

Reflections

The SoL Journal
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



ISTOCKPHOTOS

FEATURE ARTICLES

Growing Knowledge Together: Using Emergent Learning and EL Maps for Better Results

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Conflict Alchemy: A Practical Paradigm for Conflict Solutions

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Learning Together for Good Decision Making

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EMERGING KNOWLEDGE

Developing High Potential Leaders with Strategy Cafés

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BOOK EXCERPT

Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change

Bill Joiner
Steve Josephs

RECOMMENDED READING

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C. Sherry Immediato

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE HAS BECOME A CATCH PHRASE FOR social processes – such as collaboration – and cooperation that allow us to realize possibilities that would otherwise remain latent. In this issue, contributors to *Reflections* offer cases studies, research, and new methods that help us name what we know from experience, therefore improving our conscious practice in bringing out the best in each other.

How do you bring great minds together around complex challenges? SoL members Marilyn Darling and Charles Parry offer a method in our first feature “Growing Knowledge Together: Using Emergent Learning and EL Maps for Better Results.” The authors have previously developed and reported on AARs (After-Action Reviews), particularly for use in non-military settings. Their experience led them to recognize that a method was needed to help groups consciously capture learning that occurred over multiple events. Emergent Learning (EL) maps offer a simple yet powerful approach to recognize patterns and come up with more systemic solutions through capturing data or results, framing hypotheses, and articulating next steps. The “map” can then be modified following the next round of action and reflection. Judy Rodgers comments.

It is hard enough to capture collective intelligence even when we think we share a common purpose. David Pauker ups the ante in “Conflict Alchemy: A Practical Paradigm for Conflict Solutions.” We can say with some certainty that the emotions stimulated by conflict do not tend to produce a high degree of collective intelligence. Pauker uses a real case to illustrate a practical method in contrast to our instinctive “fight or flight” response. Since conflict is at its essence emotional and relational, the method focuses on “containment” – creating a space for all emotions and viewpoints to be held so that new possibilities can emerge.

In our third feature article, “Learning Together for Good Decision Making,” SoL elder Arie de Geus challenges us to equate organizational learning with decision-making. He focuses in particular on how we mobilize all those needed for a successful result, particularly in non-routine circumstances when new solutions are needed for new situations. A more holistic definition of decision-making begins with recognizing that we’re in a new situation. It continues through idea generation, analysis, choice, and implementation. How do we get better at decision making and learning? By creating low-risk environments to experiment together. De Geus uses examples to illustrate that if we develop the habits of inquisitiveness and creativity (or playfulness) and use them to respond to a challenge that has no consequences, we are more likely to call on them in real situations that normally provoke fear and result in mediocre decisions.

More organizations seem to be exploring how cohorts of new leaders can be developed rather than thinking in terms of individual high potential leaders. In this issue’s contribution to the Emerging Knowledge Forum, SoL members Jim Myracle and Diane Oettinger describe a particular method using the World Café process. “Developing High Potential Leaders with Strategy Cafes” documents in detail a process for gathering cohorts of managers to discuss their organization’s future, and to work together on a few well-defined projects with likely strategic impact. Participants become familiar with an important process, produce results for their organizations not likely to be achieved through other initiatives, and create a new web of intelligence within their enterprises.

In this issue's book excerpt from *Leadership Agility*, authors Bill Joiner and Steve Josephs offer a developmental view of leadership for collective intelligence in a world of change and complexity. The findings of their extensive research complement those previously reported elsewhere with a useful refinement. As you might expect, those individuals, teams, and organizations that continue to be successful in tumultuous circumstances are good at taking cues from their environment, and in working effectively with other stakeholders. In addition, the authors highlight "creative" agility as critical to success. This ability to bring (or stimulate) fresh thinking in a life or death situation is the high leverage version of making lemonade when life gives you lemons. Their "Five Levels of Leadership Agility" should prompt an interesting conversation among readers about how leaders' behavior is interdependent with the field in which they are acting.

In addition, we've included brief summaries of the following recently published articles and books. Please see Recommended Reading at the close of this issue for the full list.

"Collaborating for Systemic Change" by Peter M. Senge, Benyamin B. Lichtenstein, Katrin Kaeufer, Hilary Bradbury, John S. Carroll in the *Sloan Management Review*, Winter 2007, pp. 44-53 (Reprint # 48211)

"In Praise of the Incomplete Leader" by Deborah Ancona, Thomas W. Malone, Wanda J. Orlikowski, Peter M. Senge in the *Harvard Business Review*, February 2007 (Reprint R0702E)

Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges by C. Otto Scharmer (SoL, 2007)

Inside Out: Stories and Method for Generating Collective Will to Create the Future We Want by Tracy Huston (SoL, 2007)

A Leader's Guide to Reflective Practice by Judy Brown (Trafford Publishing, 2006)

The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems, 2nd Edition by Peggy Holman, Tom Devane, Steven Cady (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007)

Leadership is Global: Co-creating a Humane and Sustainable World, edited by Walter Link, Thais Corral and Mark Gerzon, including contributions from SoL members Adam Kahane and Alain Gauthier. (The Global Leadership Network, 2006)

The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics by Riane Eisler (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, April 2007)



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Conflict Alchemy: A Practical Paradigm for Conflict Solutions

David B. Pauker, JD, LL.M.



David B. Pauker

Five studio executives voted to fire the uncooperative director of an over-budget Hollywood motion picture in danger of not being delivered on schedule or budget. I was the sixth person in the room, with direct responsibility for completing the picture on time and within budget. I voted to retain the director, even though there would be penalties of several million dollars if the film were late or of unacceptable quality.

My experience was that, if managed correctly, the turmoil of conflict could be a catalyst to produce inventive solutions that could improve the film. I also knew interpersonal conflict is always tricky within the normal drama that results from lack of money and time on the one hand and the needs of creative vision on the other. There were other considerations as well, and I presented my reasons to the others in the room. The director was not fired. That was not the end of this story, however, or of its conflicts.

As the drama with the director developed, this engagement became an object lesson for the important differences between simply managing and really solving conflict. Managing conflict merely controls the tensions. Genuinely solving conflict generates good will and an opening to harvest valuable benefits that exist beneath the surface of many conflicts – including new information, creative solutions, and seeds for new opportunities. Conflict’s frictions can catalyze progress – just as friction vibrates the strings of a violin to make music, and friction of braking generates electricity to propel a hybrid automobile forward.¹

The result of this and other experiences is a paradigm for solving conflict and harvesting its hidden values. This is a system that works whether the facilitator is a neutral third-party or a participant in the conflict, and whether the basis is business, politics, social, personal, or of other origin. It is a system easy to learn, though its components, like muscles, are best utilized when exercised daily to develop healthier relationships, establish environments that decrease the number and severity of conflicts, and build shortcuts for reaching solutions that do develop. Beneficially solving conflict can, in this way, become a natural part of life, as natural as breathing.

Seven Conflict Truths

There are seven important truths about conflict:

1. *Conflict is about “no.”* People in conflict are saying, “no,” or feel “no” is confronting them. They are in disharmony and separation – with others, with situations, with themselves, or with some combination of two or all three of those. At the root, people in conflict are saying “no” to themselves about something.

Conflict is a source of progress and profits – we need not be its victims.

2. *Conflict is primarily an internal process that has external manifestation.* The roots of conflict, and the majority of turmoil, are internalized and hidden within the individuals involved. With groups of all sizes, the group collective, factions within the group, and persons in the group each have their own process that must receive attention. This is not therapy, and can be done relatively quickly for the purpose of solving conflict.

3. *The issue on the table must be acknowledged.* Addressing it will provide some relief, but not a solution. Additional issues may be masked, and the issue manifesting is rarely the authentic problem. In other words, in business conflicts it is rarely only about the money, but dealing with the money helps.

4. *There is a difference between “real-needs” and apparent needs.* Real-needs, important to solving conflict, are commonly hidden below a party’s own awareness – beneath egos, agendas, justifications, fears, and other obstacles. People in conflict, and those trying to help them resolve it, commonly focus on apparent needs and interests.

5. *Positions are not intellectual – they have an emotional and visceral binding.* At every subjective level, an emotion protects an underlying belief, with several of these layers likely to be present in each party. Emotions run the spectrum – anger, fear, and righteousness are particularly popular.

6. *It is not possible to effectively work with conflict from the mind.* The mind inherently creates separation. Its nature is self-identity (ego) and duality. One proclivity, for example, is to develop differentiation by naming and judging what it perceives as otherness.

7. *Real conflict solutions come from the heart.* The nature of the heart is acceptance and connection. This is not a strange or new notion – even in business, those with the best employee relations are perceived as caring, nourishing and supportive.

Traditional conflict resolution methodologies are too often focused on just “dealing” with the conflict.

Traditional conflict resolution methodologies are too often focused on just “dealing” with the conflict. “Dealing” with something, however, is an attempt to make it go away while maintaining a safe distance. This is very desirable when solving the problem of a too friendly skunk. But, commonly, there are opportunities within conflicts that must be nurtured, and that requires real solution.

Merely moderating tensions with first-aid methodologies also may create more problems than it solves, and can often be more time consuming and difficult than actually solving the conflict. Participants may leave feeling manipulated. Underlying issues may flare up at a later time. Deep-seated tensions may become a cancer that sours good will and beginnings of trust, and makes future discussions exponentially more difficult.

Experiences resolving conflicts and crises prove really solving conflict, as opposed to merely ameliorating tension, can generate agreements that are more successful, improve relationships, increase cooperation, and help better actualize vision. This is true whatever the location, stakes, and nature of the conflict.

The setting here is around business. This true story is about conflict involving business in Hollywood where large sums were at risk. The system described, however, works with all natures of conflicts – including those of long standing with deep animosity, and those that have recently flared. It is effective with groups of all sizes, as well as with individuals.

Seven Elements for Connection

Shortly after the decision not to fire him, the director of the motion picture began instigating confrontations with fellow employees, including me. His justifications varied; primarily he fumed at people for not doing their job, and blamed them for making it impossible for him to do his job. Everything became a battle. This culminated with the director storming out of a planning meeting for the next day's work. After considerable thought, I realized these incidents were escalating with the approach of the deadline for a number of key decisions. I recognized the director was in panic, and I saw the director would sabotage the film if his behavior were allowed to continue.

The beginning of reaching real conflict solution is making connection and establishing trust in three directions:

- (a) between the person facilitating solution and the conflicting parties;
- (b) between the parties themselves – and if the conflict involves groups this is connection between the groups as organisms, factions, and key individuals within those groups; and,
- (c) between each opposing party and their own unspoken selves – and this is not about psychological therapy, but rather opening the door for parties to discover their own “real-needs.”

The following “elements for connection” establish and enhance connection and trust – in the sense of meaningful contact. They respond to the needs of those in conflict and answer the imperatives of the “conflict truths.” These elements are non-linear – they operate in harmony and not sequentially, inter relating and working together, instead of one following the other.

Establish an “Environment of ‘Yes.’” Participants and observers should do their best to relate to everyone, including himself or herself, with acceptance and without judgment. This is an environment of “Yes.” This is not an intellectual exercise, but rather a heart centered awareness that can be developed. People flower in this kind of setting. In an interview, a manager asked how she could help her staff grow to be better at what they do – and one fundamental answer is to put in place an “Environment of ‘Yes.’”

People often have more trouble genuinely accepting and honoring themselves than others. It is not possible to fully accept others without self-acceptance. I have found it useful to move beyond a mental experience of self-acceptance by asking people having difficulty to imagine their feelings if they honored themselves in this way, and then helping them experience those feelings more deeply.

Acceptance and non-judgment, or their lack, are communicated by everyone in the room in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Verbal communications are colored by many factors,



including content, tone, and intention. Non-verbal communications include such things as body language and, yes, even the emotional tone of their thoughts and vibrations.

Adopt personal responsibility for actions and, more importantly, reactions. When something in the conflict – such as its circumstances, emotional content, or even an action – resonates subconsciously with the residual stored emotions of a participant or onlooker, s/he may have a strong instinctive reaction to what is occurring. The emotional or physical response may be uncomfortable, even overwhelming for that person.

Real needs are usually unrecognized because they remain hidden beneath a party's own awareness – under layers of assumptions, expectations, fears, agendas, defenses, and other obstacles.

The source of the discomfort is not the other person in the transaction. The cause of the (extreme) discomfort is in the person feeling it, and that person can choose to not play out the emotions and, still, honor herself. Each person must take responsibility for what is aroused in them. Their reaction can inflame and expand the conflict, or calm it.

An example of the subjective and personal nature of reactions occurred in last year's World Cup when Zinedine Zidane, the captain of the French team, was ejected from the title match because he head-butted Marco Materazzi of the Italian team who he said called him a "terrorist." If Mr. Materazzi called another person a "terrorist," s/he might or might not be offended – s/he might even

laugh – and whether or not what Mr. Materazzi actually said was accurately reported, the point is the same. It is not what someone says that is offensive – it is the receiver's emotional and psychological tenderness that paints it as offensive and triggers a charged response.

Every person has responsibility for his or her own awareness. Every person can take responsibility for his or her own actions and reactions. Even if a person believes that is not completely true, or even if it is, in fact, not completely true, he can adopt this as a "workable position." People can act as though it is completely true, and this will be beneficial for at least two significant reasons: First, adopting this position greatly reduces feelings of being a victim; and, second, it materially lessens any environment of blame.

Base solutions on satisfying real-needs, and not apparent needs. Discover real-needs by using "deep listening" (discussed below).

Real-needs are genuine interests. They have the power of truth. They are usually unrecognized because they remain hidden beneath a party's own awareness – under layers of assumptions, expectations, fears, agendas, defenses, and other obstacles.

Apparent or perceived needs, in contrast, often reflect settling for the obvious, a quick fix, or ego gratification. Because they are not genuine expressions and lack substance, they often cause inflexibility, defensiveness, confusion, and limit vision.

Recognizing and meeting real-needs will reduce the anxiety of those in conflict. It is not necessary to meet these needs in the way a party expects. The final solution may, in fact, be creative and surprising.

Pursue understanding in depth. Seek to genuinely understand what other parties are saying, what they are feeling, and their positions within subjective and real world contexts.

In their own way, the parties want optimum understanding and performance. Inquire into what is missing in their pursuit of these goals, and establish the grounds to achieve them. In

many cases, what the parties are avoiding or are not saying is as important as the things they do express. Deep Listening also supports understanding in depth.

Take “wrong” out of the equation. No one is right all the time, and this may be the time you are not right – not “wrong,” but not right. Everyone in the conflict may be a little “not right” or, looked at differently, “partially right.”

Each person is seeing the situation from their own point-of-view, based on their unique history and needs. There are many possibilities. It is possible, for example, that the parties are merely misunderstanding each other because their judgments and positions are based on different assumptions. Be generous.

Have faith in the process. Be detached from the outcome, and from what might seem to be needed, in order to discover what is really needed. Let go of preconceived ideas, identities, and roles; rigid positions limit possibilities. Concerns and objections are part of any process. They may help reveal how a solution is incomplete or flawed. Politicians understand it is better to have a law with good purpose adopted, even if it is less than what they think is perfect – and generally they maintain good will throughout the give and take. It helps to recognize that under their skin all people are very much the same.

Recognize that ineffective or hurtful behavior is not a character flaw, but a person’s best attempt at accomplishing their goals. Very, very few people do things to be purposefully bad or hurtful; most of those that do later have regrets and want to make amends.

Do not confuse “what’s” and “how’s.” Make sure everyone is talking about the same thing.

Establish what must be accomplished. Then work at discovering how that can best be done. At one board meeting, for example, the members argued for an hour about contract language to embody an already agreed approach. Finally, one board member proposed a simple resolution stating they needed a contract with that approach, and instructing their attorney to draft it. They saw it was their job to establish a “what,” the need for a contract, and that the attorney could best accomplish the “how” it would be done. The board passed the resolution in three minutes.

Be detached from the outcome, and from what might seem to be needed, in order to discover what is really needed.

While a “Yes” environment is a first among equals, none of the Elements is more important than another. They work together to form a lattice of contact, support, confidence and communication. They are not formulas or plug-and-play techniques that magically cause the tension and discomfort of conflict to disappear. They are better than that. As genuine ways to be with people who are in conflict, they create an environment in which solutions flow. They are intangible muscles to be developed and strengthened.

People in conflict are in pain. Feelings of isolation and alienation may include certainty a just solution is not possible – if there are even thoughts of solution. Anger and righteousness may be so strong that a person in conflict can only think of how right they are, and of attacking their “opponent” or getting even. This is especially true for those who have no experience with effective solution of previous conflicts.

In contrast, those who understand that solving conflicts is a process, and who have successful experience with the method employed to solve it, do develop a confidence that speeds resolution.

The discomfort of conflict extends to those around people in conflict who often feel awkward or threatened. In some situations, the reaction of friends, family and coworkers is fear; similar to feelings about being near someone with a serious disease they are afraid of catching. People fear conflict for many reasons, including the way it connects with their own inner demons, the “ugliness” they see in it, or their fear that things will spin out of control. Managers, co-workers, and other interested persons who may want to help, often do not know how to respond or fear being drawn into the struggle, and as a result feel frustrated or inadequate. They may also be reluctant to be seen as taking sides.

Many may deny that discomfort, even to themselves. Faced with conflict, they ignore it or distance themselves from it. At best, they merely try to reduce it – to make it go away, rather than solving it and benefiting from the results. In business settings, this denial among employees, between managers, and in the boardroom limits a company by sidetracking vision and draining significant time and energy from accomplishing important tasks. For these people, too, experience and confidence in the method and its process are helpful for establishing positive expectations and patience that allows solutions to evolve.

Two Key Principles

The elements for connection embody two key principles.

Containment: The First Key Principle

Containment has two elements. The first element of containment can be described as real presence. This is providing complete and unqualified attention to another person(s) with acceptance and lack of judgment, and such openness, empathy, and receptivity so as to be available for surprises, wonder, and the miraculously creative. This presence is not about saying or doing any right thing, but about your way of being.

Containment involves accepting who that person is, what they have done or are doing, and what they are saying. Just simply listen. It is not necessary that you agree with them or allow them to be destructive – only that you accept them as one human with another. Every human being has a story to tell that is worthy of this commitment.

The second element of containment is putting aside defenses, judgments, agendas, intentions, and other psychological obstacles in order to provide openness and real presence for another. Our own judgments, agendas, intentions, defenses and other psychological obstacles do not stop. We do not deny them. We observe them in a neutral fashion and without judgment, as a witness, despite the pain we may be feeling. We maintain a merciful attitude toward our own defenses and pain, and put them to the side. In this way, we can be present within the context of providing a spacious container for others, as well as ourselves.

I remember a saying from elementary school science – that nature abhors a vacuum and fills it. In these moments of containment, I can allow myself to be receptive, without abandoning my integrity, to provide a safe container others may fill with their truths – and when I am really available, the miracles of the moment inevitably follow.

Compassion and empathy are also elements of containment. It is important to distinguish them, especially when acting as a neutral third-party. Empathy is a bonding connection around understanding and sympathy. Too much empathy, however, may be seen by other conflict participants as biased partisanship precisely because of the connection and sympathy.



Compassion has love, and, at the same time, neutrality and lack of judgment. Compassion also requires courage because it makes us open to being hurt.

It is also possible – and advantageous – to give one’s own self the attention and commitment of containment. I have found there is a direct relationship between my ability to hear my own story and to meet myself with openness and presence, and my ability to provide that presence for other people.

Containment is related to the following elements for connection: establishing a “Yes” environment; eliminating “wrong”; understanding in depth; and, personal responsibility.

Trust: The Second Key Principle

Trust provides freedom to let go of attachments, and the presence of mind to go forward with whatever is genuinely needed. It allows letting go of the outcome a person thinks is required in order to create something that is new to fill real needs. It supplies security to feel safe with the new circumstances, to have confidence one can deal with them.

This is not a signal to abandon one’s core integrity. Healthy boundaries that acknowledge societal limits and protect against personal abuse are important. It is a challenge not to confuse healthy with unhealthy boundaries, and to not establish the latter as excuses for avoiding responsibility about moving forward.

Where an individual is a participant in the conflict, that person must first take responsibility for adopting containment and trust for themselves; second, gently, and without making others “wrong,” help them adopt the elements for connection; and, third, work with them to

solution. The situation is generally easier for an objective observer trying to resolve the conflict because their neutrality makes it more likely conflicting parties will listen to what they have to say and adopt their suggestions.

Three Supporting Tools

After the director stormed out of the meeting, I struggled with my anger and frustration, and during a difficult night managed to put it aside. The next morning, I appeared at the director's door before breakfast and the day's pressures began. I wanted to get the director away from his "safe" space, and suggested a walk. As we began, I asked the director to talk about the film. He was not very forthcoming. Rather than immediately responding, I kept prompting him to say more or just kept the silence. Sometimes I asked him if I understood him correctly and restated what I thought he had said. After a while, the director admitted he thought the situation impossible, and that he feared being blamed for the inevitable fiasco.

I asked him to talk more about those fears. Then I expressed my complete confidence in the director, and assured him he was not facing the dilemma alone. At one point, I stopped and reached out to touch the director's arm, looked him in the eye and told him, "I will not let you fail. This is my responsibility too. If you have any problems, you come to me and I will make it work for you. I will not let us fail. You can do this brilliantly."

I held the director's eyes, and (putting aside my own large doubts) made sure the director felt my confidence and knew I was sincere in what I was saying. Only when I saw the director's posture straighten did I resume walking. Then I asked the director about what had to be accomplished, and together we worked out an agenda for the day. That, however, was not the end of the saga.

My emptiness and acceptance provided containment, and gave the director a safe place to park his panic and other anxieties. I accepted and valued him, as well as what he had to accomplish, what he was saying, and what he was feeling but not saying.

The way I said what I did was as important as what I said. In a non-directed way I encouraged the director to say more about his concerns. By making eye contact, I communicated vulnerability and caring. I gave him opportunity to get his opinions, evaluations, and agendas out of the way, so he was available to listen with openness. I tried to demonstrate honest and heartfelt acceptance of the director, recognition of his needs, and support on his own terms.

I thought a long time before making a promise that I would "not let us fail." First, people will intuitively know if promises like this are less than genuine; and, second, a situation can easily get out of control if a promise like this is not kept. In addition, I consciously referred to "us" to emphasize I regarded the two of us as a team. I meant that he could count on me despite my own doubts about the situation.

It was only when I saw his posture change that I knew he had successfully adopted his new resolution. Physical changes – such as straightened posture, quieting of hand gestures (or the reverse where there were none), muscle changes around the eyes or mouth, and alterations in skin color – often signal internal changes. Physical manifestations may, of course, signal deepening anger or resistance, and it is important to check on what is being perceived.

Those in conflict want, sometimes desperately, to feel supported, that their needs are recog-

***Those in conflict want,
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nized, and that those needs will be met. They are likely to be feeling unheard, unappreciated or unrecognized, or some combination of two or all three of them. These “un-feelings” may be feeding one on another, becoming self-fulfilling prophecies that isolate, build walls, and make meaningful communication more difficult. One way to help break down these walls is to be with the person in complete containment. “Deep listening” is, in fact, one of three supporting tools I used to actualize the two key principles of “containment” and “trust,” to help establish the “elements for connection” and to make sure the director heard what I was saying.

Deep Listening

Deep listening is an important component of containment. This is more than listening with understanding to what another person has to say, though that is an important part of it.

Deep listeners adopt an “eager to hear” non-judgmental presence. This is about the speaker, and attention should be 100% on the speaker. Do not advocate any position or try to change the position of the speaker. Everything the speaker says is correct from the speaker’s point-of-view. Therefore, since s/he is not “wrong,” there is no reason to change her positions.

This level of attention is also the secret for discovering real-needs. People will tell you their truths if you create the climate in which they can safely do it. We can only discover real-needs from the person. We cannot imagine or research what they might be for another because we cannot truly imagine their internal process.

If the other person is playing games, nothing happens. But, in many instances, openness changes other people in the room. Amazing personal truths are often revealed – deep truths people hide even from themselves until the moment they are spoken.

There are many approaches that support the deep listening process. I offer two – and underline the importance of maintaining the appropriate underlying attitude that gives them integrity. Mere techniques that emphasize just saying the “right thing” are empty games that may only exacerbate a problem.

One, ask only open-ended questions. Simply asking a person to “Say more,” invites the person speaking to go deeper into the well of her being to discover unrealized truths, from her point of view, about the subject. A listener’s accepting presence makes this safe. Open-ended questions allow people to structure answers in their own way, with honesty, and the answers often contain content that even surprises the speaker. Examples of open-ended questions include, “Say more about that?” and “I thought you said ‘brightness,’ and I am not sure what you mean by that?” Do not ask loaded questions designed to make a point or lead the conversation. “Why?” is not an open-ended question.

Two, mirror understanding back to the speaker, specifically asking the speaker to correct anything that might be wrong. The listener should state her understanding of what has been said. She might, for example, begin by saying, “I want to make sure I am understanding you. Please tell me if I am correct.” Then in as much detail as possible state her understanding of what the person said. In describing her understanding, a listener may include any unstated emotional content they perceived in what the person said. Growing awareness of emotional content provides a doorway for the speaker to go deeper beneath the surface. Do not color what the speaker has said. Deep listeners have no agenda. At the end of her summary, the listener should again invite the speaker to make any corrections.

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Mirroring creates connection, reinforces the fact that the listener understands what the speaker is saying and that she cares, and, importantly, helps the speaker consciously hear what s/he is saying and place it in context.

It may be necessary to periodically interrupt the speaker when the listener has filled her or his capacity to hold information. For example, “I am sorry to interrupt, but I want to make sure I am understanding you correctly. Correct me if I don’t have this right.” Then she relates her understanding of what the speaker said.

Blame-Free Language

Take blame out of the discussion. There are many ways to approach this, including the following:

- Avoid language with express or implied blame. Take personal responsibility. What some people call “I” statements” are helpful. An example of blame-free language is, “I felt angry when you said I ruined your day.” The speaker is assuming responsibility for her reaction; there is no accusation that the other person said anything wrong or was responsible for making the speaker angry. “You embarrassed me when you flirted at the party” is an example of a statement with blame. This is hard; there is much that could be said on this subject.
- No matter how bad things seem, find some good and build on that. Things cannot get good from bad. They can only get better if they are already good. In other words, from the perception of bad, circumstances can only get worse, and they can get better only from the perception that they are already good. There is at least a kernel of good in everything – find it and build on it.

Some people believe others know the good and only need to hear the critical, “to help them improve.” This is a myth. In truth, many people focus too much on their negatives and fail to appreciate their strengths.

Component Solutions

Break the big problem into its simplest component parts. One issue is that people become confused by the complexity of large problems. Another issue is that they often approach problems from different points of view, and the more complicated the problem, the more likely this will be true. It is much easier to get agreement around simple issues. Then build the simple agreements into an approach to the whole. Give people something to rally around.

Get agreement on a simple agenda of tasks to be accomplished within a short time. It is easy to be overwhelmed by everything that must be accomplished. I had the director, for example, speak about everything that had to be completed, but only set the agenda for that day, and had the director commit to that.

It is feasible to begin the conflict solution process at the moment the parties are willing to talk about anything – the weather, baseball, anything. In the process of talking, it is practicable to cultivate “real listening,” and amazing things can grow with real listening. I believe it is true, as some people say, that true conflict resolution becomes possible when the parties commit to changing their situation. But there is much a neutral third-party and those in conflict can do to facilitate reaching that point, whether with individuals or groups.

Working with conflicting groups presents additional challenges, including the following: First, in addition to the members and representatives, groups and factions within them each have their own collective consciousness, which must be dealt with at the table. Second, mem-

bers may have merged their individual identities with the group's, and be fixed on their interpretation of the group's identity. Third, the group may not have a coherent vision, and may not be able to move forward. Fourth, the superficial issues on the table may be the only things giving the group its sense of cohesion. Fifth, the leaders may be answerable to incompatible factions and unable to commit to agreements. It is, therefore, crucial that all stakeholders participate in the process. One of the first tasks for a person attempting to resolve conflict with groups may be to help each group build a clear agenda of real-needs.

Long-standing conflicts may present deeper anger, hatred and other hostile feelings, and there may be a history of violence that has exacerbated problems. These circumstances will require more containment and tolerance for anxiety – and, certainly, a great deal more patience. While it may take longer to reach solution, the system for solution remains, regardless of the location, nature, stakes, or basis of the conflict.

Conflict Rewards

After the early morning walk, the director's cooperation and working good will immediately improved. He met challenges and deadlines, and he was able to innovate some creative solutions. He also allowed me to meet time and budget challenges in unusual and risky ways. But the director was not through.

Approximately ten days later, the director came with another crisis. He feared audiences would not understand the dialogue of a little girl who was one of the film's stars. The director demanded immediate action, and challenged me to pick one of the solutions he proposed – all well beyond the picture's modest budget and time constraints. I knew the dialogue was not a problem, and suggested we invite an audience of friends to see the film. The director agreed.

The audience had no difficulty understanding the star, and that crisis ended. The cumulative weight of events gave the director confidence that I would honor his needs. He began to accept my evaluations of problems that arose, and walked away satisfied when I, for example, said something was not worth worrying about. This was, indeed, the end of the conflicts, but not the story.

Throughout my experience with the director, I utilized the "elements for connection" to create an environment and relationship of containment and trust, and to defuse repeated actual and potential conflicts with the director:



Establishing an environment of “Yes.” I said “yes” to the director’s real-needs without saying “no” to everything else. Early in our process together I recognized the director’s real-needs were to have his creativity appreciated, and not to be blamed when things did not work. I could easily say “yes” to those needs. Other things dropped away naturally in the “yes” environment because real-needs were distinguished from apparent ones.

Relating with acceptance and non-judgment I related with acceptance however unrealistic his demands or outrageous his behavior. In addition, “no” was not my first reaction. I did not, for example, say the star’s dialogue could be understood; instead, I honored the director’s concerns, because they were real and deeply felt for the director, and I proposed a solution that would help the director see the truth.

Adopting personal responsibility for actions I put aside my own considerable anger and frustration to work with the director in good spirit, and honored the director’s feelings. After the director stormed out of the meeting, I set aside my own reactions. I went to see the director with good will, understanding and concrete support to assuage the director’s panic.

Taking “wrong” out of the equation I treated the director and his demands with respect, even when I thought them outrageous. I never blamed the director for anything, even in response to the director’s blame of me.

Instilling trust in the process. I trusted that events would develop in the right way if I conducted my relationship with the director appropriately. This confidence was subliminally communicated to the director. As events developed, the director’s confidence in me grew, and he could trust that his real-needs would be satisfied. This allowed the director to move forward with whatever was needed, even some things that were innovative and risky.

Basing solutions on satisfying real-needs. By honoring the director’s demands, I opened the door to helping the director discover the difference between his real-needs and apparent needs. I worked to satisfy the director’s real-needs, and the director was satisfied even though they were usually not met the way the director expected.

Understanding in depth. I took the director aside, away from the work environment, to listen to the director’s deepest concerns and fears. Having those on the table enabled me to make real contact and begin the process of building the director’s confidence in me and his trust in the process.

Distinguishing “what’s” and “how’s.” The director voiced concern about audiences not understanding a star’s dialogue, and proposed solutions based on the worst possibilities. I recognized muddled dialogue as a what. I broke this what into component issues, and looked to fulfill each with a how related to that step. First, was there really a problem? Second, if there was, in fact, a problem what was its nature and how bad was it? Third, if the problem were real I knew its nature and severity would help shape a practical solution. In this case the apparent concern dissolved by answering the first issue – I solved the problem by demonstrating there was no problem.

As a result, I avoided escalating conflicts and paralysis of the project. Instead, I engendered reduction of interpersonal tension and drama, creative solutions to problems, a better product, improved relationships, and successful achievement of time and budget goals.

Conclusion

I believe that in our deepest heart we do not want to live with conflict – regardless of the internal voices that may justify our positions. I am discovering that as human beings we seek harmony, and that it is our nature to love. Though I cannot prove this – yet – it is a question I look forward to exploring in the context of developing more complete approaches to solving conflicts.

In this instance...

Many things opened for the work on the picture as tensions eased. Three will serve as examples. First, the director completed his editing work a week early; this was a tremendous financial benefit, and I immediately realized his willingness to let go of his “baby” was a reflection of the comfort and safety he felt in his working climate. Second, the director and producer executed a new ending economically and in record time, and this gave a nice emotional lift to the film. Third, during sound mixing, which was in a distant city, two major crises arose, and the director’s response in each instance was to tell me he had complete faith in whatever resolutions I developed. He was truly happy and confident in his work; so was I – and so were the people around us.

The director delivered the picture on time and within budget. The director and I remained friendly, had dinner occasionally, and then drifted apart. The studio and everyone else involved with the film agreed that keeping the director had resulted in the best possible motion picture. And that is the end of the story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David B. Pauker is a negotiator and mediator with more than 25 years’ experience in the United States and internationally. He is licensed to practice law in California, Illinois, Florida, and before the United States Supreme Court. He has a Masters of Law in both International Law and Intellectual Property Law from The George Washington University in Washington D.C., a J.D. from Northwestern, and an AB in Psychology with Honors from Stanford. He has published articles on mediation and negotiation, co-authored an early and often cited web site about domain names and trademarks, and taught an on-line course on Internet legal issues for Marlboro College. Recently, Mr. Pauker served as Executive Director of the non-profit Coalition to Advance Prescription Drug Education [CARxE].

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Endnotes

- 1 Mary Parker Follett, an early 20th Century industrial psychologist, spoke about the benefits of friction and the violin analogy almost a hundred years ago.

Recommended Reading

from David Pauker

Solving Tough Problems

Adam Kahane
(Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

By examining tough questions related to his own personal process and some of the difficult problems with which he has worked, Kahane provides insight and interesting perspective relating to what I would describe as connection, containment, and compassion. I think it a brave book in many ways.

Nonviolent Communication

Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.
(Puddle Dancer Press, 2003)

Rosenberg advocates language as a tool to put aside our own charge and make a heartfelt and compassionate connection with others. The meat here is about reconnecting with our natural compassionate nature across words and language. His points are of real use. Some people I know have become hung up by focusing on the language, and I do not believe this is Rosenberg’s point. If nothing else, go into a bookstore and read Arun Gandhi’s Foreword.

Crucial Conversations

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan & Switzler
(McGraw-Hill, 2002)

Here is presented the value of keeping communication open and continuing – you cannot win if you stop talking. The book lays out helpful approaches to overcoming what the authors see as patterns and traps in the ways we communicate. I like that it takes fear out of approaching important interactions.

Reflections

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