

WHEN CONFLICT GETS PERSONAL: MOVING FROM THEORY TO REALITY

TRAINING MANUAL

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Prepared by

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Dealing with difficult people is a stressful challenge faced by many people every day. The cost of conflict to an organization is difficult to measure, but workplace stress negatively affects employees in various ways. Statistics indicate that 55 percent of working Canadians experience anxiety, irritability with co-workers, defensiveness, anger, mood swings and feelings of helplessness or of being trapped.

These two days of training will give you the tools to manage conflict at work and at home. This introductory workshop examines basic approaches to conflict and provides the opportunity to learn concepts and communication skills which are critical to handling conflict in healthy ways. It is an essential professional development tool for managers, team leaders and front-line staff.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Participants attending this workshop will have the opportunity to:

- Explore personal case studies in order to consider how they respond to difficult people and conflict situations and how that affects their lives
- Learn communication skills to use in difficult situations
- Increase their ability to proactively engage others to resolve conflicts.
- Learn and practice processes for clearing up misunderstandings, recovering from mistakes and resolving disagreements.

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UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

CONFLICT OVERVIEW

“Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.”¹

There are many different attitudes and beliefs about conflict. Some view conflict as something bad that needs to be avoided or eliminated, while others see conflict as an opportunity for growth or learning. For each of us, our view of conflict is related to our own experiences and our observations of how family members and others deal with conflict.

Many of us were taught as children that it is wrong to quarrel or disagree, and that differences are often best ignored or, conversely, approached aggressively. Some of us believe conflict is negative due to its association with unpleasant experiences, emotions and disruptions in our lives.

Our beliefs and attitudes about conflict influence our perceptions of a situation, our actions, and ultimately the consequences or results of these interactions. To improve the outcomes of conflict situations it is helpful to become aware of how our beliefs and behaviour currently contribute to conflict situations and to realize the powerful impact that changes to our attitudes and actions can have on a situation.

Conflict has common and predictable patterns.

A conflict represents first and foremost a crisis in human interaction. Specifically, the occurrence of conflict tends to destabilize a person’s experience of both self and other, so that each party feels both more vulnerable and more self-absorbed than before the conflict occurred.

Choosing The Process

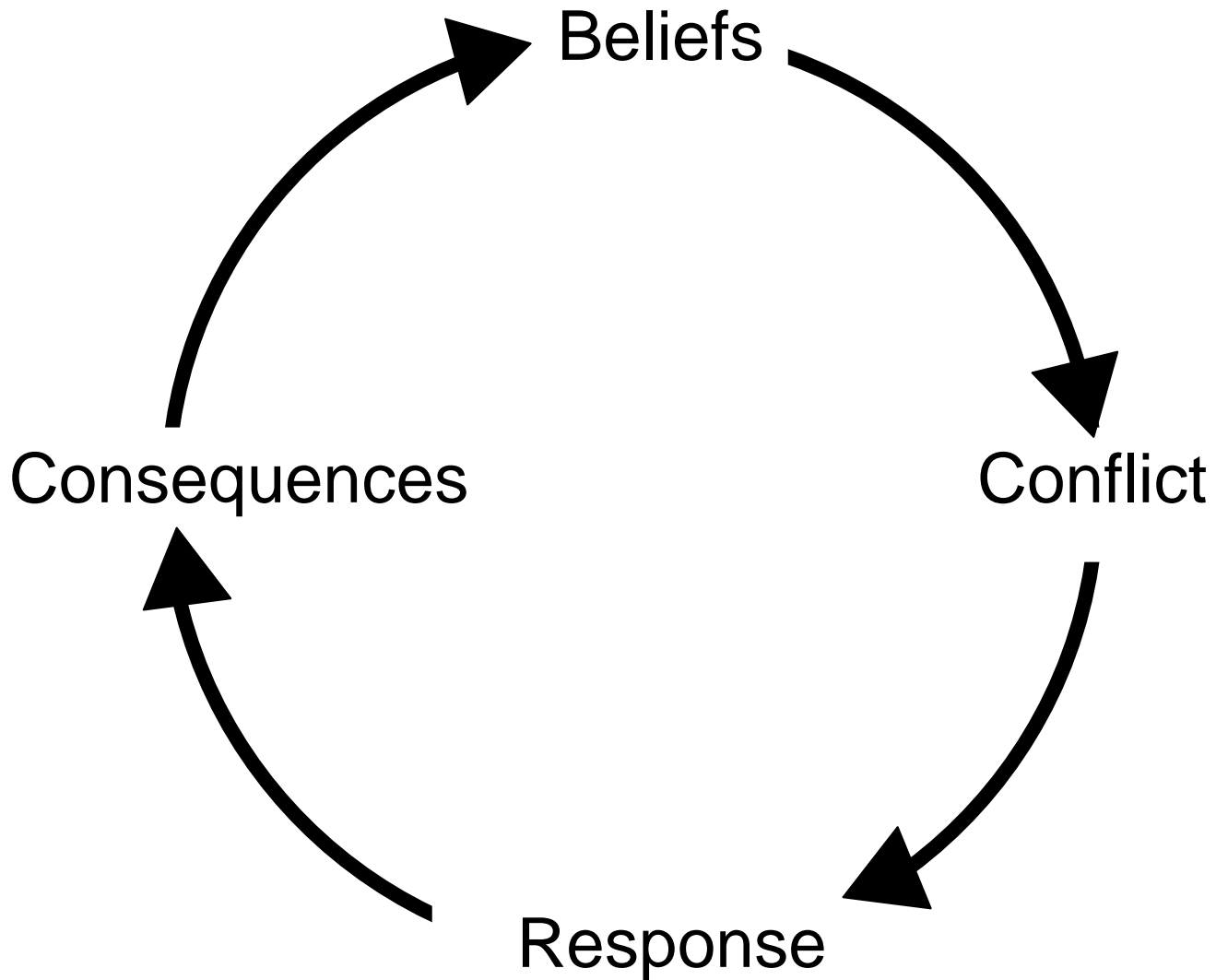
Conflict tends to be part of our everyday lives. In any relationship between two or more people, differences are bound to arise.

Managing conflict is something that we all do, but we may not be aware of how we do it. For example, sometimes we know that the time is not right to deal with an issue, so we postpone dealing with it. On other occasions we may ask a colleague to lunch so that a problem can be aired in a friendly environment. In these kinds of situations, we are attempting to manage conflict in a constructive manner.

Carefully choosing the **process** we use for dealing with our differences is more important for effective conflict resolution than the differences themselves.

¹ William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007), 9.

THE CONFLICT CYCLE²



The key to effective interaction is the belief that conflict is a natural and inevitable part of life, and the realization that it is primarily our actions and reactions to these challenges that determines whether the situation will have constructive or destructive results.

“Real freedom is the ability to pause between a stimulus and a response – and in that pause choose.”³

² For an expanded discussion of cycles see David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 229-58.

³ Rollo May, *Psychology and the Human Dilemma* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1967), 175.

THE CONFLICT CYCLE

“In stress, we all regress to our earlier learnings, and since defensive conflict behaviours were often learned in fragmented, distorted fashion from experiences of high anxiety and tension, they may be our least functional behaviours.”⁴

Our individual experience with conflict tends to follow a self-perpetuating cyclical pattern made up of several distinct phases. This pattern can be healthy or problematic. If used as a map, this cycle can help us to understand how conflict operates in our lives:

Beliefs about conflict:

- Conflict is bad.
- A good person doesn't rock the boat.
- Good relationships don't have conflict.
- Conflict means verbal or physical aggression.
- Working out conflict takes too much time.
- I have to win.
- I won't be liked if I raise objections.
- Involving others in the decision takes too much time.
- If I give in, I'll appear weak.
- Conflict is normal.

Conflict occurs:

- Our perception of what has occurred is influenced by our attitudes and beliefs.

Response:

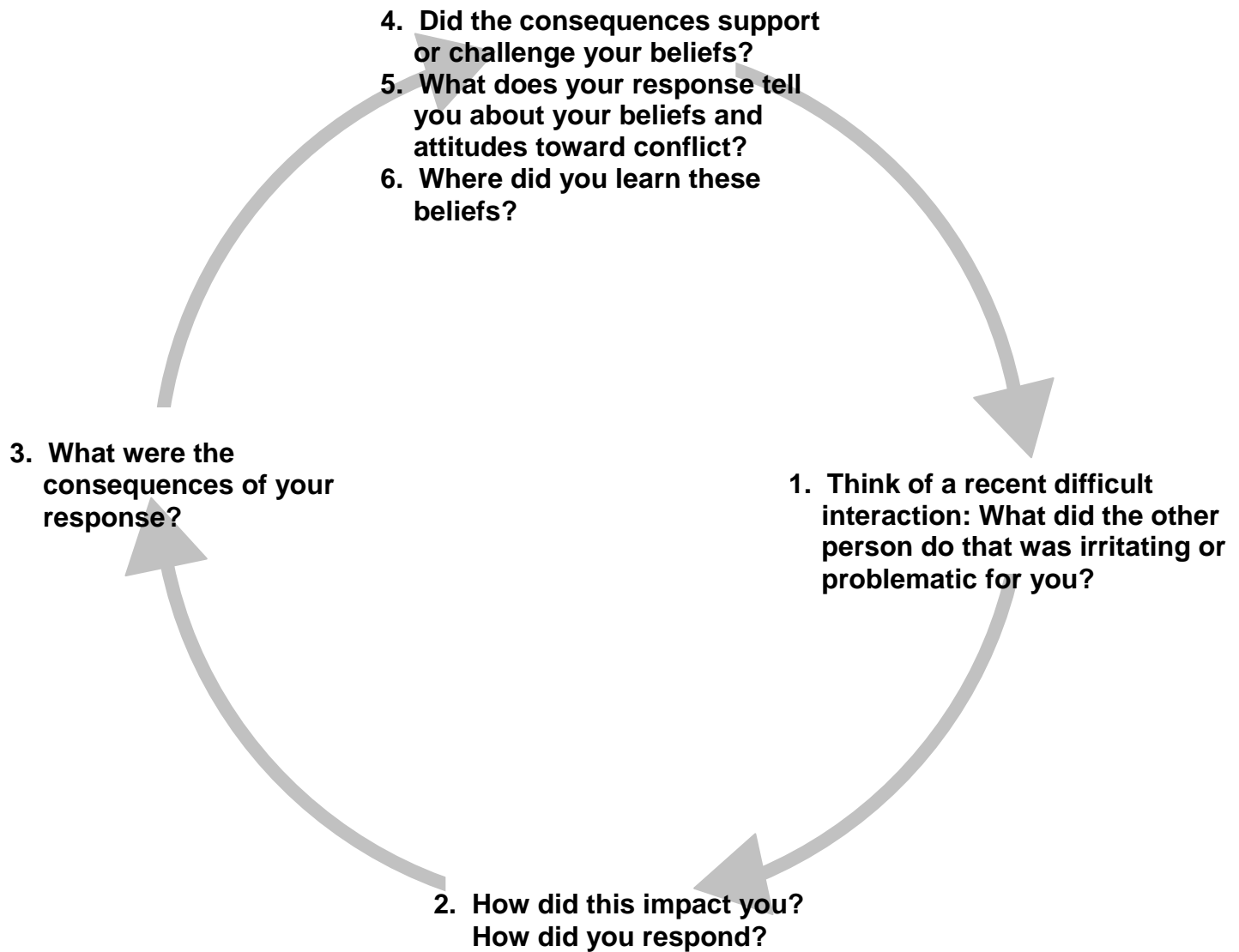
- Pretending nothing is wrong.
- Venting to someone.
- Smiling no matter what.
- Striking out at others or at the source.
- Rebuking oneself.
- Becoming sarcastic
- Silent seething.
- Discussing with an authority figure.
- Discussing with the person.
- Reflecting or journaling.

Consequences:

- Stress or relief
- Escalation or de-escalation
- Poorer or better relationship
- Decrease or increase in trust
- Loss or gain of confidence/self-esteem
- Confusion or clarity
- Hurt feelings
- Anger
- Shame

⁴ Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, 24.

CONFLICT CYCLE: PERSONAL CASE STUDY



Other questions to consider:

- What did you do in this situation that the other party would have seen as being irritating or unhelpful?
- How did the other party respond to your actions? What does that tell you about his/her beliefs about conflict or about you?
- What other response could you have chosen? What do you suppose the consequences would have been?

A person who becomes aware and exercises the self-discipline to choose alternative actions can affect a whole interaction cycle.

BELIEFS ABOUT CONFLICT: A NEW PARADIGM

Conflict is okay.

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of life and happens in the best personal and professional relationships. In itself, conflict is neither bad nor good. It can be constructive if handled well, destructive if handled poorly.

People have choices in how they respond to conflict.

I generally do not choose to have conflict, but I can choose how I respond to conflict. Others typically respond to me in the ways I invite them to. The kind of space I create for others to show up in is up to me.

People can solve their own conflicts.

People are problem-solvers in most of their daily roles, both at work and at home. The most appropriate resolution typically comes from those involved in the conflict. Resolving a conflict builds both skills and confidence that can be of use in the next situation.

I only have *part* of the story. I *have* part of the story.

Understanding what has happened requires that every voice in the conflict be heard. I can see things that don't exist and I can ignore things that do exist.

We all contribute to our conflicts consciously or unconsciously.

Just because I am offended does not mean that I should be.
I shouldn't believe everything I think.
The stronger my emotional response, the more likely it is about me.

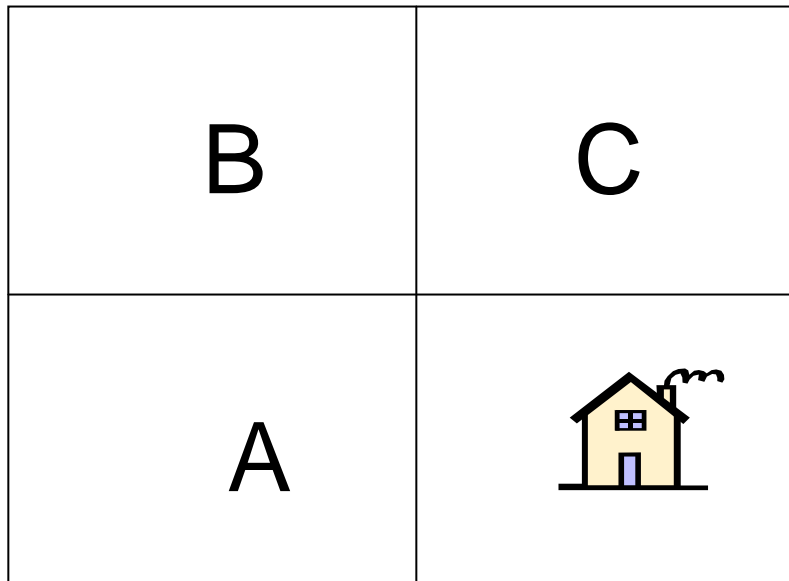
There can be win/win resolutions.

Assuming competition limits the perceived outcomes to a win/lose situation. It is possible to shift another's competitive energy toward a win/win focus.

Reconciliation is possible in a wide range of situations.

It is possible to work through issues and find reconciliation even in situations of long-standing conflict within families, communities or workplaces.

CONFLICT STYLES: THE NEIGHBOURHOOD EXERCISE⁵



The Neighbours

Neighbour A's response is to close the window and attempt to sleep.

Neighbour B's response is to close the window and attempt to sleep. Another day, B has a five-minute conversation with the dog owner and then asks a question about the dog.

Neighbour C's response is to knock on the dog owner's door and ask the neighbour to stop the dog from barking.

What observations or patterns do you notice in the group sharing?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

⁵ See Chapter 5 of Wilmot and Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict*, for a full discussion of conflict styles.

CONFLICT STYLES

Conflict Style “A”: Avoid

Strengths:

Consequences of overuse:

Conflict Style “B”: Indirect

Strengths:

Consequences of overuse:

Conflict “C”: Direct

Strengths:

Consequences of overuse:

The Dog Owner: How to Work With Others’ Styles

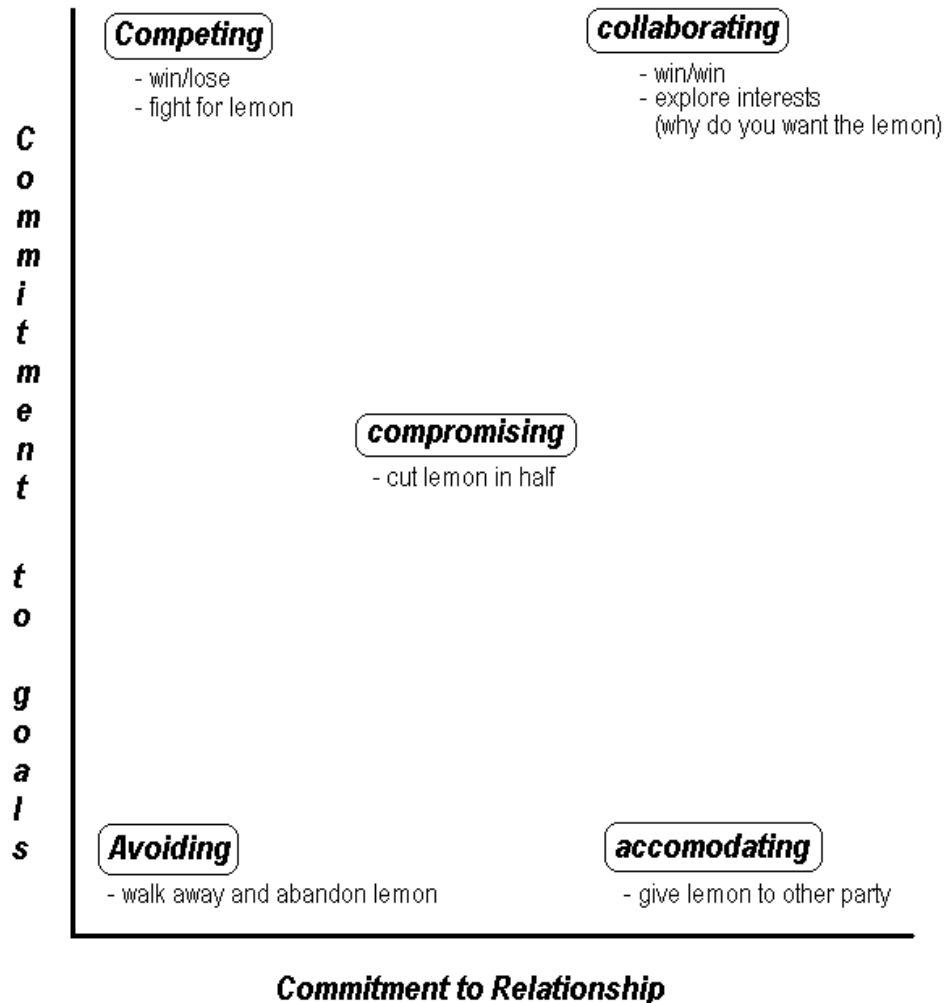
If the dog owner is an “A” (Avoid), then the best response is a

If the dog owner is a “B” (Indirect), then the best response is a

If the dog owner is a “C” (Direct), then the best response is a

FIVE CONFLICT RESPONSE STYLES

adapted from Kilmann & Thomas' Conflict Styles graph (1975)



Most people have a natural inclination to use one of these styles. It's helpful to recognize which one you are most likely to head for automatically, under the stress of conflict. You can then begin to look for situations where your "natural" style may not be the most effective response, or how it interacts with someone else's style.

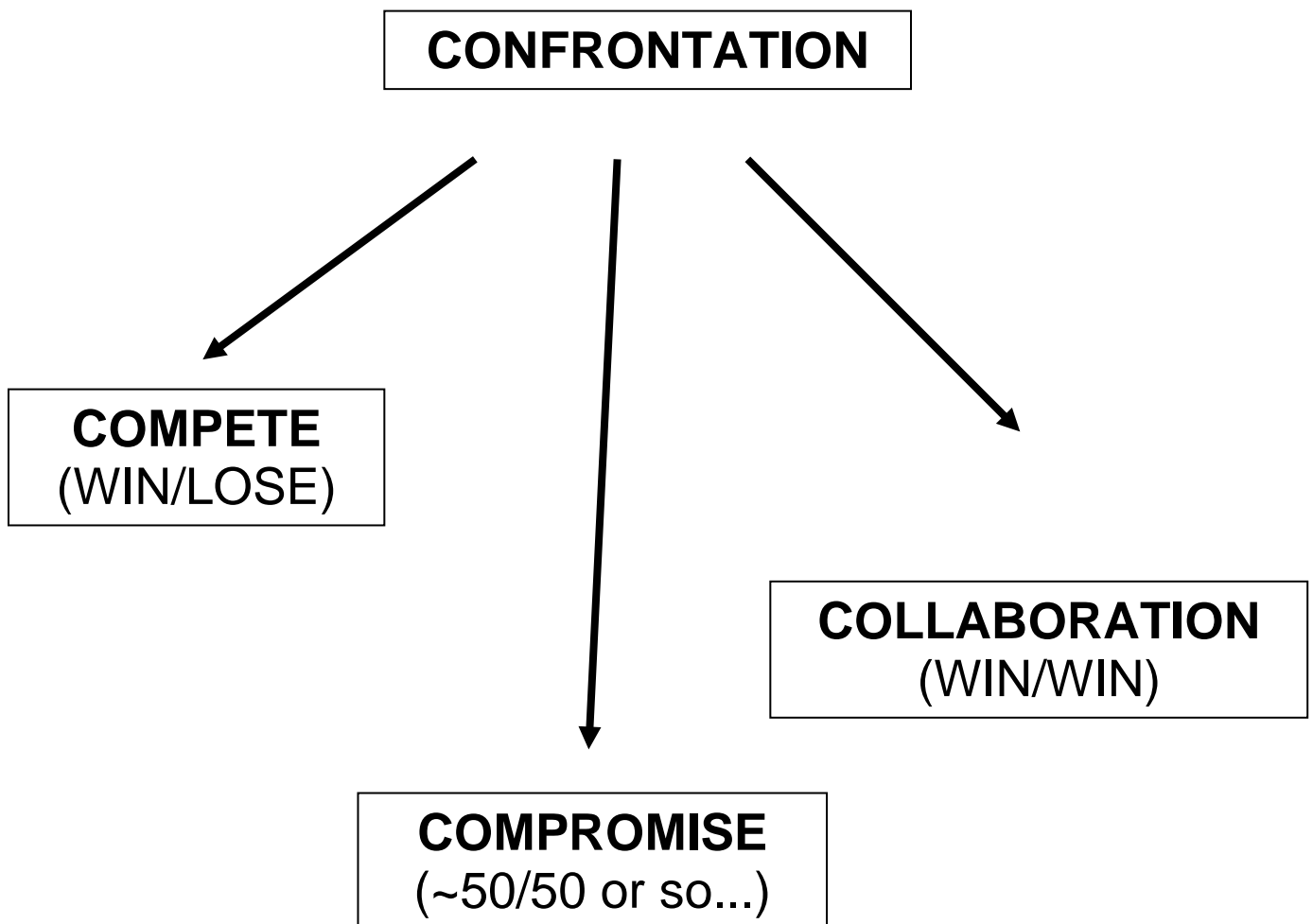
**Take a pen and mark the place(s) on the diagram above that best represent your preferred style. Then consider whether or not you need to cultivate the ability to use other styles more effectively.

Remember: there is a time and a place for each one!

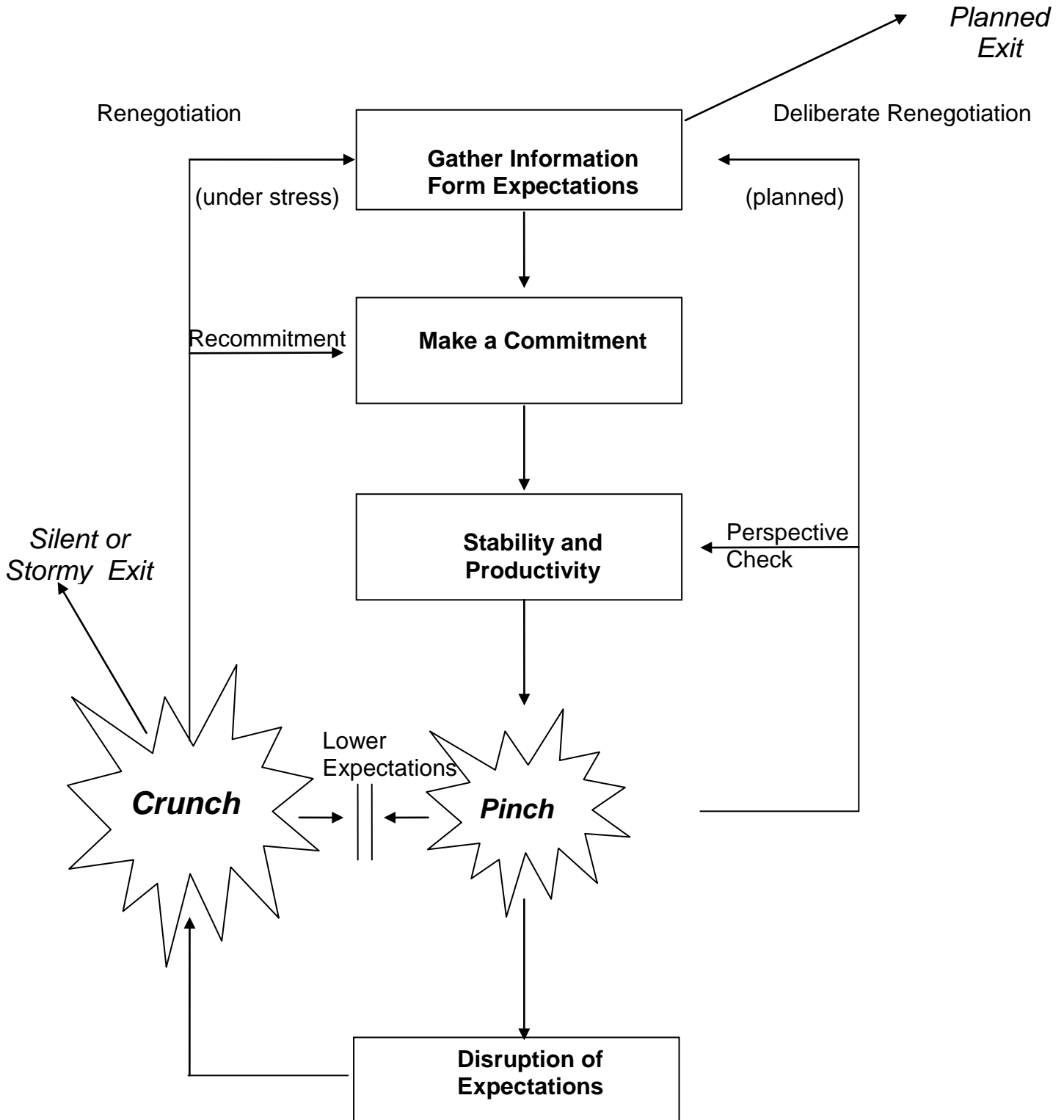
**After having done the above exercise, ask someone else who knows you well where he/she would locate your "preferred style". Prepare for another perspective!

CONFLICT RESPONSE STYLES...continued

**3 WAYS to CONFRONT
(be a “C”)**



MAPPING THE PROBLEM⁶



⁶ Adapted from Sherod Miller et al., *Connecting With Self and Others* (Littleton, Co: Interpersonal Communication Program, 1992), 43.

MAPPING THE PROBLEM

Information Gathering: All relationships begin and develop through the gathering and sharing of information. We create expectations and assumptions from the information that we have gathered.

Expectations & Assumptions: We create expectations and assumptions from the information that we have gathered.

Commitment: We choose to make commitments based on the information that we have gathered and our belief about the relationship's ability to meet enough of our expectations and goals to make it workable. Commitments can be formal or informal, articulated or kept private.

Stability and Productivity: This is the period where things are going as we expected they would.

Pinch: A pinch is something that is done or not done, that violates one of our expectations or assumptions. Pinches are private. We feel them, though the one who caused the pinch may not be aware that we are disappointed or have been offended.

Disruption of Expectations: By not acting to resolve the pinch, we may come to doubt our initial judgment of a situation. We are not sure if we can trust our operating expectations and assumptions because we have been disappointed already. Tension and stress builds as our situation becomes increasingly unpredictable.

Crunch: A crunch is open conflict. Both parties are now aware that there is a problem. However, if I have been suffering silently, my crunch may be the other party's pinch.

Crunch Management Options:

- **Silent or Stormy Ending:** This is where one party terminates the relationship after the fight without any further communication.
- **Recommitment:** This is where the parties smooth things over and play nice with each other, with the hope that the relationship will return quickly to stability and productivity. The pinch, however, remains private and unresolved.
- **Lower Expectations:** By lowering their expectations and just "putting in time," the parties hope to reduce the number of pinches and crunches that they are experiencing with each other. Eventually, this can lead to apathy and cynicism.
- **Perspective Check and Renegotiation:** By engaging in a difficult, honest conversation after a crunch, information can be gathered, expectations and assumptions clarified and parties can either renew their commitment to their relationship or agree to disagree and explore the final option of an agreed-upon transition or ending of the relationship.
- **Planned Exit:** An intentional exit from the relationship (permanent or temporary) having given consideration to the new information gathered during the Deliberate Renegotiation phase

COMMON WAYS OF DEALING WITH PINCHES

Let it Go

There is a Congolese proverb that says, "It is best to let an offence repeat itself three times. The first may be an accident, the second a mistake. Only the third is likely to be intentional." Many of us are living examples of this proverb, especially with the small pinches we experience in our lives.

Complain to someone else

Once the pinch has been repeated (or if it is really significant the first time), we often look for someone with whom we can share our experience. Our motivation for doing this is often positive. We want to release our frustration to someone else, or we are unsure if we have a legitimate reason for being frustrated. The problem is that our search for clarity often stops here and inevitably the behaviour repeats itself. This is a very common strategy in Canadian workplaces.

Pinch back

After our frustration has reached a certain level and the pinches are remembered days later, our behaviour often changes toward that person. We begin to be hesitant or more aggressive in the other party's company. We are on the lookout for the behaviour to repeat itself. Our initial responses are often very subtle and are not always obvious even to ourselves. We may respond to the other person's email in a less timely way or delay in responding to work that affects them. We may become quieter in the other person's company, withholding some of our ideas. We may become defensive in their presence as we look to protect ourselves. Not only the person who is the catalyst, but all others in the room, can invariably feel this defensive energy. In fact, it will likely become a pinch for others.

Hold on to it

Often we hold on to our hurt, nursing it, reliving the pinches in our mind, with our friends, and in our thoughts at night. This thinking often results in feelings of victimization and growing resentment. Medical research says that living with these feelings will make us more vulnerable to disease.

Crunch back

When we have suffered long enough, many of us will say or do something out of character. We will snap back. This is what we call open conflict; everyone who hears the exchange would believe that there is a fight.

Talk about it

A pinch is an opportunity to have an "expectation conversation." Unfortunately this is done far too seldom.

Ignore It

There are some pinches that are best ignored the first time or are an occasional miss step. This is especially true if they are actions outside of a person's character that seem to be a one-time occurrence when a person is under extra pressure.

MANAGING PINCHES

1. Identify a recent pinch that you experienced at work.

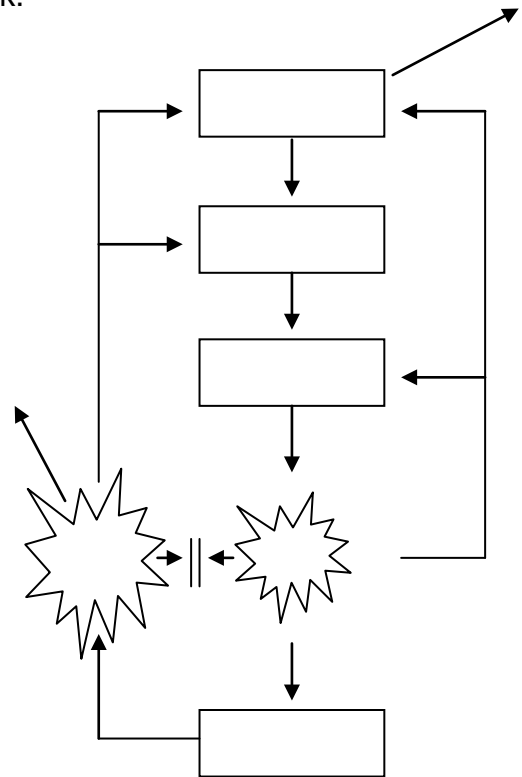
Pinches could include:

- Words
- Tone of voice or email
- Body language
- Any action that had a negative effect

2. What did you do about these pinches?

(Remember, doing nothing is a decision.)

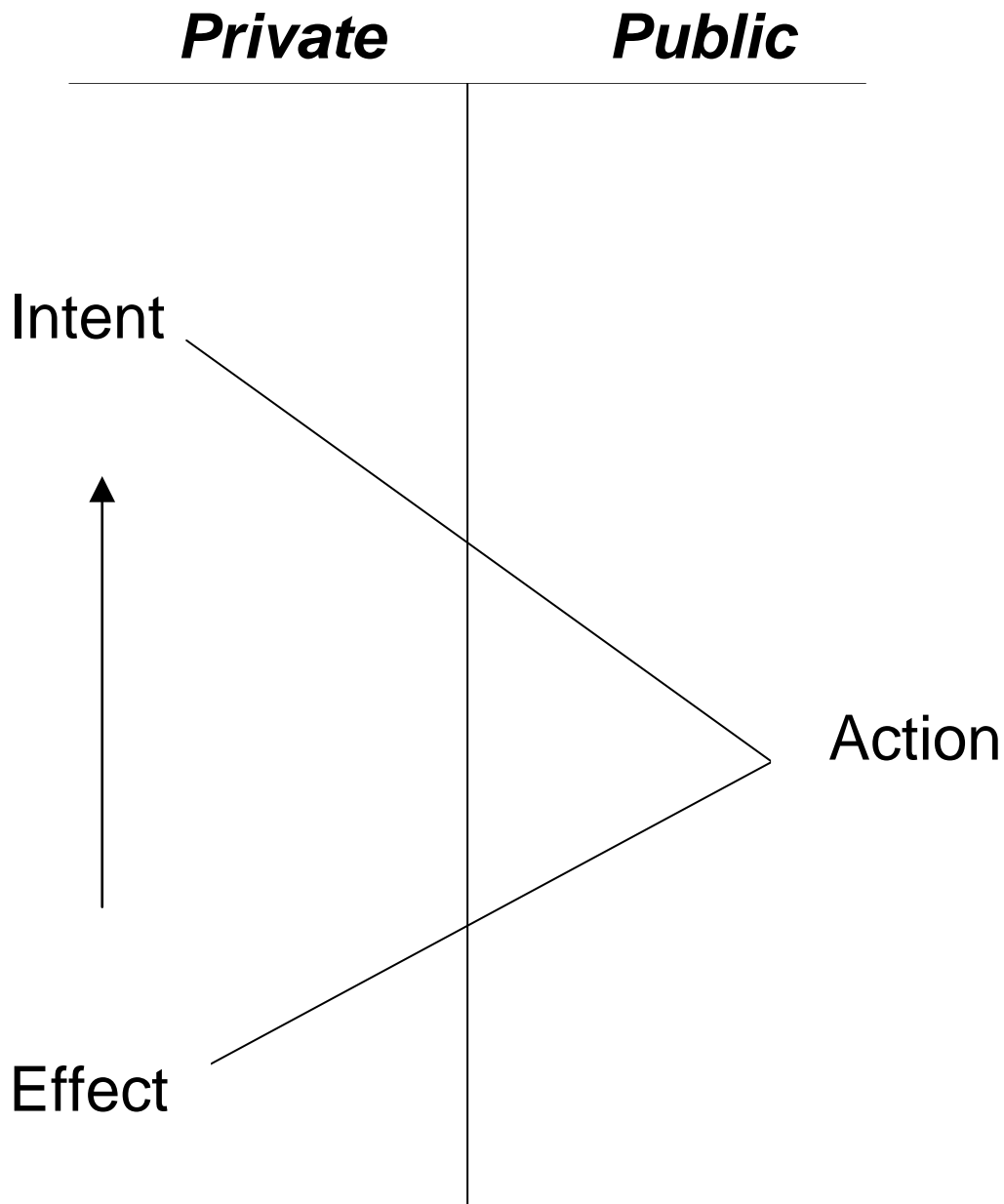
- At the moment?
- Later on in the day or week?



3. What is your pattern of handling pinches at work? At home?
Often we have at least a two-step" pattern.

4. What are the benefits and limitations of this pattern?

5. What would you like others to do when you pinch them?



To communicate effectively, we must make our intentions clear and check out our assumptions. By themselves, actions, tone and words can mislead.

INTENT – ACTION – EFFECT⁷

“We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are”.

Anais Nin

In our daily interactions we often misinterpret the behaviour of others. The assumptions we make are a major contributing factor to the breakdown of communication and the escalation of conflict. When people are under the stress associated with conflict, the tendency to misinterpret each other is greatly increased.

We often assume the other’s intention from the effect that his/her action has on us. If I am hurt by the actions of another person I will tend to assume s/he intended to hurt me. However, we tend to assume that the other person will correctly interpret the intent of our actions regardless of how we deliver them. If our intent was to help, we may assume the other person feels helped and should appreciate us.

Usually the action itself is the only part that is public. In conflict situations the gap between our intentions and the effect of our actions can become wider and wider. An effective approach in resolving conflicts is therefore to make “public” more of what is usually “private.”

Check out statements like, “I thought that...” Such phrases may be indicators of assumptions that need to be clarified. Similarly, if you are negatively affected by the behaviour of another person, do not simply make assumptions about his/her intention. Instead, inquire about the intent and/or inform the person of the effect his/her actions have had on you.

In a study conducted by Dr. Albert Mehrabian at UCLA, the act of communication between individuals was divided into three categories and the degree to which each aspect affects the total message received was explored.⁸ In a given act of communication, what percentage of the total message received would you attribute to each of the following categories?

Verbal (Words)	_____%
Vocal and Tonal (Tone)	_____%
Visual (Body Language)	_____%
TOTAL MESSAGE	<u>100 %</u>

⁷ For a full discussion see Miller, et al, *Connecting With Self and Others*.

⁸ See Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, USA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981).

TAMING THE PARROT⁹

Interpersonal conflict actually always involves at least *two encounters*; there is the *encounter with the other*, of which we are usually more conscious, and the *encounter with the self*, of which we are often only dimly aware at best.

The Encounter with the Other

The struggle with the other is usually to be heard, to be understood, to be respected, to be taken seriously, and to live well together. This encounter is an external engagement, something that takes place outside myself, manifest in the ongoing, visible interaction between the other and myself. The challenge, to which the lion's share of this manual is dedicated, is to conduct myself in a way that does not just beget more of the same. For most of us, this would be enough!

But an even greater challenge awaits. In fact, it is this second challenge we must tackle first. This is the challenge of the encounter with the self. Like the first encounter, the encounter with the self involves struggle, only this struggle is internal. That is, my sense that I am not being respected – while usually beginning with an external momentary encounter with the other – can only ultimately take root and continue grow inside of me, out of sight, apart from the other, *in my own heart and mind*.

The Encounter with the Self

This second struggle is between me and my feelings, me and my thoughts. And the question is, who will win? Will I see my thoughts and feelings for what they are – worthy of attention to be sure but ultimately no more real than any other momentarily arising phenomena, as a cloud passing in the sky? Or will I lose my mindfulness (the awareness of the mind's capacity for delusion), collapse the distance between my thoughts and reality, and thereby allow those thoughts to run me around?

Too often, I lose the battle. The internal dialogue of recrimination, defense, and counter-attack continues unabated often largely or even completely apart from the encounter with the other. This can go on for days, weeks, months, or even years. As it does so, with my full, if unconscious cooperation, it gnaws away at both my own sense of identity and my sense of the other as fully human, as a person worthy of respect and dignity. It is this, ultimately, that brings me to the extremes of silence or violence, of de-selfing or striking out. It is via this process that we arrive at war, against the self and against the other.

⁹ David Dyck, "Taming the Parrot," *Restorative Reflections: A Newsletter of Mediation Services* (Winter/Spring 2008): 1.

The Parrot – Befriending and “Taming” the Mind

The internal struggle exacerbates the external and vice-versa. It is critical to engage both intentionally if interpersonal “peace” is to be built. But, because it is in the mind that the seeds of enemy are first planted and germinate, it is there we must begin. The mind and its inner patterns of self-dialogue can create or prevent the fertile conditions for enemy-making. One simple way to think of the conditions you create within your mind is in terms of a parrot sitting on your shoulder.

Why a parrot? A parrot is a clever animal. A tricky animal. It can mimic a human voice like no other. And yet, in the end, a parrot is not a human voice. And it is not in a dialogue. Indeed, all the parrot does is repeat the lines that it has heard. Over time, it develops the capacity to repeat these same lines without even being prompted. Yet this is *still not* a dialogue, only mindless repetition of the things we have been saying to it over the days, weeks, months, and years. The parrot sits on our shoulder and repeats to us the thoughts and feelings we have said to it. Many of us mistake this “voice” for something real and – even worse – come to base our decisions, actions, attitudes, and interactions with the others in our life on this so called “reality.” This is very dangerous.

So, what do you say to your parrot? After an encounter with another that began with a pinch moment, a very specific moment-in-time that was not comfortable, our parrot talk usually begins. It might sound something like:

*“Can you believe that?! What a & *^%#! To speak to me like that at a meeting!”*

or

“I can’t believe I didn’t put him in his place. I should have told him where to get off! Next time I’m going to...”

or

*“Sh**! I am so stupid! I can’t ever get anything right. And now she’s mad at me!”*

Over time, the parrot takes over. Our mind, with all its fears, projections, and insecurities continually reinforced, begins to have its way with us. We are no longer in control. The parrot is controlling us. Its dialogue may not be real, but its consequences will be.

So what can we do? We must work at mindfulness. We must explore our thoughts and feelings but without always taking them utterly seriously. You have heard the expression, “Don’t believe everything you hear.” When it comes to our parrot, we must remember instead, *“Don’t believe everything you think!”* We must approach ourselves with compassion and humour, seeing our parrot for what it is, an interesting companion to be sure, but ultimately just a funny little bird that does not have the wisdom to dictate our major life decisions and relationships.

CHANGING PATTERNS

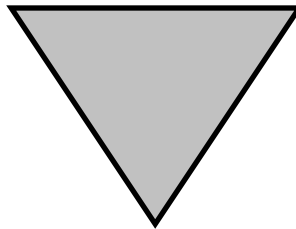
In conflict situations we often gravitate to believing that we are caught up in one of the three classic drama roles: the persecutor, the victim, or the rescuer. This simplistic role allocation provides a rather comforting clarity through which we can justify the suckers choice of sticking to silence or violence. These roles further complicate conflict in that seldom will all parties agree on who played what part. During the process of allocating blame most will justify their aggressive actions and identify the other party as being the persecutor.

Power Game Triangle¹⁰

Persecutor – I'm ok, you're not!

Blame: others are wrong and at fault

Approach: Assertive and Aggressive reporting, to get wants/needs met and to protect against my fears



Rescuer: I'm ok, others are not

Blame: others who need
Approach: advising
comforting, challenging

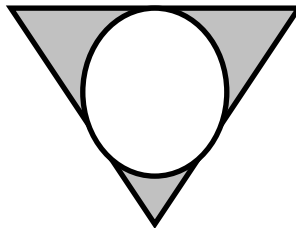
Victim – I'm not ok.

Blame: self and others – poor me – bad they

Approach: avoidance,
powerless, passive aggression

Discovery Triangle

Teaching: I have information could benefit myself and my relationships if I share it well



Facilitating/Coaching: I can be a resource to others around me by helping them prepare for and engage in difficult conversations with each other.

Learning: Even the most difficult situations offer the opportunity for new learning. Learning can build my confidence, competence, relationships and resiliency

¹⁰ Adapted from (1989) *Everyone can win: How to resolve conflict.* Simon Schuster.

SHIFTING FROM VICTIM TO LEARNER

Adapted from The Myth of Stress, Andrew Bernstein 2010

Step #1: Write a concise sentence describing something that you experience as stressful/disempowering. It is helpful to use the words “should or shouldn’t in your sentence. For example “They **should** listen to me”

Step #2: How strongly do you feel this belief to be true?

(weaker) 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10 (stronger)

Step #3: How do you feel when you believe this?

Circle all that apply and/or add your own

afraid, abandoned, angry, annoyed, anxious, confused, depressed, desperate, embarrassed, frustrated, helpful, hopeless, hurt, impatient, inadequate, insecure, invisible, jealous, nervous, rejected, resentful, tense, upset, worried,

Step #4: How do you act when you feel this way?

Circle all that apply and/or add your own

argue, belittle, blame, bully, complain, cry, drink, eat, escape, light, find fault with, give up, gossip, insult, interrupt, lose sleep, manipulate, obsess, overwork, pity myself, preach, pretend, procrastinate, shop, shut down, smoke, suffer, withdraw, yell,

Step #5:

Write the negation of your statement from Step #1. In most cases it is helpful to add “In reality” at the beginning and “at this time” or “at that time” at the end.

For example: “In reality they should not listen to me at this time.”

Step #6a:

Write below all the proof you can find that support this new statement (belief) as being truly the reality at this time (or in the past). Take your time

-
-
-
-
-

Step #6b:

Read what you found out loud to yourself. Is there any more evidence that supports this new statement as being really true at this time?

-
-

Step #7:

How do you feel when you see the truth of this new statement?
Circle all that apply and/or add your own

Calm, clear, compassionate, connected, curious, enlightened, enthusiastic, excited, free, grateful, honest, humble, intimate, light, loving, optimistic, peaceful, playful, relaxed, relieved, serene, supportive, tolerant, truthful, understanding

Step #8: What actions might come from this new perspective?

Circle all that apply and/or add your own

Accept, apologize, approach, be honest, breathe, clarify, communicate, contribute, delegate, engage, exercise, explore, focus, follow through, forgive, give thanks, listen, make amends, network, open up, participate, prioritize, reach out share, speak up, support

Step #9:

Read your original statement from step #1 again, How strongly do you feel this belief to be true now?

(weaker) 0 – 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10 (stronger)

THE THREE CONVERSATIONS¹¹

In a difficult conversation, there is an underlying structure of what is going on and understanding this structure is important in dealing with interpersonal conflicts. Regardless of what the conflict is about, our thoughts and feelings fall into three categories: the what happened conversation, the feeling conversation and the identity conversation.

1. What Happened or should have happened (Action & Expectations)

Who said what / Who forgot to say what
Who did what / Who didn't do what

Difficult conversations are almost never about getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values.

Difficult conversations are not about:

- What the letter states, they are about what the letter means
- What teaching practice is most popular but what practice we should follow
- What is true, but what is important

Three typical stories

- I. My story (blames you)
- II. Your story (blames me)
- III. Third story (blames no one – observation without evaluation)

Exploring each other's stories

- Avoid arguing: arguing is a sign that you believe you are right and they are wrong
- Arguing happens when we are unable to separate the person from the problem. We think in terms of; they're selfish, naïve, controlling, irresponsible. When we think in these terms we try (argue) to change them. (Here is what you need to do to be more responsible.)
- Telling someone to change makes it less likely that they will change. People seldom change without first being understood.

¹¹ Adapted from: *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most.* (2000). Stone, Patton, Heen. Penguin Putnam Inc.

2. The Feelings Conversation (Effect)

Unexpressed feelings:

- Leak into the conversation
- Burst into the conversation
- Make it difficult to listen
- Impact the relationship and our self-esteem

Two rules:

1. Try to get everything you are feeling into the conversation
 - Be tentative: preface your expression with an admission you are uncomfortable, unsure...
 - Express the full spectrum of your feelings. Instead of "I am angry", try "I am confused, angry and upset."
 - Model: listen and validate their feelings.
2. Before saying what you are feeling, negotiate with your feelings
 - recognizing that our feelings are formed by our thoughts.
 - our thoughts are formed by our story
 - do not share your feelings too soon
First, clarify assumptions about intentions (theirs and yours)
Second, share contribution (theirs and yours)

3. The Identity Conversation (may be the most subtle and challenging)

- Allows us to better manage our anxiety and be more effective in the other two conversations
- Looks inward: who we are and what we are about.
- How what happens affect my self esteem, my self image
- What am saying to myself about me (what am I hiding from myself)
- The more difficult the conversation the more likely it is about you

Core identities:

1. I am competent; threatened by being questioned, doubted, mistrusted,
2. I am a good person; threatened by being accused of hurting others, breaking the rules, lacking integrity
3. I am worthy of love; threatened by feeling of rejection, and being disliked,
4. My vote/voice counts; threatened by being ignored, loss or lack of power, being patronized, culture of futility/cynicism (Dilbert syndrome)

Clinging to a purely positive identity leaves no place for critical feedback and personal growth.

Managing the identity conversation

1. Become aware of the identity issues that apply to you
2. Integrate new information into your identity to let go of all or nothing.

Letting go of the all or nothing dilemma

Admit: I am NOT perfect

Affirm: I am NOT worthless

Acknowledge: your contribution, the impact of your actions

Affirm: your intentions, strengths

“CONFLICT GOALS”

What do we need?

What are we trying to get?

TOPIC GOALS

What is the substantive resource or thing that we want?

- Increase in salary?
- Holidays in July?
- A parking spot?

RELATIONAL GOALS

Who are we to each other?

- Are we looking for fairness in the relationship?
- Respect?
- Trust?

IDENTITY & FACE SAVING GOALS

Who am I in this interaction?

- How do I want to be seen, by others?
- By myself?

PROCESS GOALS

How are we going to work this out?

- What’s the best way to deal with this situation

HARRY & HARRIET

(How “Conflict Goals” often play out...)

Harriet: The garbage under the sink is beginning to smell...

Harry: So, why are you telling me?

Harriet: It’s your job to take out the garbage.

Harry: I took it out the last time. Now it’s your turn...

Harriet: Harry, you **never** lift a finger in the kitchen. The least your laziness can do is take out the garbage.

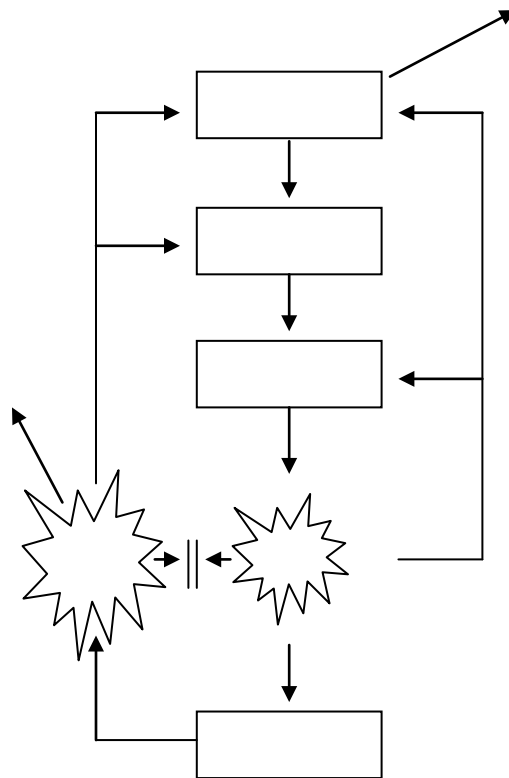
Harry: Lazy! That’s ridiculous. I do plenty around here. I’m tired of **always** being accused of not pulling my weight.

Harriet: Alright, just forget it. It’s too late, and we’re both too tired to get into this now.

Harry: Oh no you don’t. You started it, and now we’re gonna finish it.

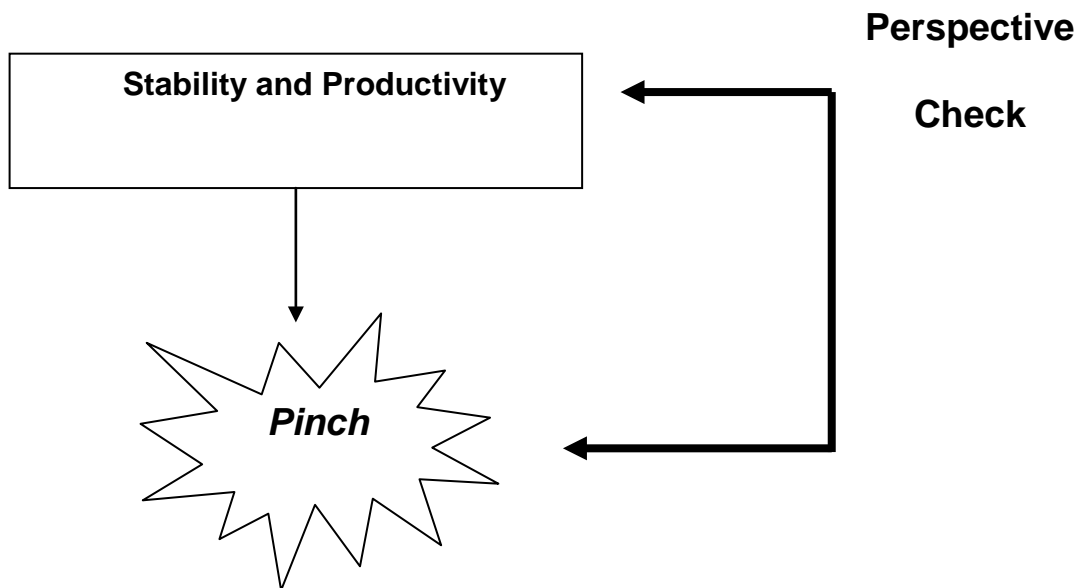
THREE METHODS FOR ADDRESSING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Perspective Checks
Apologies
Problem Solving



MODEL #1 – CLEARING UP MISUNDERSTANDINGS: The Perspective Check

The perspective check is a proactive, conflict-prevention response in which the person who has experienced a pinch takes the initiative to approach the person whose actions caused the pinch, with the intention of seeking clarity. This approach, when done well, can surface and clear up misunderstandings, provide an opportunity for others to recover from their mistakes or identify disagreements that will require a broader problem-solving conversation.

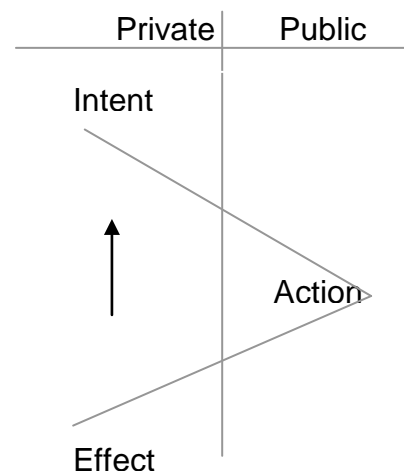


A useful variation of the perspective check is for the one who may have accidentally caused a pinch to check in with the other party, to see if his/her message was interpreted as intended.

THE PERSPECTIVE CHECK IN BRIEF **Applying Intent-Action-Effect**

When you have been PINCHED:

- Get Grounded & Check-in
- Name the ACTION (neutrally)
- Ask about the other party's INTENT
- Listen and convey understanding. (Use paraphrasing)
- If appropriate, share the EFFECT the action had on you.



When you think you may have CAUSED A PINCH:

- Check in.
- Name your ACTION that you want to check out.
- If appropriate, without evaluation, name the response you observed.
- Ask about the EFFECT on the other party.
- Listen and convey understanding
- Acknowledge and apologize for the negative impact.
- Describe your INTENT.

PERSPECTIVE CHECK MODEL IN DETAIL

1. Preparation

- Observe the behaviour.
- Identify assumptions (parrot talk).
- Suspend assumptions (judgement) about the person's intent.
- Become curious. What do you know? What don't you know?
- Get grounded. Breathe, become calm and wait until your emotions have gone to neutral.
- Determine how you will respond.

2. The Conversation

A. Check in

- See if this is a good time to talk.
- Briefly contextualize the conversation.
- Keep it light and easy.

Do you have a minute? I want to check something out.

I've been thinking about the meeting yesterday and want to touch base on something that happened.

B. Name the action. Use observation without evaluation.

To use a perspective check effectively one must develop the art of naming without evaluation, actions that one finds objectionable. This can be much more challenging than it first appears. Evaluative words seem to be the first things that come to our mind when we experience a pinch. Using evaluative language suggests a judgement of the other person's intentions. This invariably triggers defensiveness, which undermines the purpose of the perspective check.

Common Pitfalls

1. Inferring negative intent (interpreting).

Why do you put people down? You are trying to show me up.

2. Exaggerating frequency.

using terms like *"too much," "often," "all the time," "always," "never"*

3. Drawing negative conclusions (assumptions).

"You are critical," "want power," "don't think I can do my job, "just jealous," "resentful that I won the competition."

4. Blaming.

"You are" instead of "you did."

5. Not specific:

You were so rude with what you said yesterday.

6. Using too many words.

Tips:

- Try to describe the behaviour the way a security camera would record it.
- Use language like “I saw” or “I heard” instead of “I think” or “I felt.”
- Be brief. Describe the event in one or two sentences.
- If it is a pattern of behaviour, describe it using one recent example.

A one-time event:

- *Yesterday at the meeting, you stated that this project was “not my best piece of work.”*
- *You did not respond to the voice mail I left yesterday.*
- *The email you sent yesterday, reminding me of Friday’s deadline, was cc’d to my boss.*

A repeating event:

- *I did not receive a response to my email in the requested time frame. I have noticed that this has happened a few times recently.*
- *You were late from lunch today and I noticed that this has happened two other times in the last two weeks.*
- *You interrupted Marion several times during yesterday’s meeting. I have noticed that this has been occurring during the last number of meetings whenever we start talking about the HART project.*

Exercise: Re-write the following sentences, separating observation from evaluation.

1. *Ed, you are always criticising me in public!*

2. *Mary, you deliberately misled the group. That is not what happened!*

3. *You give David preferential treatment.*

Application: Review your response to the first case study (What did they do that was not helpful?). Re-name this action without evaluation. Take another personal example and describe the offending action without evaluation.

C. Ask a question about the person's intention.

Ask a brief, open-ended, one sentence question. The goal is for the other person to feel comfortable in helping you understand his/her intentions.

I was curious why you chose a team meeting to point this out to me?
I was wondering what you meant by that comment?

Common Pitfalls:

- 1. Accusations or blame.** It is important that your question is delivered in a way that clearly communicates your genuine desire to understand the other's intent. The word "why" must be used very carefully since it is easy for "Why" questions to be constructed in a ways that imply judgement. This usually triggers a defensive response as the other person seeks to justify his/her actions and defend him/herself.

I was wondering why you are picking on me? (accusation/blame)
Why did you embarrass me during the team meeting? (accusation)

- 2. Closed-ended questions** are also unhelpful as they also tend to trap the other person in a corner where he/she can only either retreat or escalate.

Are you suggesting that my design is poor?
Do you think I am not pulling my weight?

NOTE:

If the person disclosing his/her intention clarifies the situation and the explanation is plausible, let it go. This may be a good time to privately reflect on why you experienced the behaviour as a pinch. Pinches can often tell us more about ourselves than about the person who has pinched us. For example, I may experience a pinch from a colleague due to unresolved issues from my previous workplace.

D. Listen and Convey Understanding

You will need to provide space for the person to respond to your question.

It is important to actually convey that you are listening by using paraphrasing or by summarizing what you have heard. This will help you break your mental arguing pattern and demonstrate your commitment to hearing the other person.

Depending on his/her response, you may want to consider one of the following:

The pincher responds to the perspective check by...	The pinched, in turn, responds by...
1. clarifying a misunderstanding. <i>Oh no, what I meant was...</i>	1. thanking the person and letting it go. <i>I appreciate your response, thanks.</i>
2. taking responsibility and apologizing. <i>I'm sorry, that didn't come out very well. I'm under a lot of stress these days. I was not upset with you.</i>	2. thanking the person and letting it go. <i>Thanks, that clarification is helpful.</i>
3. sharing his/her intent and revealing surprise at the negative impact of his/her actions.	3. sharing an alternative action or clarifying needs and expectations.
4. becoming defensive by minimizing, justifying the impact of their behaviour, or back-pedaling.	4. sharing the impact of their action, then pausing. If necessary, sharing a preferred action.
5. revealing or clarifying a disagreement.	5. negotiating, using interests to meet as many expectations as possible.
6. blaming you and/or revealing how your words or actions have pinched him/her.	6. shifting to listening and problem-solving model.
7. becoming defensive and angry beyond your personal comfort zone.	7. using the exit strategy to end the conversation.

PERSPECTIVE CHECK SENTENCE STARTERS

Begin with what happened (facts):

- When we were talking, you said...
- I noticed that you did...
- Four times during the past week you have...
- I heard you mention...

Ask about their intention:

- I'm wondering what you meant by that?
- What was going on for you?
- I'm curious what that meant to you?
- Where was your thinking at during that moment?
- I didn't now how to understand that, could you share with me what you were thinking?
- What were you hoping I would take away from that?
- What did you mean?
- What was your intention?

Convey listening?

- So you meant...
- Oh, so you intended...
- You were hoping that...
- Okay, that's clearer to me know.

Share Effect (if helpful)

- Here's how I made sense of it...
- Here is how I was impacted...
- I felt _____ when _____ because _____

YOU DON'T GET IT: SHARING IMPACT

If the response to your perspective check suggests confusion about what you are communicating, or a lack of understanding that the person's action was not appreciated, it may be helpful to identify the impact. The primary purpose of sharing impact is to help the other person understand how and why his/her behaviour affects you the way it does. It is up to you how vulnerable or deep you will be about sharing the reason for the negative impact. It is important to remember that **how you interpret others' behaviour is primarily a result of your personal expectations, interests, beliefs, values, fears and anxieties.**

To share impact effectively, it is helpful to use the three components of the classic assertion technique called the "I message"¹²:

- **When** (describe specific behaviour)
- **I feel/get** (state impact)
- **Because** (name interests, unmet expectations or needs...)

The **WHEN** element helps separate the person from the problem. This is extremely important for keeping the discussion in a clarifying/problem-solving mode rather than fight mode. It lets the other person know what particular action is problematic for us. This helps keep the conversation focused and reduces the chances of eliciting a defensive response. *NOTE: If you have already done a perspective check you have already articulated the "when."*

Perspective check: *Hey Tony, I missed you at yesterday's presentation. What happened?*

Tony's response: *Oh things just got busy and I couldn't make it – sorry.* (Minimization)

The **I FEEL** component clearly makes public the impact a person's actions have had on you. This is important because it acknowledges and clarifies your own experience in a way that is not blaming or judging the other person.

Instead of an accusatory: *You are so irresponsible! Do you have any idea what you put me through?*

Be descriptive: *When you didn't show up I felt both anxious and angry.*

¹² Virginia Coover et al., *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1977), 92-3.
Resolution Skills Centre, Winnipeg, Canada 42 When Conflict Gets Personal: Moving from Theory to Reality

The **BECAUSE** explains the unmet expectations, interests and needs that are the reason why we felt pinched by the other's action. To share this component effectively requires significant self-awareness and is therefore often ignored in the heat of the moment. It is however, crucial to understand and share the "because" as it is this part of the message that reveals our expectations, interests and beliefs which may:

1. help the other party understand why his/her behaviour did not work for you and may help him/her to take you seriously and become more mindful of his/her behaviour.
2. assist in clarifying where your expectations and assumptions are in disagreement. This information can help you to either let go of the issue knowing that the actions are not personally malicious or it can assist you in transitioning to a problem-solving conversation to address these differences.

Be explanatory: *When you didn't show up I felt both anxious and angry because I was not sure if I was going to have to cover your part of the presentation, or if you were going to show up or if you were even alright. As a result I did not provide the quality of presentation I believe our clients expect us to deliver.*

PAUSE. After sharing impact it is good to pause to provide the other person with an opportunity to respond. During this pause they may respond with an apology, an explanation or with any of the other options outlined on the response chart.

Sharing Impact Examples:

- *I'm not sure that you noticed, but I was embarrassed by the comment. I knew it was not great work, which is why I had called it "working notes" and not a "draft."*
- *When you are late others need to answer your calls and it can put everyone behind.*
- *When you interrupt others at meetings they tend to stop contributing ideas.*

USE WITH CAUTION:

It is important to note that when using a perspective check most people will be able to determine very quickly that your question suggests that their behaviour was problematic for you. If people do understand this and you continue by describing why their action was problematic (sharing impact) it generally results in people moving from feeling awkward or badly to experiencing shame and ultimately what is commonly referred to as "losing face." You need to remember that a perspective check conversation for most people will be experienced as a pinch in itself. Going into more detail than is necessary will add a second pinch, this time more intense and uncomfortable. If this happens you could be experienced as being insensitive and possibly disrespectful, which is the last thing you need.

REQUESTING AN ALTERNATIVE ACTION

When doing a perspective check it is sometimes helpful to identify an alternative action that you would prefer the other person to do in the future. This is particularly important if it is not obvious what you need to be different in order not to feel pinched. It is also a helpful technique to use when you are “muscling up” and need to set clear expectations and boundaries. When used too frequently, this response can come across as being controlling and/or condescending.

What if you believe the other’s intent is positive?

When you believe that the other person means well, though he/she is doing things that are causing you or others to be uncomfortable you may respond by:

1. Naming the action.
2. Acknowledging positive intent.
3. Naming the impact.
4. Asking for a specific, alternative action in the future, or discussing another way the person can achieve his/her intent without a negative impact on you.

Jim to Mary: I appreciate the critique you give me on my work. I know you want the best product possible. I’m beginning to feel overwhelmed by the number of corrections and suggestions you are providing and I need some feedback on what I’m doing well.

Tony to Cal: I need your feedback and appreciate your candidness in telling me where I can improve. I know you didn’t mean to embarrass me at the team meeting, but I was embarrassed when you said my work “wasn’t up to it’s usual standard.” I’m wondering if in the future you can tell me these things in private?

If you are unsure the intent is positive:

1. The person backpedals and is clearly uncomfortable with the conversation.

This can often sound like an “I didn’t mean anything by it” comment. Given that you have simply asked about the person’s intention in an action, this often means that there is more than you bargained for and that the person is not prepared to talk about it. In these situations it can be helpful to take his/her stated intent (denial) at face value, state clearly the effect and request alternative action you would prefer in the future. It is also helpful to leave the door open for a future conversation.

Tony to Cal: Good to hear you didn’t mean anything by that. I was simply wondering if there was something we needed to talk about, as I felt uncomfortable by the public nature of your comment. In the future I would appreciate it if you would make those types of suggestions to me in private. You also need to know that if there ever is anything about our work relationship that is not working for you, I am very willing to talk about it.

2. The person becomes defensive and justifies his/her action.

In this situation it is often helpful to thank the person for his/her intent, share very briefly the impact of the action and request a different action in the future.

Jim to Mary: I'm relieved to hear that you think I'm doing good work. I was beginning to believe that you thought I was not performing adequately. I'm wondering if in the future you could also let me know what I am doing well?

The first time one uses this strategy it would be important to just say it concisely, one time. Only when the behaviour does not change do you need to consider muscling up further.

SHARING YOUR PERSPECTIVE EXERCISE

1. What have I said to the other person so far?
2. How have I shared this information (words, tone, body language, time and location)
3. What important things have I not shared with her/him? (needs, feelings, impact of the behaviour, intentions, hopes....)
4. How can I say what is important to me without making things worse?
5. Choose one pinch from your case study and work out the elements of an “I” statement for it.

When you _____

I (feel / become / get / react) _____

Because _____

Alternative Action _____

SO I STARTED IT? DEALING WITH ACCUSATIONS

We can be hit with an accusation either out of the blue or in response to a perspective check that we have initiated. When this happens the natural response for most of us is to assume a defensive posture. Unfortunately, this only produces an unproductive cycle of attack, defend and counter-attack that often continues until one party feels shut down. Paraphrasing is an effective way to break out of the futility of this cycle and transition into the Problem-Solving Model.

If the accusation occurs in response to a perspective check, you can temporarily set aside your concern and shift into a listening posture to get the other person to talk about his/her concerns. According to the Problem-Solving Model, the initiator would re-introduce his/her agenda later on in the conversation. If it is not the right time or place for a fuller problem-solving conversation, you may wish to end the exchange by agreeing on when you will take time to talk through your concerns.

Paraphrasing

When paraphrasing effectively you are:

- **genuinely** trying to **understand** the other person's perspective,
- attempting to **capture the essence** of what the person has said – both **facts** and **feelings**,
- **using your own words** to check out your understanding,
- focusing on the other person “so **you**” and not on yourself “so what **I** hear you saying is...” and
- being as **brief** as possible.

Paraphrasing can help you to:

- create a collaborative tone in the conversation,
- shift the energy from “accuse and defend” to “discuss and resolve,”
- check to make sure you understand the speaker's intent,
- allow the speaker to correct you if you have misunderstood something,
- avoid thinking of your own response while another person is talking,
- convey to the speaker that you are interested in him/her and what she/he has to say, and
- clarify information.

In response to Jim accusing Mary of being ineffective and micro-managing, Mary might say: *So you're finding my feedback really unhelpful and frustrating.*

Effective paraphrases are often best followed by an open-ended question to probe for more specific information such as the other person's interests, or in Mary's case, to discover what it is about her feedback that makes it unhelpful and frustrating.

SOME PARAPHRASING PITFALLS

Overusing (hiding behind) paraphrasing.

If you overuse paraphrasing without taking a turn at sharing your own perspective you create an imbalance in the reciprocal nature of a good discussion. This imbalance is exacerbated if the body language of the one overusing the paraphrase response is indicating that they are disinterested or annoyed. If Mary only paraphrased Jim, Jim could easily start to feel increasingly pinched and respond with increased anger.

Reading too much into what the person says.

Statement:

No, no, no! This is not working. I really do not get what you are trying to say here in your article.

Paraphrase:

So you don't think that I know what I'm talking about.

Improved Paraphrase:

So you're finding this section unclear.

Stating back word for word what the person says – “parroting.”

Statement:

You can't shovel your snow all over my walkway anymore. One of these days I am going to slip and break my neck!

Paraphrase:

So, you're saying I can't shovel my snow over your walkway anymore because one of these days you're going to slip and break your neck?

Improved Paraphrase:

You're really fed up with the snow ending up on your walkway.

Stating the paraphrase as a solution.

Statement:

I am so fed up with my partner; I'm not gonna put up with his crap any longer!

Paraphrase:

You're really frustrated with him and you're thinking of ending things.

Improved Paraphrase:

So you're at the point where you need to see some change.

QUESTIONS: A MORE OPEN APPROACH

Moving from Judgement to Curiosity

In collaborative forms of conflict resolution, questioning is used to probe for information and is **not** used in the sense of a cross-examination—to prove a point, to demolish an argument, or to force compliance. As with any technique, there are helpful and unhelpful ways to use questions when your goal is an outcome that all parties can live with and live up to. Many of us have a tendency in conversations to assume that we understand what the other party means so we often move on without checking for accuracy. The risk is that we do not understand. This risk increases dramatically under the pressure of conflict. Questioning can help clarify your assumptions, thereby reducing this risk.

Questions may be divided into six types:

Why questions can draw out important information. On the other hand, depending on the tone, why questions often have the impact of challenging, blaming or calling upon the other person to justify or defend his/her actions or position. Many “*why*” questions are intended to prove wrong-doing. For example, “*Why would anyone do it that way?*”

Leading questions are really disguised statements. The speaker attempts to express his/her opinion through a question. For example, “*Don’t you think it would be better to approach him before the meeting, rather than surprise him?*”

Multiple questions are defined as asking two or more questions immediately following one another without adequate time for response. This is often confusing for the respondent because s/he has trouble focusing on what is being asked. For example, “*Where were you last night? When did you get home? Were you drinking? What about your homework? What’s the matter with you?*”

Close-ended questions invite a one-word or two-word answer only, “*Did you or did you not commit to getting a full draft ready for this meeting?*” The possible responses are often limited to yes or no. Closed questions narrow the amount of information that is given and tend to increase the sense of pressure and hostility in the situation.

Assumptive closure questions give the expected answer in the question. “*This is a pretty basic question, isn’t it?*”

Open-ended questions invite a longer response. They give the other person a choice of how to respond. Open questions are particularly critical when attempting to make use of the Perspective Check.

In the context of a perspective check or problem-solving conversation, open-ended or “high-yield” questions can be used for:

Clarification—to pull out specifics.

- *“Would you please explain what you meant when you said...?”*
- *“I’m not sure I understand how my decision affected you at the time. Could you please say more?”*

Information Seeking—to get more information about perceptions, feelings, or thoughts.

- *“What was going on for you when you opened the door?”*
- *“So, help me understand how my going past deadlines has been impacting on you and your job?”*
- *“How’d that leave you feeling?”*

Explaining—to look at underlying motives.

- *“How does that tie in to the issue of the feedback?”*
- *“Tell me more about what you were hoping for when you spoke up at the team meeting...”*

Reality Checking—to examine options realistically.

- *“Where do you see this going next if we do not resolve this matter between us?”*
- *“Who else has to be involved in our decision to re-work the drafting process in order to get buy-in?”*

Interests—to move from positions to underlying needs and fears.

- *“What do you need from me the next time this comes up?”*
- *“What are you afraid will happen if you don’t get that?”*
- *“What are you hoping will happen if you get what you’re asking for?”*
- *“In what way would that make the situation better?”*
- *“What would it do for you to get that?”*
- *“How does this tie in with your values?”*
- *“What is most important to you about that?”*

Brainstorming—to look for possible solutions or “tweaks” so as to return to stability and productivity.

- *“What are possible ways we can work this differently going forward?”*
- *“What should I do next time when I see I may miss an upcoming deadline?”*
- *“So, what would be more helpful for you to see on the page the next time I’m giving you written feedback?”*
- *“What are some other ways that this situation can be handled?”*
- *“Given the concerns we’ve just discussed, what are some options that might go some way to meeting both our needs?”*

PARAPHRASING AND OPEN-ENDED QUESTION PRACTICE

Paraphrasing and open-ended questions are core skills when responding to accusations and or working through a problem-solving conversation.

Please write a paraphrase and an open-ended question for the following statements:

1. KERRY (employee) to TOM (supervisor):

Yeah I didn't call in. And, yeah, I didn't show up. But – YOU messed up here too, Tom! I asked for time off four and a half weeks ago...and you couldn't even be bothered with a very important request. This could have been worked out a long time ago, but you didn't care.

Paraphrase:

Open-ended question:

2. LOUISE to SANDY (colleagues):

Louise, the reality is that you often don't have things quite ready or quite finished, and I'm the one who has to pick up the slack! For example, that safety document you created was full of errors that I had to correct, remember? You were on vacation, so I had to put aside all my other stuff just to get the document readable by the deadline.

Paraphrase:

Open-ended question:

3. MICHAEL to SAMANTHA (peers):

Listen, I'm not asking for the world here. What I'm telling you is that my department head is breathing down my neck and needs this project today and there's going to be hell to pay if he doesn't get it. So if you want to play "it's not my job," then fine. Next time you're in a tough spot with your boss, I'll be sure to remember this moment and return the favour.

Paraphrase:

Open-ended question:

SO WE DISAGREE: SHIFTING TO PROBLEM SOLVING

In some cases a perspective check and the paraphrasing and questions that follow uncover significant disagreement in expectations between the two parties. In these cases it is helpful to:

1. Clarify and acknowledge the difference in expectations.
2. Clarify whether resolving this disagreement is needed or if the differences can co-exist.
3. Confirm that all participants have the time and ability to continue with a problem-solving conversation at the present moment or schedule a time to pick up the conversation using the problem-solving process.

NOTE: Sometimes, to resolve conflicting expectations, others (specifically those in leadership roles) will need to be involved to clarify what is expected or to articulate the industry standard.

TOO HOT? THE EXIT STRATEGY

In most cases a perspective check will lead to a helpful, clarifying conversation; however, in a few situations it may open up something more than you are ready for. It is important to know how to exit a conversation effectively in situations where the other person's response becomes too emotionally intense or complicated for the time and energy that you have available. To get out of these situations respectfully it is important to communicate three things clearly and concisely:

- 1. Your need to end the conversation at this time.**
- 2. Your reason for ending the conversation.** Own the reason, don't blame the other party.
- 3. Your commitment to carry on the conversation at a later time.**

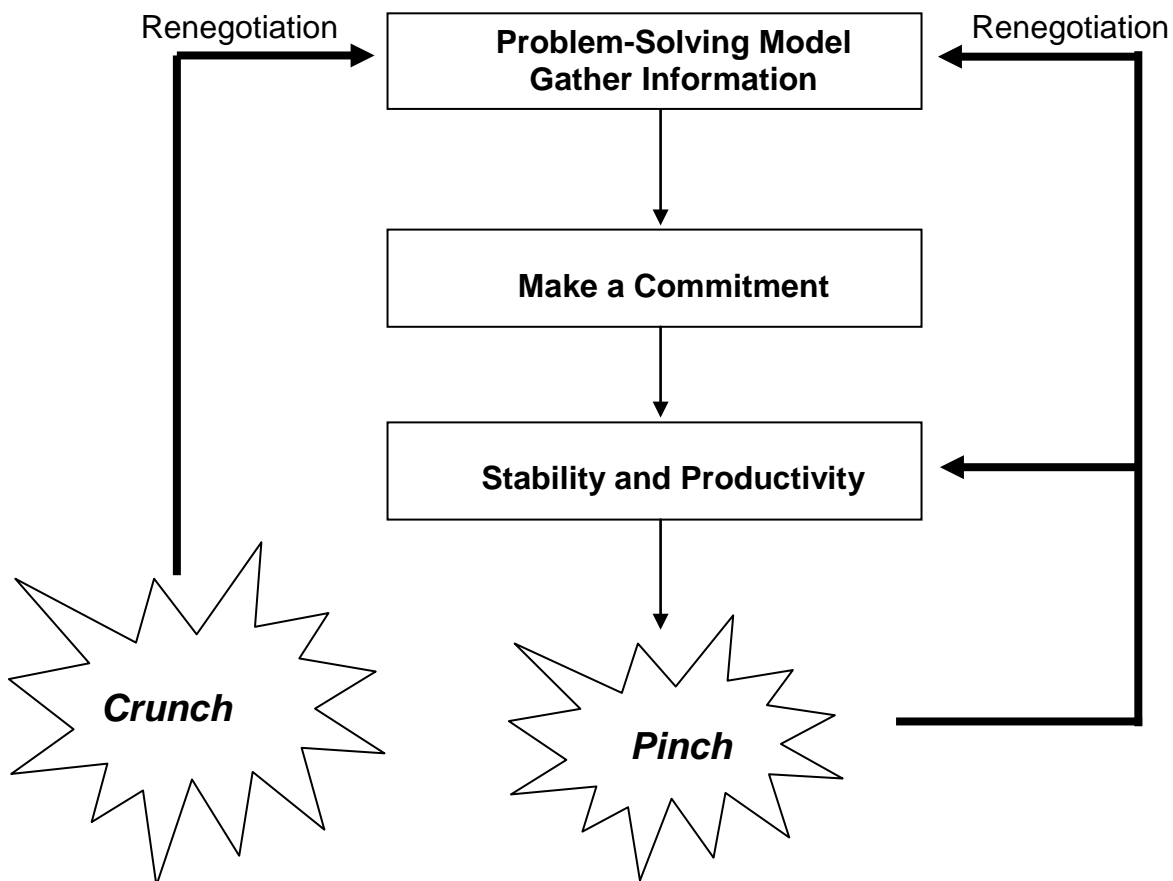
Generally, the more specific you can be, the better.

Wow, this issue is obviously much larger than I had assumed. I am a little overwhelmed right now and need a break to digest what you have shared. I would like to pick this up later on today, say at 3:30?

MODEL #2 – RESOLVING DISAGREEMENTS

When either a perspective check reveals a disagreement or when several crunch experiences have already occurred, a longer and more in-depth problem-solving conversation is usually required for people to be able to recover from the past and to create clear and shared expectations on how they will interact with each other in the future. While appearing simple at the surface, it is important not to underestimate the difficulty of effectively managing a problem-solving conversation when there has been an accumulation of negative history between the parties.

A problem-solving process can be initiated either from the pinch after a perspective check has revealed a disagreement or after a crunch where a longer conversation will be required to resolve outstanding issue(s) and/or unpack a number of preceding events.



A PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS SUMMARY

STEP 1. Prepare

- Step back and reflect on the situation.
- Consider your own intention, interests and hopes for the conversation.
- Reflect on ways you may have contributed to the situation.

STEP 2. Start Positively

- Invite the other person to a conversation
- Share you positive intent or hope for the conversation
- Describe what you want to talk about (neutrally)
- If you are aware of your contribution, take 100% responsibility for it.

STEP 3. Sharing Perspectives & Resolve Issues (using Intent/Action/Effect)

Their Issues

- Invite them to start by sharing a concern
- Convey understanding – use paraphrasing and summarizing
- Share your intent – briefly (if relevant).
- Acknowledge your responsibility.
- Reflect together on what could be different in the future
- Ask, “Is there anything else?” If Yes, Repeat the above issues.

Your Issues

- Describe your perspective of the situation, including both what your concerns are and, if appropriate, how you feel about the situation. Be specific.
- Invite them to share their intent
- Convey understanding – use paraphrasing and summarizing
- If relevant acknowledge your responsibility.

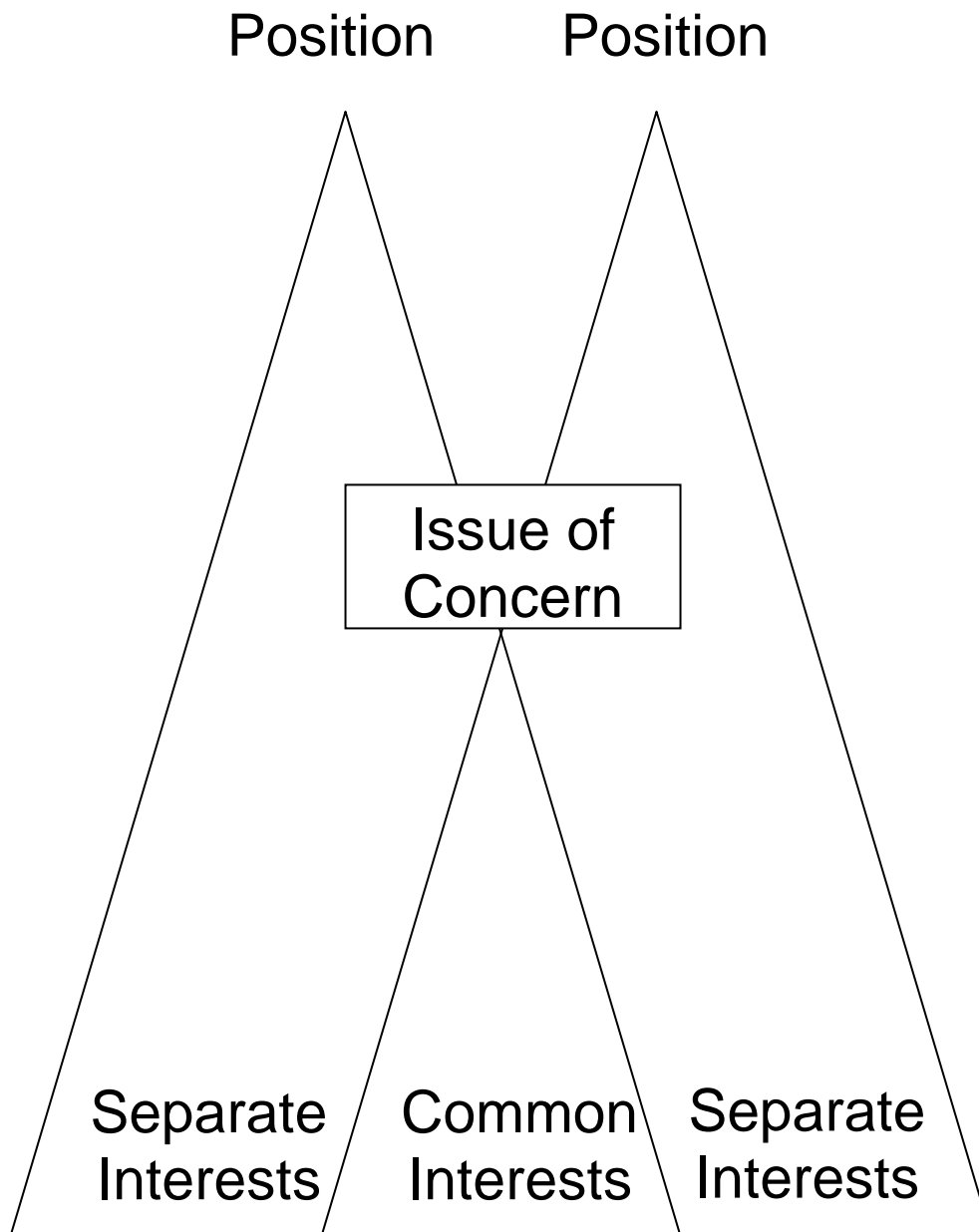
STEP 4. Summarize Agreements

- Summarize and clarify agreements.
- Be positive and hopeful
- Identify next steps (i.e. send summary email, meet again in a week....)
- Thank them

STEP 5. Follow Up

- Check in with the person to see how things

For more information on the skills required for the Problem-Solving Process, please check out the following courses: High-Stakes Conversations, Transforming the Argument, and Assertive Communication.



While a judgmental reaction to another's position often leads to gridlock and frustration, a curious attitude allows us to uncover both the issue and interest(s) from which the other person's position stems.

POSITIONS AND INTERESTS¹³

“What is surface conflict, jagged peaks of icebergs facing off with each other, beneath may be joined when we have eyes to see.”
Tilden Edwards

One of the keys to conflict resolution, especially in a complex situation, is the identification of the **interests** of each party. Shifting from **positions** to **interests** is crucial for working toward creative solutions that will work for each person in the conflict.

Position:

- A person’s position is her/his solution to the issue.
- The reason people are in conflict is because the positions they hold address only their own needs.

People can get locked into their positions, which is often referred to as “becoming positional.” Common motives for becoming positional are the desire to be taken seriously, fear, revenge, and expectations. Becoming positional can also be our historical pattern of reacting to conflict. In making the shift from positions to interests, it may be necessary to first acknowledge the position and then address the underlying issues.

Issue of Concern:

The issue is the general topic of the disagreement. It is helpful to name the issue in language that both parties acknowledge is the issue prior to probing for interests. This usually enables a more efficient identification of the underlying interests. If you do not identify the issues, you run the risk of receiving justifications for the other party’s position instead of their deeper interests.

Interests:

- Interests are the underlying wants, needs, fears, hopes, and concerns that motivate us to hold our positions. Interests reflect and are shaped by our values and priorities.

Discovering and stating interests allows each person in a conflict to understand what will be needed to create a mutually acceptable and lasting resolution. When people are able to express their interests they also may discover that they share many more values and concerns than they assumed and are subsequently less likely to perceive one another in purely adversarial terms.

Basic human interests, which often come up in disputes, are the need for **power, approval, justice, inclusion, identity, and security**.

TIP: To discover interests it is helpful to use open-ended questions to seek to identify the issue of concern and then to understand the particular interests that make this issue important.

¹³ See Chapters 9 and 10 of Miller et al., *Connecting with Self and Others*.

APPLICATION: POSITIONS AND INTERESTS

Think of a disagreement/ unresolved issue that you are facing:

1. What is your **Position**? If it were just up to you, how would you solve this problem?
2. What is the **Issue of Concern**? Name the issue in a way that the other person would find tolerable.
3. Cover up your **Position** – Now looking **ONLY** at the **Issue of Concern** ask yourself:
 - What makes this issue important to me?
 - What are my interests regarding this issue?

My needs _____

Fears _____

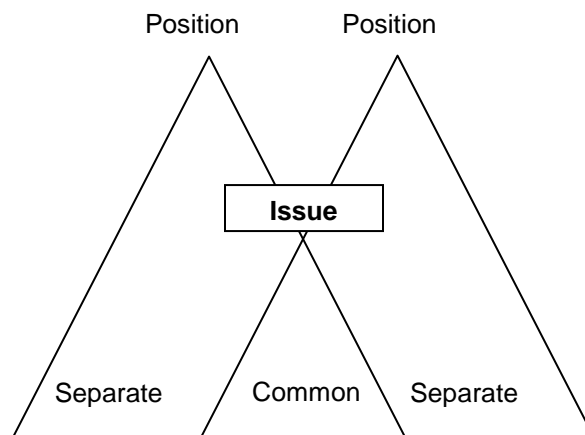
Hopes _____

Concerns _____

Values _____

Also consider:

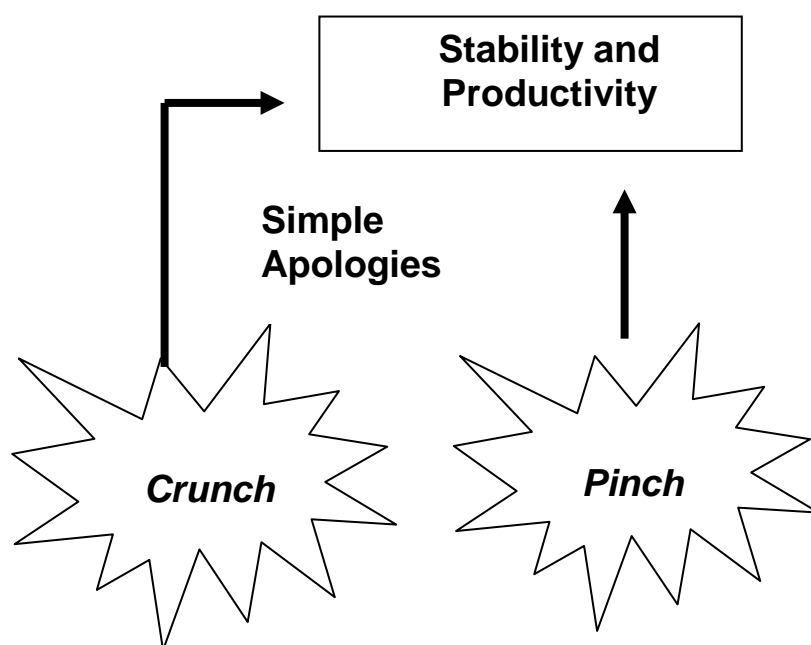
- What is the other person's position?
- Do I know what makes this issue important for him/her?
- What does he/she really need, fear, or hope for?
- How can I act in order to assure my needs are met without making the situation worse?
- If the other person was in my shoes, how would I hope he/she would approach me?



MODEL #3 – RECOVERING FROM OUR CONTRIBUTION

*The one who throws the stone forgets;
The one who is hit remembers forever.*
Angolan proverb¹⁴

Accidents happen, errors occur and we all have times when we lose our composure and act out of frustration. The bottom line is we have caused others to feel pinched and crunched. While we may desire to forget and move on, those we have negatively affected will often remember our mistakes for years, and it may lead to an escalation of tension and conflict in the future. Being able to acknowledge our responsibility effectively through the process of a well-stated apology is an essential method of ensuring that we recover from our mistakes and return to a stable and productive relationship.



Acknowledging responsibility in my case study

As you prepare to seek resolution in a conflict, consider these questions:

- What do I need to hear for me to put this incident behind me?
- What are the things I can take responsibility for?
- What can I do differently when faced with a similar situation?
- Is there a tangible action that would help us feel we are making a fresh start?

¹⁴ Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, 259.

ACKNOWLEDGING RESPONSIBILITY

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

Leo Tolstoy

Interpersonal conflicts begin when one person commits an action that leads to a negative experience for another person. The person who committed that action may or may not have intended any harm. Regardless of the intent, the person who had a negative experience can often put the conflict behind him/her if he/she receives some form of acknowledgement.

There are many ways to take responsibility. One can apologize, acknowledge harm done, make a statement of regret, express remorse, and so on. How we should take responsibility will depend on our contribution to the conflict.

Sometimes we don't believe we have contributed to the conflict in any way. We often believe that the other person “started it” and therefore should apologize first. The dilemma here is that invariably both parties believe that the other person “started it.” This justifies their retaliations (mild or severe) and creates a stalemate. Many conflicts start with someone unintentionally frustrating the other person. It escalates when that person intentionally responds in kind. People who want to resolve conflict must take responsibility for 100% of **their** part, the sooner the better.

Common elements in apologies include:

An expression of regret. This includes not only acknowledging the hurt but also expressing concern that the person is hurting. *I'm sorry that I hurt you... or I regret the impact that my behaviour had.*

Clearly naming the action. This involves clearly identifying the action that caused discomfort. Examples could include *“the way I have been giving you feedback,” “the angry tone in my voice,” “forgetting to pick you up.”*

Taking full responsibility for your behaviour. Your actions occurred in a specific context, but it is important to separate your actions from the other's behaviour. If we do not do this it will only sound like we are justifying our behaviour and continuing the debate.

Steps to prevent recurrence. If this situation has occurred before, it is important to share what you will do to work at changing your behaviour.

In some situations, a **symbolic gesture of regret** is appreciated. This could include buying flowers, taking a friend out for lunch, sending a card, etc.

It is not helpful to:

- Use the word “but” in an apology.
- Argue with the person's experience.
- Minimize the level of hurt.
- Blame the other person for your action.

TWO TYPES OF APOLOGIES¹⁵

Recovering from INTENTIONAL actions (post pinch or crunch):

You know that you did not handle the situation well and that your actions have caused harm.

Key elements:

- Listen to understand.
- Express regret for the negative impact.
- Name the action (be as specific as possible).
- Commit to alternative action in future (optional).

Pat, I am sorry for offending you at the meeting by interrupting you and saying that disrespectful comment.

Recovering from an UNINTENTIONAL offence (post pinch):

You had positive intent, but your actions caused some harm.

Key Elements:

- Listen to understand.
- Express regret for the negative impact.
- Name the action (be as specific as possible).
- Clarify positive intention (carefully).
- Re-issue statement of regret for negative impact of behaviour.
- Discuss how to interact in the future so as to avoid future pinches (optional).

Pat, I'm sorry for leaving you stranded with the kids. I need you to know that I did not hear the announcement this morning. I regret that it put you in this bind and I will make a point to listen more carefully to the announcements.

Accepting Apologies:

People who express regret need a response. Sometimes people do not respond because they are afraid that accepting the apology will exonerate the person. Silence is often experienced as an act of aggression. However, it is possible to accept an apology, and **still address** the problematic behaviour. Responses can be as simple as "Thank you" or "I appreciate your acknowledgement."

A good apology can turn a destructive response into an opportunity for growth. We recommend that before having a potentially difficult conversation, the person initiating the conversation should reflect on what his/her contribution may have been and be ready to share that insight at the appropriate time.

¹⁵ Developed by Janet P. Schmidt for Mediation Services.

REFLECTING ON YOUR CONTRIBUTION

Identify something from your case study that you need to recover from. OR
Identify a different personal experience in which someone started a conflict but you have most likely contributed something that you need to recover from.

Who do you think started it?

How do you think the other person views the situation in terms of who is responsible?

NOTE: It is common for both parties to feel that the other person threw the first punch. This often results in both individuals waiting for the other to apologize first. The only way to break an apology stalemate is for someone to take responsibility for their contribution, even if it is only a small contribution. Taking responsibility ends the waiting game, and invites the other person to do the same.

In my situation I have contributed to our difficulties in the following ways:

-
-
-

In particular I could acknowledge my contribution and apologize by saying:
(Refer to intentional and unintentional guide on the previous page)

A well-stated apology is often the doorway that opens up a larger conversation about the issues and concerns you need to see addressed.

NOTES

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EVALUATION FOR WHEN CONFLICT GETS PERSONAL

Name: _____ Organization: _____

Date: _____ Email: _____

By providing your email you are consenting to receive email from Resolution Skills Centre which will include information about upcoming courses and events as well as promotions and special offers.

1. a. I came hoping to learn:

b. What I learnt was:

c. One way I intend to put my learning into practice is:

2. I thought the pace of the workshop was:

3. I really enjoyed:

4. One thing that could make this workshop stronger is:

5. I thought the trainer was:

6. Overall, I would give this workshop a score of _____ out of 10.

7. If you're interested, please use this space to write a short testimonial or for any additional comments:

May we use your name and the information you have shared on this form in our promotional material? Y/N

BACK OF EVALUATION
DO NOT USE FOR NOTES