where

For example: "I propose that you be the one who picks up Johnny after school and takes him to his soccer practice. Then, you can keep him overnight and bring him back to school the next morning."

This is much better than saying: "You never took Johnny to any of his soccer practices. You always left it up to me. Then you showed up on Saturday at his games and made it look like you were such an involved parent. I want some respect here for all that I've done!" And then the other parent attacks back: "You never gave me a chance…." And on and on.

Can you see how it would have been so much simpler to just ask for what you wanted in the future by making a proposal? It saves all of the blame and defensiveness that people get stuck in talking about the past.

So proposals are always about the future. They are not about the past or about the other person's intentions or *Why* they made the proposal. *Why* questions easily turn into a criticism of the other person's proposal. "*Why* did you say that?" It really means: "I think that's a bad idea." And of course, if you think a proposal is a bad idea, then the best thing to do is to make another proposal – until you can both agree on something.

PROPOSING SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS

Most problems have many solutions. For example, here are some:

In a divorce dispute: "If you're going to be late after work all the time to pick up the kids on Fridays, then I propose we just change the pickup time to a more realistic time. Instead of 5pm, let's make it 6:30pm."

And the other person might propose: "I'm going to talk to my boss and see if I can get out earlier on Fridays. I'll let you know in a week. If not, then I'll agree to your proposal. If I can, then let's just leave it the way it's scheduled now."

Or in a workplace dispute: "I propose that we talk to our manager about finding a better cubicle for you, since you have so many phone calls that need to be made and I often hear them."

And the other person might propose: "I can try to make my phone calls when you're away from your cubicle. I know you're in and out. Are there any regular times that you're away each day?"

These people can keep making proposals back and forth until they can agree on something. If each proposal takes into account what the other person was concerned about, then there is a good chance for success. It's just a matter of time before they can fit their concerns together.

ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT A PROPOSAL

After one person has made a proposal, the other person may not be sure whether they can agree or not. Therefore, it often helps to ask questions. One of the best questions is to ask "What would your proposal look like in action?" This way you can get clearer on the Who, What, Where and When of the proposal. You might even ask: "What's your picture of how this would work? What would you do? What would I do, if you could picture your proposal actually happening?"

But of course, you don't want to ask "Why" questions, because that usually starts up the defensiveness. And if someone's defensiveness is triggered, then it makes it hard for them to think of solutions to problems. Why questions are usually really criticisms, not questions.

Responding with YES, NO, or I'LL THINK ABOUT IT

Once you've heard a proposal and asked any questions about it, all you have to do to respond to such a proposal is say: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." You always have the right to say: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." Of course, there are consequences to each choice, but you always have these three choices at least. Here's some examples of each:

YES: "Yes, I agree. Let's do that." And then stop! No need to save face, evaluate the other person's proposal, or give the other person some negative feedback. Just let it go. After all, if you have been personally criticized or attacked, it's not about you. Personal attacks are not problem-solving. They are about the person making the hostile attack. You are better off to ignore everything else.

NO: "No, I don't want to change the pickup time. I'll try to make other arrangements to get there on time. Let's keep it as is." Just keep it simple. Avoid the urge to defend your decision or criticize the other person's idea. You said no. You're done. Let it drop.

I'LL THINK ABOUT IT: "I don't know about your proposal, but I'll think about it. I'll get back to you tomorrow about your idea. Right now I have to get back to work. Thanks for making a proposal." Once again, just stop the discussion there. Avoid the temptation to discuss it at length, or question the validity of the other person's point of view. It is what it is.

When you say "I'll think about it," you are respecting the other person. It calms people down to know you are taking them seriously enough to think about what they said. This doesn't mean you will agree. It just means you'll think about it.

MAKE A NEW PROPOSAL: After you think about it, you can always make a new proposal. Perhaps you'll think of a new approach that neither of you thought of before. Try it out. You can always propose anything. (But remember there are consequences to each proposal.) And you can always respond: "Yes." "No." or "I'll think about it." (And there are consequences to each of those choices, too.)

AN EXAMPLE

William and Natasha have a four-year-old daughter, Halle. They recently separated and have a hard time talking to each other right now, because they usually argue. However, they both love Halle and want the best for her. They need to decide how they will share parenting time with Halle. They are going to meet with a Family Mediator to help them reach an agreement. They are each to prepare a proposal and have each read articles that say different things about the best parenting plan.

Natasha has read that young children should have the stability of one primary parent, with the active involvement of the other parent. The article said this is especially true with children up to age 3 or older. William has read an article that recommended sharing parenting 50-50. It seemed to suggest that this works best after children are at least 5 years old.

They were both told by their Family Mediator that the best plan is always one that both parents can agree upon. The children should feel that their schedule is normal and routine, and that their parents aren't always stressed out or fighting over the schedule. Neither William or Natasha want to keep fighting about this.

Here are their initial proposals:

Natasha's First Proposal: "*I read an article that says its best for young children to have one primary household, but that the other parent is involved every week. So I propose that Halle live with me most of the time, but that she spend one day and overnight each week with you. In my proposal you would also have half of the major holidays each year, then we could alternate the following year.*"

William's Question: "*I have a question about your proposal. What day and overnight were you picturing that I would have each week?*"

Natasha: *"I was thinking you'd have Friday nights and all day Saturdays each week."*

William's Response: *"Ok, I think I understand your proposal. I would say No to that, as I read an article that says that it's best for children to have approximately equal time with each parent."*

William's First Proposal: *"I propose that Halle spend 6 days and nights with me in a two-week period, so you would have 8 nights in the same period, as I recognize she's been with you more of the time up to now. After she's five, I'd like a 50-50 schedule, so this would be a transition."*

Natasha's Question: *"Which nights would you be thinking of having with her?"*

William: *"I'd like a weekday overnight every week – like Wednesdays – and I would alternate weekends Friday at 5pm through Monday morning back to daycare one weekend and Friday overnight the other weekend."*

Natasha's Response: *"Well, my answer to that would be No. I think she's way too young to be spending that much time away from me, as I've been her primary caregiver for all these years. And*

that just seems like too much back and forth for a girl that young. However, I might be willing to consider that she spend a little more time with you, especially as she gets older.

William: *"But I want to be fully involved in her growing up – weekdays with her schoolwork as well as weekends. So here's another proposal…"*

These are at least 3 possible proposals for William to make now. No one proposal is right for everyone's situation, and there is usually more than one solution to a problem. Here are a few:

Option 1: 3 nights/11 nights in two weeks

William's New Proposal: *"I would agree to have three nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and Friday night and all day Saturday every other week."*

Option 2: 4 nights/10 nights in two weeks

William's New Proposal: *"I would agree to have four nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and alternate weekends from Friday at 5pm to Sunday at 5pm."*

Option 3: 5 nights/9 nights in two weeks

William's New Proposal: *"I would agree to have five nights every two weeks. I would have Wednesdays overnight every week and alternate weekends from Friday at 5pm to Monday back to school."*

Some parents would agree on Option 1, some on Option 2 and others on Option 3. The reality is that there is not a huge difference between these options. William and Natasha could go back and forth asking questions of each other and making proposals until they reach an agreement – with the assistance of a mediator, collaborative professionals, a therapist or lawyers. The idea is that the process of making proposals helps build an agreement that can end up working the best for the people involved. Be patient and creative, and you can probably come up with a good solution.

CONCLUSION: AVOID MAKING IT PERSONAL

In the heat of the conflict, it's easy to react and criticize the other person's proposals—or even to criticize the other person personally, such as saying that he or she is arrogant, ignorant, stupid, crazy or evil. It's easy and natural to want to say: "You're so stupid it makes me sick." Or: "What are you, crazy?" "Your proposal is the worst idea I have ever heard." But if you want to end the dispute and move on, just ask for a proposal and respond with "Yes" "No" or "I'll think about it."

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