

IN AND OUT OF THE FAULT LINE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN 4 TECTONIC STEPS

Samia Moustapha Bahsoun and Brenda Naomi Rosenberg

Northwood University in Midland Michigan invited us to lead a 2-day Tectonic Leadership program, “**Harnessing the Power of Tension to Build Sustainable Relationships**”.

The scope of this workshop was to train students leaders in our 4-step tectonic process to address the tension of residence living and sexual harassment on campus. We thought this would be a piece of cake, especially for us, two women, an Arab and a Jew, whose decade long friendship and our program were birthed out of the tension of our polarized views on the 2009 Gaza War / Operation Cast Lead, and our explosive discussion about the Holocaust.

Day 1 of the workshop began at 1 pm on January 26. That same afternoon, 80 miles south of Northwood, tension erupted on Michigan State University (MSU) campus. Reports flashed across all media. 20 years of built-up pressure was released in a mere 72-hour period starting with the horrific and disturbing Dr. Nasser Sexual Harassment trial ending with Nasser being sentenced to up to 175 years for molesting female student athletes and members of USA gymnastics team; the school president, Luanne Simon resigned, as did the athletic director.

The tension of unheeded sexual harassment spread like a tsunami, from the MSU’s boardroom to room 207 of the Richard DeVos center where the training was taking place. Yes, you read it right, the DeVos center built by the late father in law of our education secretary Betsy DeVos, whose rolling back of Title IX policy on sexual harassment has made her a primary target of the #metoo movement.

We started the workshop by showing a video on issues between two roommates Sarah and Ashley, arguing about hair in the sink, dishes piled up and unwanted noise. After a few good laughs, we asked the student to give the tension a name. While this appeared to be a simple step in the process, it took a good half hour for students to scope down the problem and spell out the tension; they could not help but go straight into the solution about what the roommates should or should not do; some felt more sympathy for Ashley, others for Sarah, the two parties in tension, attributing blame to one or the other. Some saw that Ashley was organized and clean, Sarah irresponsible; others saw Ashley uptight and Sarah laid back. In reality, both roommates were, at a point in time, inconsiderate of the other.

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The case study we chose for sexual harassment was selected from the Northwood University "Gender based and sexual misconduct policy and grievance process", page 8 of the manual:

"Amanda and Bill meet at a party. They spend the evening dancing and getting to know each other. Bill convinces Amanda to come up to his room. From 11:00pm until 3:00am, Bill uses every line he can think of to convince Amanda to have sex with him, but she adamantly refuses. He keeps at her, and begins to question her religious convictions, and accuses her of being "a prude." Finally, it seems to Bill that her resolve is weakening, and he convinces her to give him a "hand job" (hand to genital contact). Amanda would never had done it but for Bill's incessant advances. He feels that he successfully seduced her, and that she wanted to do it all along, but was playing shy and hard to get. Why else would she have come up to his room alone after the party? If she really didn't want it, she could have left."

When we asked the participants to name the conflict, step 1 of the 4-step tectonic process, an overarching cloud reigned in the room, an extension of the storm hovering over our nation's boardrooms, campuses, homes and communities, our government and the White House. From Bill's perspective, Bill received the message that Amanda is willing to have sex because why else would she go to his room at 11:00 pm? Bill thought Amanda is just playing shy and hard to get. "No" did not mean no to Bill because Amanda stayed and did not leave. From Amanda's perspective,

Amanda thought Bill's invitation was a message he wanted to get to know her better.

The students were perplexed to say the least. **In situations of tension, most often our individual biases surface, our attention directed towards judging the parties in conflict not to the tension itself.** We agreed to name the tension: "Mixed Messages".

Northwood University policy on Mixed Messages is crystal clear: *"Mixed messages from your partner are a clear indication that you should stop, defuse any sexual tension and communicate better. You may be misreading them. They may*

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not have figured out how far they want to go with you yet. You must respect the timeline for sexual behaviors with which they are comfortable.”

Hence,

“Bill is responsible for violating the University Non-Consensual or Forced Sexual Contact policy. It is likely that a University decision would find that the degree and duration of the pressure Bill applied to Amanda are unreasonable. Bill coerced Amanda into performing unwanted sexual touching upon him. Where sexual activity is coerced, it is forced. Consent is not effective when forced. Sex without effective consent is sexual misconduct.”

While the punitive approach aims at deterring bad behavior, it rarely does. It punishes and castigates the perpetrator; it aims at vindicating the victims but instead, creates more victims.

Instead of punishing Bill, what would have changed if Bill and Amanda were brought together and agreed to go through the 4 step Tectonic process?

In **step 1 of the process: “name the tension”**, they may have realized, after a few tries that they were giving each other and receiving from the other **“mixed messages.”**

In **step 2 of the process: “describe the tension on each side”**, both Amanda and Bill would be given permission to clearly express their feelings around that night. Could Bill have felt angry, disappointed, impatient, confused? Could Amanda have felt helpless, hopeless, uncomfortable, impatient, overwhelmed?

By acknowledging their feelings, they would each feel heard and their feelings validated. **When we let go of the judgements we have of the other, we realize that one does not have to be wrong for the other to be right and that our opposite truths can paradoxically exist in the same space.**

In **step 3 of the process, “bridge the divide”**, we demonstrate how it is possible to **use the tension that once separated us to connect us.**

This is how step 3 with Bill and Amanda could look:

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Ask Bill: What were you thinking when you invited Amanda to your room and she said yes? What have you thought about since? What has been your greatest challenge? How has Amanda been affected by you? What can you say to Amanda recognizing her position and pain?

Ask Amanda: What were you thinking when you went to Bill's room? What did you think when you left his room? What impact has this incident have on you? On Bill? What has been the hardest part for you? What can you say to Bill recognizing his position and confusion?

Ask Both: What could they each say to each other that would inspire them to work together, build trust, and bring a new level of understanding to issues of sexual harassment on campus?

In this third step of the process, parties in conflict have an opportunity to step into the fault line and allow the tension to convey information that would not otherwise be conveyed and deepen their understanding of the other.

It is our premise that tension is never eradicated. Especially, in this age of You Tube, Facebook and Twitter messaging, the tension escalates at the speed of light, reaching astronomical proportion, permeating campuses, businesses, governments, and communities. While restoring relationships is an achievement, creating a foundation that can sustain these relationships through seismic events is essential. This requires that parties in conflict **create something new together that benefits all parties, step-4 of the process.**

Just as a contract can be created between roommates to reduce roommate incidents on campus, what can Amanda and Bill create together that would bring a new awareness of the severity and consequences of sexual harassment, using their situation of tension to benefit both men and women on campus. What would their vision of gender relationships on campus and elsewhere be? which goals can they commit to as champions of reducing mixed messaging and sexual harassment instead of falling victim of their own tension? What obstacles do they foresee, and what measures can they put in place to mitigate them?

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The workshop ended on January 27, Holocaust Remembrance Day. For us, it was a remembrance of the brave conversation we started 10 years ago when we asked ourselves “How can we use the Holocaust to connect instead of allowing

the Holocaust to use us and separate us!” We used the tension of the Holocaust instead of letting it use us to create the foundation for our friendship and our Tectonic Leadership program. Despite the escalation of conflicts in our respective communities, we have demonstrated how it is possible to harnesses the power of tension and use tension as an opportunity to inform those in conflict of both the conscious fears, pains, and the unconscious trans-generational wounds that separate people and plague our world.

We need not only a safe space for the truths to come forward but also a brave space, where tough questions get asked, paradoxical truths reside, feelings are validated, empathy presides, and new solutions begin.

For more information please see our book **Harnessing the Power of Tension** available.

https://www.amazon.com/Harnessing-Power-Tension-paradoxical-communities-ebook/dp/B017UJN8CU/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1519257706&sr=8-1&keywords=tension+brenda

