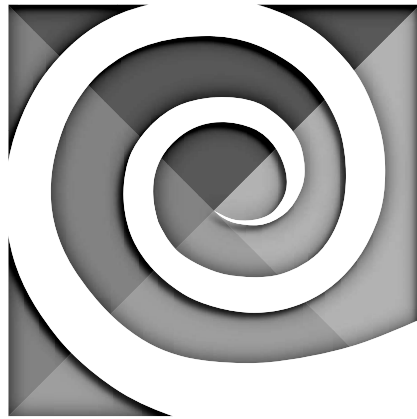



SPIRAL IMPACT®



The Power to
Get It Done with Grace

Karen Valencic



Communication creates movement;
Stillness fosters clarity;
To be moving and clear
This is true power.

*Dedicated to
Kylie and Taylor*

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SECTION 1

Introduction

■ Momentum Interrupted

“Keep moving and bend your knees.” These words echo in my head whenever I begin to struggle.

In the early days of my martial arts practice, I would frequently feel overwhelmed by my big, sweaty opponents. But if I suddenly appeared immobilized by my opponent’s greater strength, my teacher’s voice in the background would ring out, “Keep moving and bend your knees.”

The martial art “aikido” mimics life. Movement gives us energy and creativity; struggle and fear make us feel stuck. The choices you make

either create or stop momentum, both on the aikido practice mat and in life and work. “Keep moving and bend your knees” in everyday life means be flexible and ask questions for continuous learning.

I was initially drawn to study aikido from a desire to be strong, clear, and balanced, particularly in challenging situations. As a project engineer I frequently felt frustrated and disempowered when our project team disagreed on how to proceed. When I worked in manufacturing, the pressure created by balancing quality with keeping the production line moving was overwhelming at times. The dollars lost every minute the line shut down were huge. And having my office across the hall from the union office didn’t create a peaceful sanctuary to recharge in! I felt anything but balanced. Escaping these circumstances to have children didn’t lighten the stress. Taking care of a colicky infant that cried endlessly for six months was probably one of the most challenging times of my life. I wanted to be in command of my life rather than having circumstances control me. Aikido practice develops body, mind, and spirit. As one becomes proficient in aikido, the skills easily transfer to all aspects of life. An increased ability to deal with conflict and influence outcomes is also a wonderful benefit.

Practice on the mat typically consists of one person providing the energy, or attack, the other person learning to respond. In life,

Movement gives us energy and creativity; struggle and fear make us feel stuck.

potential attackers or opponents may be:

Differences between people

- When “they” just won’t see things your way
- When you are at an impasse in a negotiation

Demands on your time

- When you are over-committed
- When you are feeling burned out
- When you can’t say “no” to others’ requests
- When you feel a loss of motivation before a large project is finished

Disappointments

- When potential clients or employers keep saying “no”
- When you don’t have something you want
- When unwanted change happens

Each of these scenarios has the potential to interrupt your momentum to get “it,” or your desired outcome, done. Using the core concepts from aikido, you can accomplish your “it” with power and grace. Grace in this context is beauty, finesse, and style.

In aikido you learn that power comes from connecting with and moving in the same direction as your opponent’s attack. Therefore,

**Strength comes from
position, not force.**

In aikido you learn
that power comes
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direction as
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attack.

The intention of aikido is to protect both the attacker’s life and your own. When practiced correctly, there is no struggle or conflict; all life is nurtured and protected.

The concepts in this book come from seventeen years of aikido practice and fifteen years of helping people work together in a variety of circumstances. A great deal of my work has been teaching conflict resolution. Because conflict often keeps our desired outcome, our “it,” out of reach, I’d like to define conflict here.

■ Conflict Defined

When I ask people what conflict is, most of the time they respond with “A difference in opinion.” Conflict is not a difference in opinion; it is how we respond to a difference in opinion.

Differences are a good thing. In organizations if everyone agreed on everything, progress would stagnate. If we agreed on everything in relationships, they would be boring. We need differences to create and grow. For example, the difference between the tech savvy person and the relationship person is a healthy difference. As the two share their different comfort levels and needs about technology, they both grow. The tech person may learn he needs to adjust his ideas to fit the real needs of the company, and the non-tech person may learn he needs to grow in his comfort level with technology.

A difference becomes a conflict when you choose to push against the difference. The word *conflict* is derived from the Latin root words *com*, meaning *together*, and *fligere*, meaning *to strike*. So conflict means *to strike together*. Conflict can be experienced as creative tension or destructive tension. In the above example, destructive conflict could happen if the tech savvy person forces a point of view that technology is the answer to everything and the relationship person dismisses technology as a waste of time. When either person takes the position that he is right and the other is wrong, and then pushes his point of view beyond the comfort level of the other person, conflict becomes destructive.

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Let's explore another example: two people may have different opinions about how to grill chicken. One person may see this as merely interesting – a difference. Another person may choose to make the difference a big issue arguing that his way is right. A third observer may say nothing but feel internal conflict over his friends'

arguing. A discussion, even an intense one, over how to grill chicken may or may not become destructive conflict for the two friends. Likewise, the third friend observing may or may not be bothered by the exchange.

People choose to turn differences into conflict for many reasons: past unresolved issues between those involved, learned behavior patterns, insecurity, or fear.... Regardless of the reason for the behavior, recognizing the behavior is the first step to changing it.

Take a moment and try this: make a fist with each of your hands. Now push them together. Imagine this same tension pushing against something. That something could be another person, an event, a thing, or yourself.

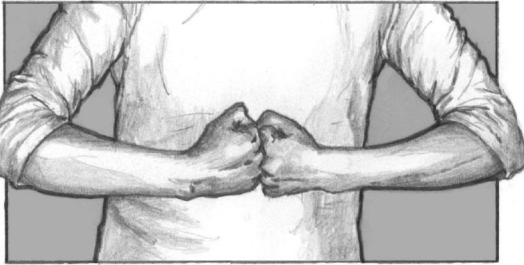


Figure 1: **Pushing Tension**

A certain amount of tension is creative tension causing you to “move off being stuck” and find solutions. This is good. However, each person has a limit to the amount of tension he can handle before the tension becomes destructive conflict, felt internally and/or expressed externally.

When people feel pushed in any way, they almost always push back. Identifying whether you are pushing productively or *forcing* is crucial to using conflict creatively and maintaining momentum. When you increase the push or force beyond a person’s tolerance you may:

- Cause the other person to resist more causing destructive conflict
- Shut the other person down mentally, emotionally, or physically
- Cause yourself to burn out or collapse

The secret to truly being creative with conflict is to understand and honor the different people involved in the process. Recognizing how much tension or pushing is productive, given the people involved, is key to being creative with conflict.

In aikido practice, conflict is required. Sensitivity to how much force the practice partner can take is crucial to helping her learn. As she develops her skills, the more force and intensity she can handle.

Only one of the people involved in the conflict must make a different choice to create movement rather than impasse.

Recognizing how much tension or pushing is productive, given the people involved, is key to being creative with conflict.

At wit's end, Hank called me for advice. He felt defeated and bewildered. Hank's agency provides educational materials for health clinics. Providing the information contained in the materials is a standard state requirement. Hank's service saves the clinics resources they would otherwise need to purchase to create their own materials. Yet, the first two meetings with clinic staff were like a battle; why were these people so resistant?

After asking Hank a series of questions, I had a sense the people may have felt Hank was "pushing" his agenda. Even though they needed and wanted the materials, they felt pushed and were subtly pushing back.

I suggested he go back in with the intention of learning all he could about them, asking questions rather than giving them solutions. Before he met with them, he was also to do some deep breathing and relax a little.

Hank reported back that his next meeting felt almost too easy. He had asked questions and listened. His customers were then very open to what he had to offer. Hank's changed approach changed their response. He got his desired outcome.

When change or disappointment happens, you can struggle internally or "keep moving and bend your knees."

It was a very long night flying back from South America. Sleeping in a foreign airport made us all a little on edge by the time we landed in Dallas at 5:30 AM.

Two women from NYC were anxious about returning on time for appointments scheduled that day. As we deplaned, we all scrambled toward the flight schedule to learn the status of our connections. The two NYC travelers learned their flight was canceled. One woman sat down full of despair, totally debilitated by the news. The other woman immediately began to scan the other airlines' flights. She saw another flight to New York, which was scheduled to arrive earlier than their original flight. She moved quickly to secure a seat on the flight, and away she went. She kept moving and bent her knees. She got "it" done with grace and included the other woman in her solution.

The way you choose to interact with people can create a lot of conflict and unnecessary work for yourself. "Keep moving and bend your knees" applies here as well.

Ingrid felt invincible; she was a smart, capable person. She knew how to "get it done." The trouble for her employer was that she had no "grace" in her style. Her way was the right way; she shut down and disempowered others in the organization. She was in command and control giving little respect to most of the people she worked with. She did, however, get small project results, which made her valuable to the organization.

Mid-career she was awarded responsibility for a multi-million dollar global project. This was the opportunity of her life. Her superiors knew she had the knowledge needed for the project. They also knew and were concerned about her ability to lead effectively; they knew Ingrid's command and control style could potentially alienate the project team.

Ingrid and I spent quite a bit of time building communication skills at the onset of the project. She began to see the importance of everyone's working together. When I demonstrated the concept of "keep moving and bend your knees," she literally experienced through the aikido movement how much easier it was to work with people rather than to constantly direct and control them. She ultimately saw the value of leading by bringing out the best in people rather than shutting them down. As I facili-

tated several team development sessions, Ingrid enjoyed the team interaction and reaped the benefits of a group working together. She verbalized she was relieved to have the cooperative support of the team, rather than having to follow every detail herself.

A few months passed, and I met again with Ingrid. She told me everything was going well if she kept a constant watch over everyone. Seeing my face drop, with wide eyes she sighed, “I’m still trying to command and control, aren’t I?” The pressure to succeed had caused her to resort to old behavior, which was paralyzing and again alienating the team. Her behavior was also draining her energy and time. She needed to again “keep moving and bend her knees” to keep the team engaged. We created a strategy which included ongoing coaching and daily reminders both visual and auditory to keep her on track.

Ingrid’s project was successful. When last we talked, she was taking on an even larger leadership role in the organization.

I’ve learned over the years that whenever I feel stuck or like I’m pushing, I “keep moving and bend my knees.” This is how to create the power to get it done with grace.

