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DEMANDING A FINAL ANSWER CAN BE IMMENSELY SATISFYING – AS LONG AS YOU DON'T EXPECT THE SAME SATISFACTION FROM THE RESPONSE.
ALEXANDRA CARLTON ASKS WHETHER ULTIMATUMS REALLY WORK

Recently, a rather theatrical friend of mine flung her handbag down on the bar in front of our assembled group of friends and announced she'd given her boyfriend of six years an ultimatum: marry me by my 31st birthday (a mere month away) or it's over. Four sets of eyes simultaneously widened, then lowered. We coughed as one. Unfazed by our synchronised show of dismay, my friend continued. "It's a good thing," she told us brightly. "The power is now in my hands." We looked at her hands. They shook slightly. Eventually, I spoke up. "Lisa," I began – not unkindly, but not exactly ready to lead the gang in a rousing rendition of "I Am Woman", either – "How on Earth is any good going to come of this?"

No good did. The birthday arrived. He said no.

Then my friend broke the number-two rule of ultimatum delivery (number one being, "Don't do it!"): she stayed put and started to ask questions. She wanted an explanation. They talked more. She pressed. He

hedged. Things limped along, punctuated by urgent powwows with her friends. "I'm still glad I gave him the ultimatum," she told us all at one point, starting to sound far less strident. "We're really talking about the situation now. It put a lot of things on the table we hadn't been able to discuss before." A lot of interesting, revealing things, doubtless. Perhaps the topics that should have been out in the open a long time ago. But the fact was the ultimatum now glowered over everything – threatening, aggressive and then robbed of any positive punch it may have packed when it was revoked. It goes without saying that a couple of weeks later, the relationship was an irretrievably shattered mess. Suddenly she didn't feel so powerful anymore.

It's not an uncommon story. We've all considered slamming down an ultimatum in front of someone we feel is blocking our needs. Not necessarily over marriage, but perhaps over a partner's devotion to boys' nights out. Or to a friend who perpetually cancels dinner arrangements.

Or a boss who keeps ducking your pay-rise requests. You've waited. You've hinted. You've negotiated. You've made your needs abundantly clear. You tell yourself and everyone around you that your opposite number just needs a push, a fright, a little bit of wise-the-hell-up and a taste of what it might be like to lose you. And so you begin a conversation that contains two tiny but menacing phrases: "If you don't..." and "Then I will..."

The problem with an ultimatum is that it is, in every sense, a threat. Its natural habitat is the kidnap ransom note. And unless you've got Stockholm syndrome, no one likes to feel trapped.

"It's basically blackmail," says Sydney-based psychologist Jacqueline Saad. "If you have the need to make an ultimatum in any area, you need to ask yourself *why*. Are you not communicating your needs properly? Do you have unrealistic expectations? Is there any way you can compromise?" If, like Lisa, you can answer yes-no-no to those questions, then you really need to stop and think. "He knows what I want. And he's given every indication he doesn't want the same." How is a stand-off going to change things?

Here's the truth: the very fact that you feel the need to make an ultimatum should be enough to tell you the answer will be no. In Lisa's case, her boyfriend had checked out of the relationship a while back (ironically, he was cheating on her with a girl who worked in a bridal shop). On some level, Lisa knew this. The ultimatum was little more than a final act of closure.

Of course, there's always someone who ruins it for everyone. Google hard enough and you'll find women (not scores, but a few) who crow, "I gave my boyfriend 'the marriage ultimatum'" (yes, the phenomenon is now common enough to have earned a definite article) "and we've been happily wed for five years." Janelle, a 26-year-old teacher, gave a "move to my city or we're through" ultimatum to an out-of-town boyfriend – and the guy packed his bags and was under her roof within the month. Then there's Callum, a 39-year-old pharmacist from Sydney. "A woman who was probably the love of my life broke up with me five years ago because I was dithering and undecided," he says. "I often wonder how I would have responded if she'd hit me up with a take-it-or-leave-it scenario."

Probably not favourably, says Saad. "I've seen that situation in my practice a fair amount," she says. "And I'd have to say nine times out of 10 if a marriage happens under the cloud of an ultimatum, it will end in divorce. If you've had to threaten someone into marriage, it doesn't bode particularly well for every other decision you'll have to make together down the track, does it?" The ultimatum-maker will always worry: did he or she really want to come to the party? Or did I hold a gun to their head? Janelle and her boyfriend eventually went their separate ways. And Callum says he wonders about the ex... but he doesn't exactly pine for her, either.

And what of the workplace? On paper, it would appear to be a reasonable testing ground for ultimatums. You may say that hitting your boss with a "pay me an extra \$10,000 or I'll walk" scenario is just business, nothing personal. But that's

not a very grown-up way to work things out. "Ultimatums put people off," says executive coach Tina Monk, managing director of Tina Monk & Associates. "Think instead about instigating a negotiation, but one that has a bottom line." If it's a pay rise you're after, she suggests going in with a range rather than a fixed figure in mind. "Giving someone options makes them feel like the power is back in their hands," she says. Then you need to consider your relationship with that person to help decide how firm you can be about what you will or won't accept.

So what are you meant to do if there's an ultimatum in your head screaming to get out? What if you still love your partner/friend/job but you feel like you've put up with something that jars with your values for long enough? Are you supposed to keep waving semaphore flags on the sidelines and hope the relevant party catches a glimpse of them out of the corner of their eyes?

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Sort of. There are ultimatums and there are *ultimate* ultimatums. The first option involves delivering a message that isn't quite so heavy on the "ultimate" bit. On the marriage front, Saad suggests framing things in a positive, rather than negative way. "You could try something like, 'Marriage is an aspiration of mine. I'd like to be married within the next five years. A long-term commitment is something I desire,' or words to that effect," she says. "It's more positive than scary and negative – which would freak anyone out." And if you're not getting the responses you're looking for, there's no need to tack on an "or I will..." You have your answer.

Another option – risky, perhaps, but dignified, is to set *yourself* an ultimatum. Begin the negotiation process. Make your needs clear. Restate them if you've already put them on the table. And then set an ultimatum for yourself in your own head – keeping it to yourself, of course. If the other person isn't playing ball by a certain date, then it's up to *you* to leave. This also applies to the workplace. If you're not getting what you want from your job, move on. Your boss doesn't need to know you had them on a virtual countdown – so you're much more likely to retain cordial relations in the future.

The plus side of this option is the event of your leaving may operate in the way you hoped an ultimatum would. A boss may suddenly be able to scrape together that extra money when you walk in with your resignation letter. The boyfriend may suddenly see, rather than anticipate, what he's missing when you're busy packing your bags. You never know – this could be the trigger to get them on board. And if it's not, then, well, it was never going to happen. Is this still a form of blackmail? Yes. But it's better than the last resort, which is... making that ultimatum.

Go on, do it if you must. If you think it will help you move on or get closure, go right ahead. Do it calmly and carefully and kindly and stick to your guns no matter what. The answer will almost certainly be no. But at least you won't die wondering.