



CONFLICT SPIRALS

Have you ever had a discussion with someone about a difficult issue where you seemed to get caught in a negative spiral where the conflict between you seems to intensify as the discussion progresses?

There are many reasons this happens and one relates to the concept of reciprocity. Reciprocity is the idea that we must 'return a favour'. It is a fundamental law adopted by many animals (including some fish!). It helps groups to function effectively. Unfortunately reciprocity has a dark side. Not only do we tend to repay favours, but we also tend to repay negative experiences. If you say something that attacks me or my viewpoint, I will have a very strong urge to respond by saying something that attacks you or your viewpoint.

Some research suggests that when we are in conflict with someone we get in a mindset where we are more likely to notice and repay negative comments than positive ones. This then creates a conflict spiral.

So my tip is to learn to notice when a conflict spiral is starting (before it has had a chance to build up momentum) and then consciously notice any attempts by the other person to:

- Demonstrate that they understand your perspective
- Show empathy for you and your concerns
- Suggest the issue is a shared problem for you to solve together.

Whenever that happens, make sure you take the opportunity to repay them in kind. If you don't observe *any* of these behaviours in the other person then you may notice you feel an impulse to respond negatively. Consciously choose to respond with collaborative behaviours. However, do make sure that you also assertively express your own concerns and needs.

If you would like to read more about this I recommend the following:

- Brett, J., Shapiro, D., & Lytle, A. (1998). Breaking the bonds of reciprocity in negotiations. *Academy of Management Journal*, 41, 410–424.
- William Ury: Getting Past No: Negotiating with difficult people

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