From Chaos to Coherence:
A tool to manage conflict

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Chaos and conflict emerge when people focus on unproductive differences and talk about them in unproductive ways. The emerging field of Human Systems Dynamics (HSD) explores complex interactions and defines innovative ways to make those interactions more efficient and effective. By helping individuals focus on differences that make a difference, HSD shifts individuals toward shared understanding. By establishing transforming exchanges, HSD opens dialogue and shifts the pattern of interaction toward emerging coherence.

This simple conflict management tool is based on the conditions of difference and exchange that support coherent self-organizing interactions among people—fundamental principles of HSD.

This protocol has been used to address individual and institutional conflicts in a variety of settings. Though it is deceptively simple, the protocol is robust enough to support conversations that resolve a variety of conflicts. The example given below demonstrates how this tool can be used to surface differences and establish dialogue toward coherent relationships and action.

HSD Institute cannot guarantee that this tool will solve every “personality conflict,” but it should help consultants and combatants shift toward more productive dialogue.

If you have questions about how to use this tool or if you want to discuss a particular case, contact Julia Wolter at jwolter@hsdinstitute.org.

For more information about the underlying theory and practice of this and other tools, visit HSD Institute at www.hsdinstitute.org or the OD Network Thought Leader’s Site at www.odnetwork.org.

Instructions

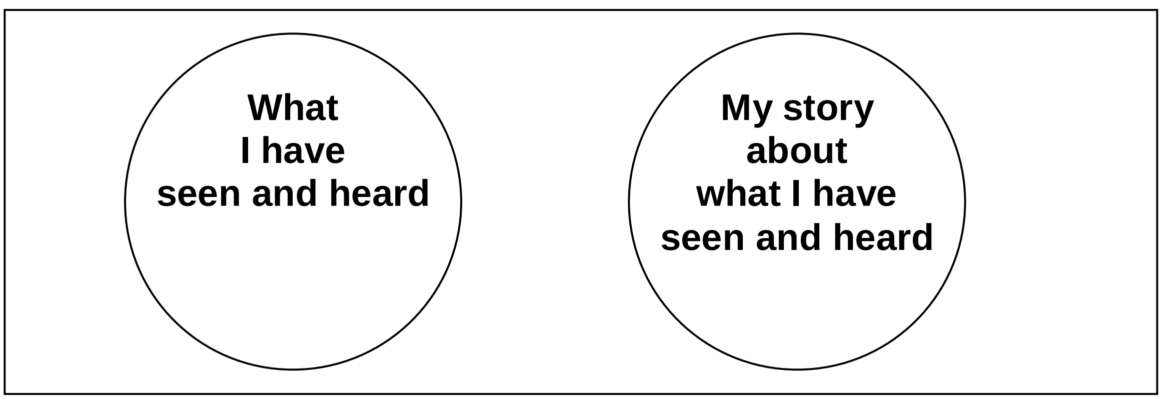
Step 1. Clarify each person's perceptions of history and current expectations.

A neutral third party uses the Reality Circles (shown below) to structure interviews with each person involved in the conflict.

The Reality Circles help people distinguish their own interpretations of events from the events themselves. In the left circle, the person records the observable reality of a situation. What happened? What did my perceptions tell me? What do I know directly without "benefit" of my interpretation? The right circle names the interpretive stories that the person connects to the events observed. It takes a bit of practice and sometimes some coaching for a person to be able to distinguish observation (what I've seen and heard) from interpretation (my story about what I have seen and heard).

The benefit of thinking in the two circles is that the left circle can be shared by everyone involved in the discussion. Differences here can be resolved through investigation and collected data. Differences in the story, on the other hand, may not be affected by facts and figures. Too often, new information only serves to confirm one's story rather than to challenge it.

The best way to build a better story is to compare and contrast one's own story with the stories of others. As both parties recognize that their differences are differences in interpretation, then they can begin to build a respect—if not agreement—for the other person's story. They can come to agreement on a story they can share.



In a one-on-one meeting with each of the combatants, the interviewer draws the two circles and defines the difference between the two. He or she should not go into detail about the significance of the differences or how this process will contribute to resolving the conflict. Just name the circles and help the person sort out observation from interpretation. The following questions shape the one-on-one interview.

1. What aspects of the current conflict belong in the left-hand circle? What aspects belong in the right-hand circle?
2. How do your stories contribute to the current stress in the relationship?
3. When you consider the person on the other side of this disagreement, what do you want out of the relationship?
4. If you consider the interactions to be a game in which everyone involved in the conflict is on the same side, what must you do to be sure that your side wins?
5. What three questions do you want to ask the other person(s) involved in the conflict?

Step 2. Develop the questions.

Each of the persons involved drafts a set of three questions to ask the other(s). Those questions are sent to the interviewer, who gives feedback to ensure that the questions are:

- Constructive in tone and content
- Authentic requests for insight
- Focused on clearing past concerns or establishing grounds for future work

After the questions are reviewed and revised by those involved, they are sent to responders at least 24 hours in advance of the group meeting.

Step 3. Confirm shared reality.

When the interviews are complete, each combatant has recorded their own observations and interpretations. The interviewer will have seen the observations of all and can see if there are any differences in the "objective" reality in which everyone lives. If there are points of disagreement or missing factual data, the interviewer researches the questions to ensure that the "what is seen and heard" circles can be the same for everyone involved in the conversation.

Step 4. Meet together for inquiry.

The persons involved meet with the interviewer for a one-hour meeting. First they confirm critical aspects of the shared reality. Then the questions begin. Person One asks Person Two to respond to the first question in the list. After Two answers, One has an opportunity to consider whether or not the response was complete. If not, One asks follow-up questions until satisfied that he or she understands Two's perspective.

Person Two then asks One to respond to his or her first question, asks follow-ups as necessary.

This process continues with each asking and answering alternating questions until both One and Two have asked all their questions. The meeting ends when each has asked and answered three questions and the various follow-up questions. All participants reflect on what they've learned about the other's interpretations, their expectations for the future and identify any relevant action items. The meeting is adjourned.

It is crucial that the interviewer not intervene in the shared meaning-making during this meeting. Do not offer solutions or interpret one person to the other. If necessary, ask clarifying questions, but allow the two to establish their own shared meaning.

Step 5. Assess outcome and plan further action.

Two weeks after the meeting, the interviewer contacts each of the participants to assess the process and the outcome of the interaction. If necessary, further activities are planned to encourage participants to remain in productive modes of inquiry and self-awareness into the future..

In most cases, this simple process is sufficient to restructure a relationship over the long term. Unless other problems arise in future, no more follow-up activity is required. If other conflicts do arise, the process should be completed again either with the aid of a facilitator or by the combatants themselves.

Example:
Who owns the internet strategy?

A mid-sized consulting firm was growing by leaps and bounds. Mary had been with the company for 20 years. As one of the first employees, she had taken on the role of innovator and technical strategist. Though her education and outside experience were administrative, and her title was VP Sales, over the years she had developed outstanding technical skills and insights about the use of technology. Six months previous to this engagement, the company had hired Joe to be the Information Architect for the growing firm. Joe had extensive expertise in designing and implementing complex web-based systems. He reported to one of Mary's peers.

A long-time client of the company requested a proposal for a web-based solution to their growing issues of global communication. Both Mary and Joe were assigned to the team to propose a strategy to meet the needs. At the first meeting, they clashed. After the second meeting, Joe went to his boss and gave an ultimatum—either Mary was off the project or he would quit!

The boss called the Human Resources Department desperate for help. HR called us. We walked through the steps of the tool. The results of each step are described below.

Step 1. Clarify each person's perceptions of history and current expectations.

Mary was eager for the intervention. She thought Joe was way out of line and needed to be educated about the history and capacity of the company and the long-time relationship with this particular client. In her initial interview she provided the following responses.

1. What aspects of the current conflict belong in each of the circles?

What have I seen and heard?	My story about what I've seen and heard
• Joe hasn't been at the company long • He showed up at the first meeting with a solution already framed • He misspelled the name of the primary client for the contract • His proposal included technical language and diagrams • Techology is not very important to the future of the company	• Joe needs to be more customer sensitive • He doesn't respect relationships • He doesn't treat me with respect • Our clients will never be able to understand this techno-jargon • Joe's boss should keep him under control • He should get a life and enter the real world

2. How do your stories contribute to the current stress in the relationship?
    - I want to talk to his boss rather than to Joe.
    - I get really frustrated with his long-winded technical talks.
    - He won't listen when I try to explain about the customer history, so I get frustrated.
3. What do you want out of the relationship?
    - I am tired of doing IT and know my skills aren't up to the task. I would really like Joe to take over, but he's got to do it the right way!
4. If you consider the interactions to be a game in which everyone involved in the conflict is on the same side, what must you do to be sure that your side wins?
    - The game is getting the contract, and our side needs a great proposal. I have to somehow get Joe to think from the customers' perspective.

5. What three questions do you want to ask the other person(s) involved in the conflict?
   The questions required several iterations to get the blame and frustration out of the language, but Mary finally ended up sending the following questions to Joe:
   - How do you find out about clients and their needs?
   - How can I help you understand what the client needs?
   - Are there different ways you can communicate technical details to be more accessible to other staff and to the client?

Joe wasn't so pleased to be "targeted" for an intervention. Still, until he heard an answer to his ultimatum, he really saw no choice but to cooperate with this "silly game."

1. What aspects of the current conflict belong in each of the circles?

What have I seen and heard?	My story about what I've seen and heard
• Mary is VP Sales • She has no formal education in IT • She argues with everything I say • She has dinner weekly with the client • My boss has not done anything to control her • When I came, they said they wanted technical innovation	• She has no business making technical decisions • My boss doesn't support me, he lied when he said he wanted innovation • This company will never get out of the 20^{th} century • I am just doing what I was hired to do

2. How do your stories contribute to the current stress in the relationship?
   - I probably do shift into technical language sometimes when it isn't necessary
3. What do you want out of the relationship?
   - I want her to leave me alone to do my job!
4. If you consider the interactions to be a game in which everyone involved in the conflict is on the same side, what must you do to be sure that your side wins?
   - We want to get the contract. I need to be sure that we're using the best and most effective technical solutions.
5. What three questions do you want to ask the other person(s) involved in the conflict?
   - What are the problems you see with my current plan for the client proposal?
   - How do you want to be involved in technical design processes in future?
   - How can we make this proposal and this project successful?

Step 2. Develop the questions.

Joe received Mary's questions, and Mary received Joe's. We didn't hear from either of them for three days, when our group meeting was arranged.

Step 3. Confirm shared reality.

Reflecting on the initial interviews, the interviewer noted one basic disagreement between the observations of Joe and Mary. Mary thought technology was not important to the future. Joe thought it was. Did the company want innovation in information technology or not? A fifteen-minute meeting was arranged with the President of the company to gauge her commitment to new web-based strategies. Indeed, the President said, they were committed to new and different web-based products and services. In fact, the future of the company (and her intention to go public in two years) depended on it.

Step 4. Meet together for inquiry.
The meeting was held at a neutral location to be sure that both Joe and Mary were on equal footing. They were reassured that, in the President's view, technical innovation was crucial to the future of the company. With that shared knowledge in place. The questioning began.

Mary went first and asked, "How do you find out about clients and their needs?"

.Joe answered. The interviewer asked if that was clear and sufficient. Mary said yes. Joe asked his first question, and the process continued. Sometimes one or the other needed additional detail before they were satisfied with answers. Sometimes the interviewer needed to intervene to be sure that they focused on the question at hand until it was completely answered. Otherwise, the process continued uninterrupted.

In the course of the conversation, they discovered that:

- Joe had never had a customer relations class, and he wished he were better with clients.
- Mary really was eager to move out of her technical and into her VP role.
- Joe knew multiple methods for representing technical architecture, and one of them was quite easy for Mary (and the client, she thought) to understand.
- Mary really didn't have time to go to meetings to plan technical details of proposals.
- Joe was curious about this client company and how they had used technology in the past.

Mary and Joe decided that, in future, Mary would document client requirements based on her history and sensitivity to client needs before the technical proposal was developed. Then Joe and Mary would meet after the plan was complete to be sure that she and the client could understand the features and benefits of the solution.

Step 5. Assess outcome and plan further action.

Two weeks after the meeting, the interviewer contacted Mary and Joe. They had followed through on the plan of action, and it worked fine for this proposal. Both wondered if such a formal process was necessary in the long run, but they agreed to use it as long as it was necessary.

The President reported at the next quarterly check-in meeting that Mary had begun to have lunch with Joe to explore ways they might develop and market new technologies to meet customers' needs.