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ARTICLE
MANAGING YOURSELF

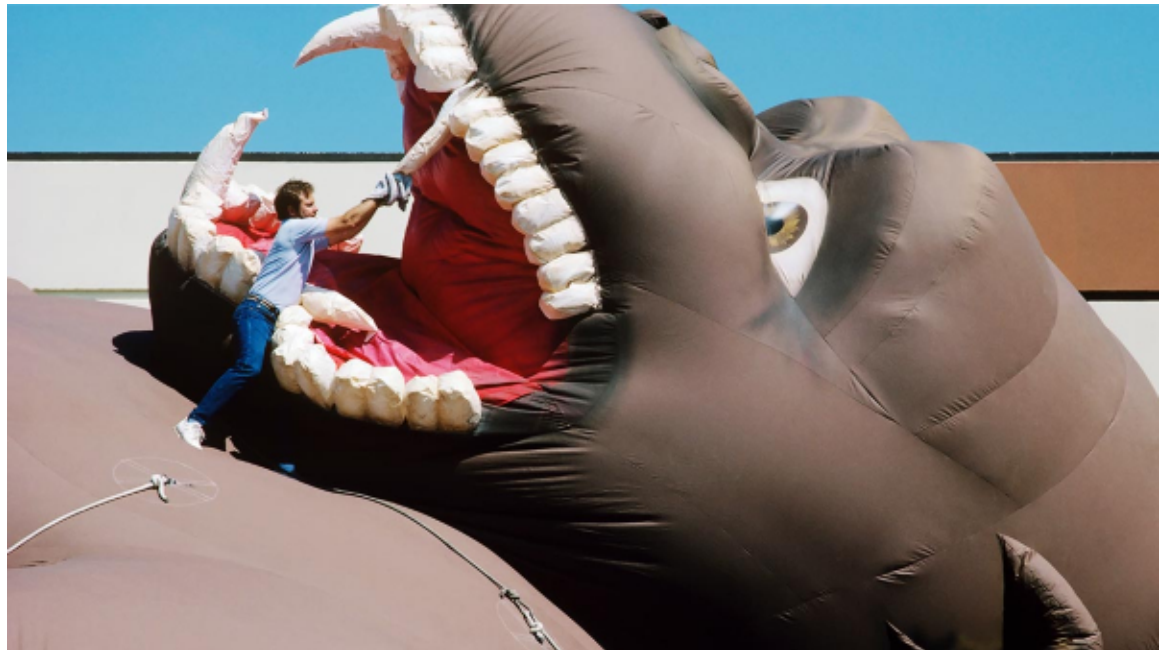# Signs That You're Being Too Stubborn

by Muriel Maignan Wilkins

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They're hardheaded. They dig their heels in. You know the type — people who are way too stubborn for their own good. While it's easy to point the finger at others who exhibit this behavior, it can be hard to recognize this trait in yourself. Here are the signs that you're being too inflexible:

- You keep at an idea or plan, or insist on making your point, even when you know you're wrong.
- You do something you want to do even if no one else wants to do it.
- When others present an idea, you tend to point out all the reasons it won't work.
- You visibly feel anger, frustration, and impatience when others try to persuade you of something you don't agree with.

- You agree to or commit halfheartedly to others' requests, when you know all along that you're going to do something entirely different.

Stubbornness is the ugly side of perseverance. Those who exhibit this attribute cling to the notion that they're passionate, decisive, full of conviction, and able to stand their ground — all of which are admirable leadership characteristics. Being stubborn isn't always a bad thing. But if you're standing your ground for the wrong reasons (e.g. you can't stand to be wrong, you only want to do things your way), are you really doing the right thing?

Take Joe, a senior level executive whom I coached. Joe was known for his commanding presence, and for driving results within the organization. His decisiveness and ability to focus on key issues and solutions made him a valuable asset to his company. However, there were times when Joe was blinded by his own abilities and unable to see other courses of action that were in the best interest of the company and critical stakeholders. After Joe continued on with plans to reorganize a division in spite of his boss's and the board's caution against it, his boss aptly described the situation as such: "Joe is so laser focused on what he wants to do that he doesn't realize he's winning the battle, but losing the war."

Like Joe, the overly stubborn individual is often the victim of Pyrrhic victory — while they get what they want, the damage they've done along the way negates any good that could have come out of it.

So what do you do to ensure that your holding your ground doesn't get in your way? Here are four strategies:

1. **Seek to understand:** Simply put, try listening to the other person. Rather than automatically shutting down the conversation, seek to understand her idea and rationale. Many people don't listen because they're afraid if they do, it will appear like they agree with the other party. This is not a valid reason for *not* listening. Just because you understand someone doesn't mean you agree with her. But you'll have a better chance of stating your position if you can show that you at least have a good sense of the bigger context. And who knows, you might actually change your mind once you have the whole picture.

2. **Be open to the possibilities:** Overly stubborn people often believe that there is only one viable course of action. As a result, they remain solidly staunched in their positions. By approaching a situation with an openness to at least explore other alternatives, you show some flexibility — even if you ultimately end up right back where you started. When someone is trying to persuade you on something you vehemently oppose, ask yourself "What conditions would need to be in place for me to be convinced of this idea?" By checking your assumptions, you might find yourself able to entertain other possibilities that weren't originally in your purview.

3. **Admit when you're wrong**: Being convinced that you're right is one thing. Digging your heels in when you know that you're wrong is inexcusable. In the latter situation, own up to your error and hold yourself accountable for your decisions and actions. In the long term, that will gain you far more credibility than sticking to your original plan.

4. **Decide what you can live with**: Being overly stubborn can become a habit. And while staying true to your stake in the ground is admirable, not every situation warrants that type of steadfast conviction. Rather than always pushing for your idea, decision or plan, recognize when it's okay to go with a decision that you can live with even if it's not your top choice. It may be that you have more to gain in the long term if you show that you're persuadable in the short term.

At the root of all stubbornness is the fear of letting go of your own ideas, convictions, decisions and at times, identity. But as renowned author James Baldwin eloquently stated, "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it... Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free... for higher dreams, for greater privileges." Sometimes, letting go of an overly staunch position can result in greater value than you originally expected.

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