

Double Binds: Damned If You Dare and Damned If You Don't

How to address being caught between two conflicting options.

A WIDER LENS Blog by Dr. Kenneth Silvestri

Posted by Psychology Today on Feb. 09, 2020

"Human nature seems to me like the Alps. The depths are profound, black as night, and terrifying, but the heights are equally real, uplifted in the sunshine."—Emily Greene Balch

We all have, in far too many instances, felt the pressure of being in a circumstance described as being damned if you dare and damned if you don't. Well here is the scoop of how a double bind occurs and a means to resolve this painful situation.

What Is a "Double Bind?"

A double bind is a dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, with one message negating the other. This creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other, so that the person will be automatically wrong regardless of their response. The nature of a double bind is that the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma, and therefore can neither comment on the conflict, resolve it, nor opt-out of the situation.

One of the first times I was able to grasp the devastation of being in a double bind was watching a film of a family therapy session at the beginning of my studies at Columbia University. The mother of a ten-year-old asked her son if he loved her. He hesitated and wearily answered, "Yes." His mother then followed with "Why do I have to ask you?" He was damned either way and this affected his consequent behavior.

The session was filmed and when we looked at it frame by frame you saw non-verbal messages of anger from the mother that were not recognized with the naked eye, yet

subconsciously internalized by her son. Upon further inquiry into a wider context, it was revealed that the mother had her son out of wedlock and lost a prominent job. Her resentment of what happened was in direct conflict with the sincere love that she had for her son. When she was able to understand the situation from a wider perspective, it allowed for new ways to better communicate with her son.

A double bind generally includes different levels of abstraction in the order of messages, and these messages can be stated implicitly within the context of the situation or conveyed by tone of voice or body language. Further complications arise when frequent double binds are part of an ongoing relationship to which the person or group is committed. On a positive note, human communication and the mind itself function in an interactive manner like an ecosystem, which helps us understand the interdependence of different parts of a message.

The clue to rising above a double bind is to create perspective by seeing it in its context but also at the same time simultaneously within a larger context. It takes rigor and hard work to break the constraints of a double bind, but if you dare to appreciate it with a widened lens, stepping out of the box, you can construct a whole new world that graciously welcomes the inevitable paradoxes of nature and blends with them to produce new orders of endless possibilities.

The Buddha and the Snake

There is a great story about how the Buddha demonstrated avoiding a Double Bind. He was going to a temple to give a talk. When he arrived his congregation remained outside, saying that a snake had bitten several people and was preventing them from entering. The Buddha, like Harry Potter, spoke to the snake and a few days later upon his next visit, he was pleased that everyone entered the temple without a problem.

After the sermon, the Buddha was the last to leave and, on the path, he heard some rustling and crying. There was the snake all beaten up and hurting. The Buddha asked the snake what had happened, and he told the Buddha that his congregation had attacked him. The Buddha paused and then said, "I told you not to bite them, but I did not tell you not to hiss." It was then that the snake understood how to avoid a devastating consequence.

Enhancing your Relationships

In our relationships, we can have good intent or desire even if it is at odds with another's beliefs. I often ask people who I am counseling to think of a time when they were creative. There are many answers, yet all have the common thread of conflict and dialogue occurring before creativity came to fruition. If you look at conflict and/or the contradictions in your life as neither good nor bad, but something that just "is", then you open the door to new forms of growth.

The key, however, is to navigate those ever-present paradoxes in their presenting contexts before they solidify into a double bind. This is where the acceptance of mutually learning from each other will help define who we are as individuals. In truth, it takes two to know one through a process of win-win collaboration. Thus, resolving those painful double binds is being creative, through understanding our interdependence.

The Nine Dots Exercise

Here is a simple exercise that can help your understanding of how creating a wider perspective can be useful in avoiding double binds and remember you can hiss but don't bite. I credit this to Mr. Wizard who I watched on TV as a kid.

Connect all dots with four continuous lines.

0 0 0
0 0 0
0 0 0

- What was your initial reaction to this exercise?
- What message do you get from this exercise?
- What double binds have you experienced in your life?
- Think of instances where you might have been able to use a different way of being in a conflictual situation.

- How have you pushed through obstacles and produced outcomes that you may have thought were impossible?
- In what ways can you sustain and encourage yourself and others to widen their lens and be more humble, vulnerable and human?

*This blog was adapted from my book, *A Wider Lens: How to See Your Life Differently*.

**The answer to the above exercise is to go out of the box in order to connect the dots with four continuous straight lines.