Restoring Equilibrium in Our Relationships

Eric Giordano, PhD, Executive Director, Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, University of Wisconsin System

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

It seems we have become a lot less patient with those whose views differ from our own. A friend of mine recently reported switching barbers because of discomfort with his former hair stylist's politics. Over the weekend, a close family member acknowledged limiting interaction with a sibling because they couldn't see eye to eye on vaccinations. Across Wisconsin, differences over public health, critical race theory, the role of police, election security, and many other issues are boiling over in ugly ways.

Being forced to navigate an increasingly complicated and divisive world reminded me of some game theory principles I learned in graduate school. Game theory is a set of analytical tools designed to explain behaviors and outcomes when decision-makers interact. Mathematician John Forbes Nash, Jr. won a Nobel Prize in part for developing the Nash equilibrium, defined as the point at which rational actors make consistent – even predictable – choices in response to their counterparts' behaviors over multiple interactions.

Social norms, for example, are often described as natural equilibrium systems predicated on years, if not millennia, of consistent human interactions. From allowing "gimme putts" in professional golf competitions to honoring white flag truces in the midst of bloody conflict, human beings are remarkably capable of negotiating behavior that encourages optimal social outcomes that might not be expected if examined in isolation. People often cooperate and thrive even when in direct competition for scarce resources. On the flipside, human beings are equally capable of undermining social norms – even revolting against longstanding agreements – under certain conditions. In this article, I examine a few variables that cause us to deviate from consistent behaviors during interactions with others and offer some suggestions to encourage and restore a sense of equilibrium in our decision-making strategies.

Avoid Tearing Others Down

My home has been in the news this year for all of the wrong reasons. While sensationalist media coverage is partly to blame, the source of conflict is a "Community for All" resolution which has divided residents and elected officials alike. After a lot of public and private meetings and despite some compromise on language, opponents of the resolution remain unmoved in their criticism, which is their constitutional right. But things took a turn for the worse when organized opposition began labeling "Community for All" advocates as "communists" and "D.I.E." advocates (of course, the common acronym is DEI which stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Meanwhile these opponents claim they have been mischaracterized as "white supremacists" and "racists." Name-calling and misrepresentation are classic dirty tricks. Such tactics are designed to tear people down and privilege ends over means. Even if motivated by reasonable goals, hurtful voices can inflict unintended long-term damage. Scorched earth campaigns often lead to pyrrhic victories that normalize dehumanizing tactics and make it harder for individuals to reconcile. Such approaches also frequently rely on pressure alignment – "You're either with us or against us" – forcing people to pick sides and be carried by the current, no matter how strong or dangerous. This puts extra responsibility on local leaders to seek bridge-building strategies and reject chasm-digging processes.

Advocate for Healthy Stakeholder Interaction

One way to help restore equilibrium to interactions and decision-making at the local level is to actively support processes that normalize healthy stakeholder interactions. As individuals and leaders we can be voices of reason by encouraging civil dialogue, debate, and deliberation. We can support people's right

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1. See for example, Martin J. Osborne and Ariel Rubinstein, *A Course in Game Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 12 Jul 1994). http://ebour.com.ar/pdfs/A%20Course%20in%20Game%20Theory.pdf.

2. For more information about the Nash equilibrium and game theory, see John Nash. "Non-cooperative Games," *Annals of Mathematics* 54 (2), 286-295 (1951); John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1944). In this article, I do not seek to explain either the Nash equilibrium or game theory in any depth. Rather, I use it as a metaphor and device to bring forward strategies for improving our interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

to respectfully disagree by setting ground rules and codes of conduct and asking stakeholders to abide by them.

Additional suggestions include organizing purpose-driven one-on-one conversations; providing authentic listening and sharing opportunities for stakeholders; engaging in community naming and framing processes; and providing venues and resources to negotiate sticking points. Worst case, even if our efforts fall on deaf ears, we will have created rational alternatives that residents can then juxtapose against extreme activities and viewpoints. By being intentional about offering clear, rational, and constructive pathways as alternatives to destructive interaction we can prevent doors from slamming shut permanently.

Encourage Transparent Information-Gathering and Analysis

Decision-making is only as good (and rational) as the information upon which it is predicated. Many have noted the challenge of obtaining accurate information in today's chaotic media environment. Most cable news channels do a terrible job of mingling news and opinion without clear distinction or full disclosure. Throw in our societal obsession with social media – and sprinkle in foreign and domestic provocateurs actively sowing confusion – it is little wonder that confidence in information sources has dramatically waned in recent years. Basically, it is up to each of us to sort through and actively resist oversimplified arguments, categorizations, and stereotypes of people and ideas. An old axiom, "A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing," seems more apt than ever.

The more we stay in our echo chambers and wrap ourselves in information cocoons, the greater likelihood we will find arguments that appear to corroborate what we know yet say nothing about what we are missing. This phenomenon can be summarized by another key axiom: "We don't know what we don't know." Lack of information and/or misperceptions about existing data can fuel misguided assumptions and lead us toward disequilibrium in decision-making and, ultimately, suboptimal outcomes. Hackers and conspiracy theorists understand this and prey on our vulnerabilities. As leaders, we must be strong advocates in seeking and using reliable information, checking the validity of our sources, and applying high-quality analytical skills before making decisions. Because societal doubt has crept in regarding even our nation's most prestigious scientific institutions, we must be extra diligent in making sure our information gathering and data analysis processes are transparent.

Act as if You Will Interact Again

Another common disruptor to equilibrium in decision-making is the decline of respectful communication and in civil behavior generally, particularly on social media platforms. Interactions that are anonymous, short-term, or highly transactional, offer little accountability. We can "throw shade," "gaslight," or "troll" in the heat of the moment and generally behave as though we will never interact with people again. Sadly, this attitude encourages us to remain blissfully ignorant about how our actions affect others. The long-term effects are hard to contemplate. But to put it in perspective, if we consider that 80% of face-to-face message transmission is nonverbal, then every electronic message we send and receive, emojis notwithstanding, contains only a small fraction of what we would otherwise communicate. Is it any wonder that social norms and the relationships that underpin them are so uncertain?

Elongate Relationships

Game theory reveals that when parties believe they will interact with one another in the future, they will begin to develop tit for tat behavior as a means to ensure optimal outcomes. The more we interact with others, the more we affect both our and our counterpart's expectations about how to behave in the here and now. Scorched earth policies, by contrast, are only appropriate when we care nothing about the future. Repeated interactions, therefore, tend to decrease brinkmanship and risk-seeking behavior while laying the groundwork for compromise and long-term cooperation. Creating opportunities for facilitated dialogue and collaborative work are potential strategies to encourage ongoing interaction.

Despite the theoretical nature of game theory, it has a great deal of power in explaining how our world works, whether our daily interactions in our homes, in our business transactions, or even our ability to have a functioning society in which people behave in civilized ways. For example, without some belief in the predictability of rational behavior, we would live in chaos, and laws would have little meaning in our lives. If enough people lack confidence in the future, the result is short-term, risk-averse thinking that disrupts relationships and normal interactions. Prolonged disequilibrium and intense mistrust in our institutions and relationships can also lead to disorder, violence, and the unraveling of society.

Those of us who work regularly with local government maintain that our best hope for overcoming some of these challenges lies at the community level. Municipal government is far from perfect, but it remains closely tied and accountable to residents, businesses, nonprofits, and local networks with typically longstanding and ongoing relationships. It is harder to simply cut ties when we eat, shop, play, and rely on one another for much of our daily interactions and well-being. Yet, without strong, intentional, and courageous efforts – especially when difficult issues are at stake – we risk putting those relationships and decision-making processes into disequilibrium.