

Transactional Relationships: "I will do this if you do that"



*Mr Tan returned home from a hard day's work. A mess greeted his eyes. Toys were strewn all over. Frustrated, he yelled at his home-maker wife, "What have you been doing the whole day? You are having it easy at home, yet you can't keep the place tidy for me to return home to!!!"

*Jane and her son had one of those numerous discussions about his allowance being insufficient. Her son disagreed. In exasperation, she blurted out, "If you do not increase the amount, you settle your own dinner! Do not expect me to prepare dinner for you!"

What do you think of the above relationships? Are they healthy? Are the parties happy? If this is how they operate, will the bond / trust between them be strong or weak, stable or fragile? What do you think is the issue? Is it about the husband yelling? Or the mother complaining? No, it is something deeper. It is so deep that the parties guilty of it are usually unaware.

Mr Tan and Jane are guilty of operating in transactional modes in their relationships. If Mr Tan

had yelled at his wife out of concern over his child's welfare, it would have come out differently. If Jane was not guilty of being transactional, she would not have tied the matter of the allowance to giving her son dinner, even if it was indeed insufficient. Providing dinner would be a motherly act of devotion to her son, completely outside of the allowance issue.

In looking at Transactional Relationships, we are not talking about husbands and wives making arrangements to have clear responsibilities where one party takes care of the children's school work and the other, the housework etc. If such arrangements are mutually agreed upon based on principles of efficiency, deciding on roles best suited to the strengths of the parties, that is not transactional.

Neither are we talking about keeping to house rules in Parent-Child relationships, where we say, "If you do not follow this rule then we will not agree to that." This is also not transactional.

Whether one's approach to a relationship is transactional or not is evidenced by the attitude, the spirit one operates in. Characteristically, people who operate in this mode harbour these subconscious attitudes:-

I will do this if you do that.

If I do this, what will you do for me? (what will I gain?)

I am doing this, why aren't you doing that? (Mr Tan's expectation)

If you do a little more of this, I will do a bit more of that. (Jane's expectation)

They approach relationships with expectations of reciprocation. They focus on the other person's contribution or the lack of it. How much they are willing to give of themselves is dependent on what they perceive as 'fair' and on how much the other party gives. Hence their giving is limited and conditional. This results in the other party feeling unsafe and frustrated. The relationship is unhealthy and unsatisfying.

Connect-Point

In the business arena, we expect to see people operating in transactional modes. They have an explicit aim of profiting the most out of giving the least. We experience them as calculating, self-centred and self-serving. When they perceive the situation as not being in their favour, they walk away. They find another vendor, another customer or another employer. They quit. If they cannot afford to quit, they sulk. They feel victimised. They protest against any extra demand made on them.

Mr Tan's yelling at his wife is his form of 'protest' that she is not doing her fair share. The home is a safer place for him to make the 'protest' than at his workplace. Would he quit from his family? No it has never crossed his mind. He loves his wife and son. He just felt he had a right to demand that she steps up her game. Like Mr Tan, Jane too loves her son. She too felt she had a right to drive home to him the message that the allowance was insufficient.

What do they feel about their wife/son hearing their complaints? Both Mr Tan and Jane said they were clueless. They were unaware of how the receiving party experienced them. The fact is, when they communicated from a transactional approach, the hearers received *unspoken messages* behind their spoken words. These unspoken messages spoke louder and hurt deeper than the words.

The unspoken message Jane's son heard from his mother was: "My love for you is conditional. I will only show you this act of affection (of providing you dinner) on condition that you give me enough. You are not worth my giving 100%." Mrs Tan would have received a similar unspoken message: "My love for you is conditional. I appreciate and value you only when you do your fair share."

No wonder. As parents, as spouses, this always bewilders us; we have genuinely loved all these years. We have invested into the relationship. Yet the other party has not perceived us as genuinely loving. Can we blame them for feeling so?

If things remain status quo with Mr Tan and Jane, their resentment will build up. They are not getting their fair share in return. They will hold back their

giving. This heightens the other party's resentment. Mrs Tan and Jane's son will question too. 'Is it worth what I am putting in if this is his/her attitude in the relationship?' They too withhold their affection, their giving. The vicious cycle spins out of control. The relationship spirals downwards.

Does it mean that Mr Tan and Jane should not have brought up the issue of the house being messy, the allowance too meagre? Certainly not. These issues and all the others are real and valid. It is the approach they take in communicating about the issues that is problematic. When the approach is transactional, the words and the resulting tone will generate negative vibes.

People who approach relationships with a transactional stance operate under a subconscious force which drives that behaviour. Behind this force is usually fear that they are unaware of. It is fear that comes out of deep insecurity. *(To elaborate more in the next article.)* They may have experienced and perhaps been traumatised by betrayal, loss, a breach of trust etc. This would have caused them to feel a sense of injustice, vulnerability and mistrust of others. They harbour inner vows and beliefs like "I don't want to be victimised or taken advantaged of" 'I am vulnerable and can be bullied by others' or they may simply be unquestioningly and blindly modelling after their insecure parents.

Are we in such unhealthy relationships? If we are and we want to see change in our relationships, understanding the root issue is crucial. Cultivating an awareness of our relationship approach through self-examination is needful. Are we guilty of being transactional? Admitting and acknowledging that we need to learn new ways of relating offers hope to break out of unhealthy relationships. Turn transactional relationships into relational relationships. *(To elaborate more in future article.)* Approach relationships differently. Relate out of a desire to connect not self-protect. Relate not out of a fear of losing out but out of faith, a belief that when we give unconditionally, we can enjoy more satisfying and healthy relationships.

**Fictitious names*