

Gangsters

War Councils and Cash and Pimples

Skinny, self-conscious and with an aspiring case of acne, during the eighth grade I sought shelter in a posse putzes, a gaggle of geeks, whose sheer volume of which gave us a sense of shelter. This was an especially difficult accomplishment for me since I was new to both the neighbourhood and the school, and they all had nicer homes than me. Although I was careful to never, ever invite any of them to our little condo, which smelled of burnt pork chops, and was adorned with Sally Anne furniture, I still found a way to fit in.

One day, very early in the formation of this crew, we decided we were a gang. We didn't look much like a gang, I mean, unless Charlie Brown and Linus and Schroeder could be called a gang, but suddenly we were challenging the punks at a nearby school to a rumble. Those jerks had to pay for... um, for not being... ah, from our school.

Somewhat less menacing than the dancing warriors of West Side Story, we nevertheless had a war council that day. Weapons. I'm not really sure where I got the ethic, but it was deeply engrained in me. You never turn your back on a fight, and when you fought, you fought with your fists, not hiding behind a knife or a gun or a pipe. Location: under the bridge on Cameron Way. 8:00. May the gangliest gang win.

We met up at the park a half hour before to strategize. The plan was to wait for the other kids to go under the bridge first, watching from a few yards away so we could assess the risks as we approached together, adjusting to the situation on the fly. If the other side broke code and brought weapons, we would respond with rocks from the creek.

We decided we would split in to three groups as we approached the creek from either side of the bridge. Two of the groups, representing a total of about half of us, would take either side of the creek, in full view of the street lights, a deliberate attempt to make us look vulnerable. If we could ferret out the opponents while the third group, representing the entire other half of our squad, stayed in the trees, a surprise force would attack from the rear.

It all sounded pretty cool until it got dark and cold. And the creek was, well, wet. And what if the other guys brought weapons? And... what time is it anyway? I'm hungry. I have to be in by 9. I have math homework. Can I borrow your calculator?

In the end, just two of us made our way to the underside of the bridge, very tentatively, which could have been a huge mistake. And as it turned out, we were two more than the other school brought to the battleground, and we fizzled home, victors by acclamation. The anticipation of direct combat was truly frightening once we got close. Truth is, it could have been a disaster, the sort that gets on to the TV news, but that vivid expectation of violence proved too much for nearly all of us. And that's a good thing.

War Councils – Family Matters:

Over the past few weeks we have had a fair bit of discussion in these columns about the difficult conversations we need to have with our beneficiaries in order for the transition of our surplus to the next generation. Approaching this is stressful. A war council of sorts might be in order. There are many benefits of talking before the battle starts.

5 key benefits of upfront communication

1. It provides context to your decisions and helps your children develop an understanding of the reasoning behind choices made.
2. It removes the element of surprise in the reading of a Will and unanswered questions around why certain decisions were put into place.
3. It creates a forum for feelings to be dealt with up front, which helps decrease the likelihood of resentment later on.
4. It allows children to communicate their interests and concerns, which may improve decision making or provide a perspective that you would otherwise be unaware of.

5. It can promote ongoing family unity and harmony after your death.

The role of written documentation

Even when family meetings and discussions take place, a prudent approach is to document the reasoning behind each decision. And for those who absolutely don't feel comfortable discussing it with family up front, recording the reasons is crucial, as it will serve as the only lasting explanation for loved ones who couldn't come to the table live. Some individuals even choose to do videos or letters outlining what they've done if the face-to-face meeting could not come off. Videos might do a better job of inflecting feeling and meaning than words alone.

The Family Advisor – a non-binding arbitrator of sorts:

A third party which all of the players trust can be a huge asset in approaching difficult conversations. He or she can be a calm voice in the room of discontent. A dispassionate observer. A counsellor. A professional, and in the end, a friend. And he or she can absorb some of the brunt of the difficult choices to be made, providing calculated reasoning for them.

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