



Introduction

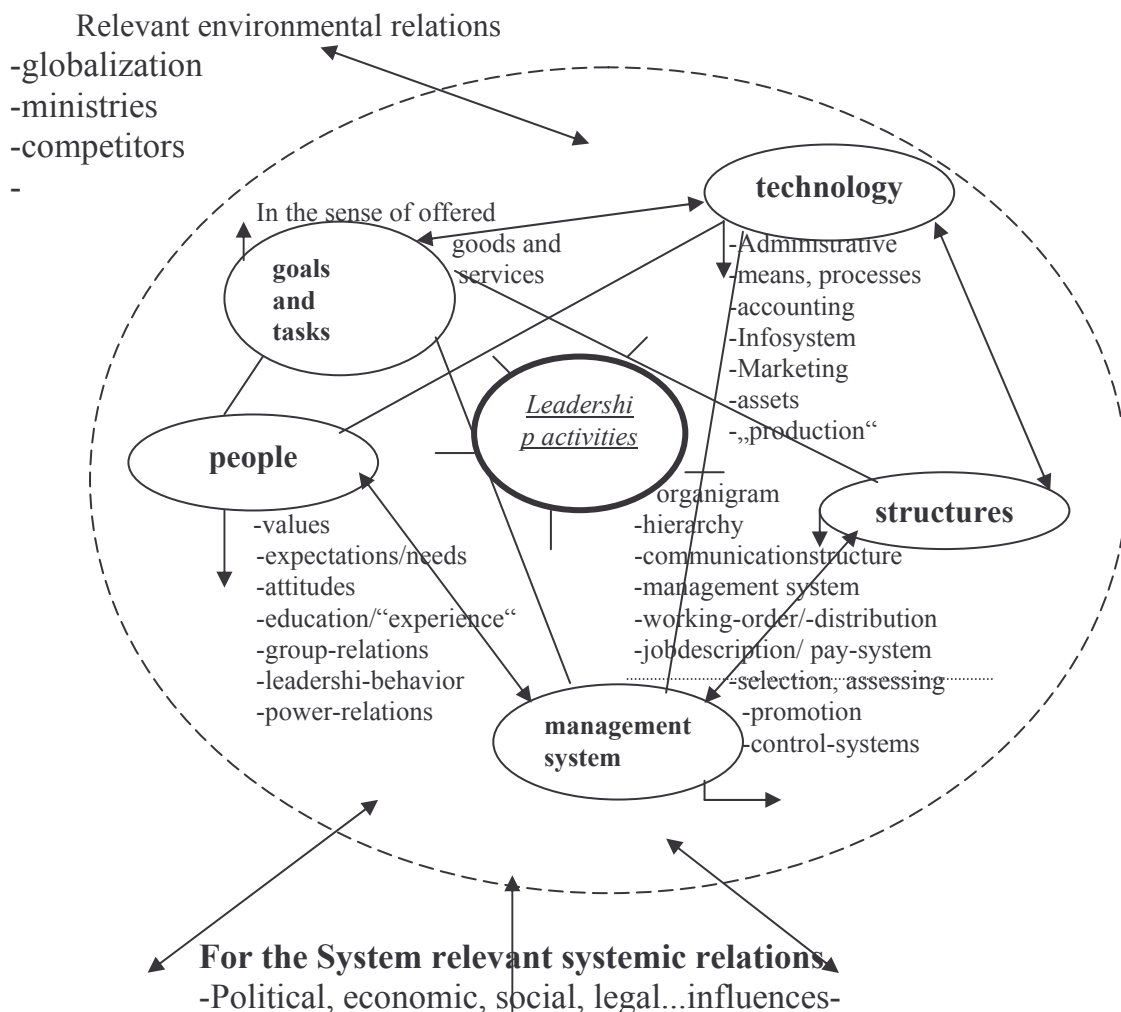
Welcome to this script, participant of a seminar, a (conflict management) workshop or an Organizational Development(OD) process. This script is meant for those of you who enjoy reading- not only after the action. It is part of building learning capabilities, as an essential part of producing more effective work (and life) practices.

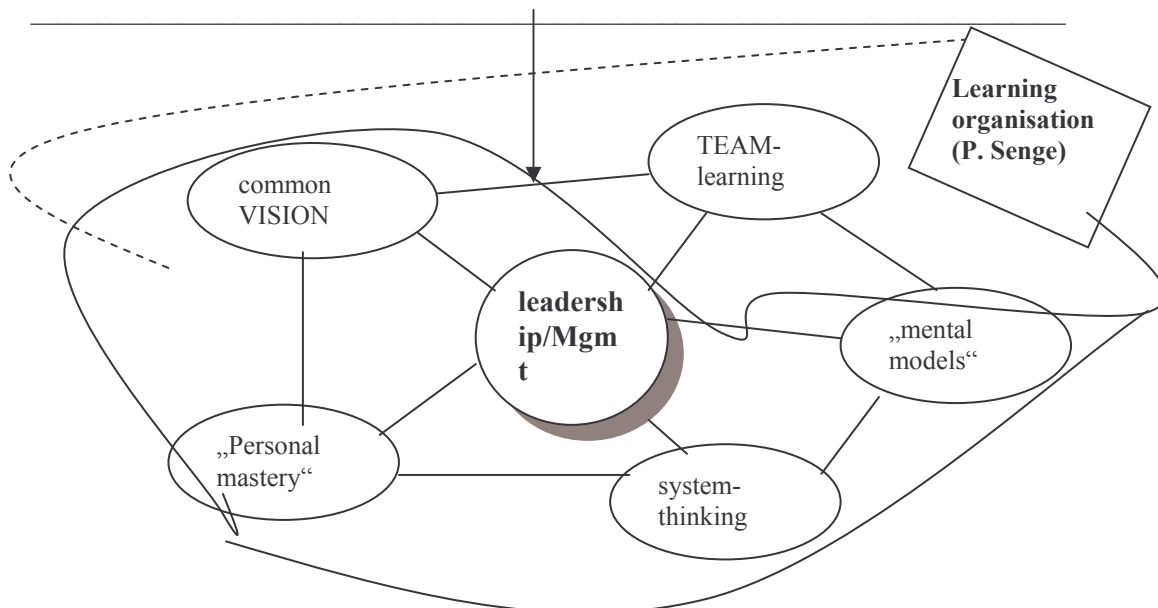
"We (the management) are pretty good at directing others to change, but not so great at changing ourselves." I use this citation in order to hint at the fact that people start seeing and dealing with a complex world with interdependencies and deeper causes of problems only as they develop the skills of system thinking.

Conflicts always relate to other aspects of the "surrounding world" and give important information where additional system-development has to be promoted. I perceive a growing awareness of the view that the responsibility for development and reaching goals lies with everybody managers, workers and employees, and not only in the hand of "heroic" CEOs. Nothing in nature- and in organizations- grows in the absence of limiting processes and all this in complex but structurable systemic interrelations. Growth dynamics can develop when we have the committment of all members.

The following graph of the open socio-technical-system serves to share one view we can look at the complexity of organizations.

Open Socio-Technical-System





Conflict, by nature belongs to our lives like earthquakes and thunderstorm. As part of our daily lives it is inevitable because of our highly complex, competitive and often litigious society. Whether in our personal relationships or our business interactions, each of us has their own ideas, opinions and needs. How we deal with these differences can determine our mental and physical health.

A conflict is born when tension develops in discussions and the parties involved do not regard this tension as the result of the different point of views but as a consequence of the behaviour of the other party. In addition some of the tension remains in the “belly” and “hostile image-construction” starts. The conflict is “imprisoned” on the relational side. Every time the parties meet the tension arises independent of the different contents.

Some conflicts are simply minor nuisances, may be differences of opinion, situational tensions or emotional outbursts, but others keep our relationships from realizing their full potential. Some become so severe, that they do irreparable damage to individuals, families, and the workplace. The efficiency, the output of organizations suffer enormously. Learning how to deal with conflict effectively is an increasingly essential life skill needed by every person and every group regardless of age, social role, profession or cultural background.

At a rather early stage of the escalation-process¹ conflict-parties cannot resolve the conflict on their own. They need assistance. At later stages the conflict can only be resolved by mediation, separation or other. In organisations this can be firing or displacement. What do you associate with conflict? Fight, avoidance, pain or wrongdoing?²

I share Dudley Weeks view that when we fear conflict or perceive it as a negative experience, we harm our chances of dealing with it effectively. I believe that conflict is neither positive nor negative in and of itself. It is an outgrowth of the diversity between us, you and me and how we see the world around us. Each of us can learn to share the basic attitude that conflict is the spice of life. We have the influence and power over whether or not conflict becomes negative and that influence and power is found in the way we handle us and “it”.

² Peter Senge et al: The Dance of Change, p

Man and Organization, Dr. Frank Rambaek, Berlin. This script to all those who give credit to those who did the work, so I to Dudley Weeks and you to me.

Some Preconditions for the resolution of conflicts:

- That the conflict parties **want to** resolve the conflict.(preparedness)
- That they hope they are **capable** to do it
- That they do **not blow up** (manipulate) the conflict, but that they do not treat it as a banality
- That they accept help and call for a consultant

After a successful conflict resolution both parties WIN, defeated is the conflict.

When I read Week's book I experienced something like: "Well this is exactly how my own reflections upon my different conflict interventions go and the language he uses appeals to me." I can assume that we are kindred spirits but that would go too far because *what* he writes is based on many more cases and with much more time taken for reflecting and writing.

So, when I started to write a new script, I decided to use this book as the basic source, cross-checking with my "old" material only to add where necessary.

I shall try to meet him one day, shake his hands and say: "Thank you for writing this book." I would give him my script and say to him:"This is my work *and* yours for those who are willing to follow the long and winding road of learning conflict resolution.

Five popular -but ineffective - approaches to conflict resolution

As people seek to improve their conflict resolution abilities, one of the most important preparation tasks is to look inside themselves to gain a better understanding of their own internal perception processes, tendencies, behavioral patterns...and beliefs. By doing so, they can learn to rearrange aspects such that their ineffective approaches fade away and improved conflict resolution behavior increases. This need not be threatening but it can be a valuable, enlightening, and even fun-adventurous experience.

We people tend not to like it when others put us into boxes filled with prejudices, images and stereotypes. "Typical man" or "woman driver". It helps when learning about effective and ineffective approaches to conflict to work consciously with certain types. Before going into the five popular but ineffective approaches I would like you to look at Virginia Satir's *4 typical ways of dealing with conflicts* where I perceive parallels to Weeks' points.

1. Accusing

is described as intimidating, accusing, refusing, judgemental, reproaching, demanding, never agreeing and acting presumptuous.

"What's the matter with you?" "You *never* do anything right!" "You *always* do that!"

This type tries to get his self-importance into the foreground in order to intimidate the other and to assert his own position.

And deep down what else does he feel?

2. Allaying

Here we have a kind and caring behavior, calming down, mediating, defending and protecting others, docile and agreeing easily.

"I do everything you want me to" (helpless helper) "Whatever you want it's okay with me."

And deep down what does he feel?

3. Rationalizing

He behaves quite rational and correct, emotions do not matter, he cites authorities, patronizes, proves logically, explains and interprets, is always right, uses abstract language, cannot trust feelings and emotions.

He tends to go for perfectionism and is not allowed to make mistakes.

And deep down what does he feel?

4. Distracting

He pretends not to understand, changes the subject, plays the helpless, talks redundant and irrelevant bubbles, speaks without relating to what others say or do.

This person feels he does not belong anywhere, avoids conflicts and follows no goals.

And deep down what does he feel?

Taken form Virginia Satir, 1975 with thanks to G. Martens, Munich

Conflict Types



accusing



allaying



rationalizing



distracting

Dudley Weeks in 1992 distinguishes between **five ineffective approaches** to conflict resolution. He seems to hint at one basic realization when we reflect upon solutions:

Very often the solution we choose is part of the problem

1. The Conquest approach

Similar to “*accusing*” we have scoring victory, defeating the opponent, proving how right you are and how wrong the other party is- these are the goals of the conquerer. This is done by creating the perception that the other party is at fault and should be penalized. Or somebody belittles the other in front of colleagues hoping that weakening the other would make oneself strong.

What’s wrong with the conquest approach?

- By depending on bullying and manipulation to weaken the other party it sets a pattern in which power is understood and used in destructive ways. A “loser” is necessary.
- The dominant party seems to have an advantage in determining the outcome but it perpetuates an unhealthy relationship whereby the contributions of the dominated party do not come forward.
- The conquest approach polarizes positions and greatly restricts options for resolving the conflict.
- This approach does nothing to improve a relationship, whether in friendships, families or work relations. The more this approach is used in dealing with conflicts, the more likely it is that the parties in the relationship will seek dominance rather than cooperation in other aspects of the relationship. Within the workplace the conquest approach creates needless and damaging power struggles and overall inefficiency.

2. The Avoidance Approach

Perhaps there is a link to “*allaying*” and “*distracting*” when we look at avoidance behavior which is both seductive and complex. Here people hope that conflicts will just dissolve if they pretend they do not exist. One type of avoider is so fearful of conflict that they try to avoid getting into relationships with people who differ in values, ideas, attitudes and a host of other characteristics. This type of avoider not only cheats himself out of potential enrichment that diverse relationships can provide but also perpetuates the misperceptions that conflict is negative, and that there are no effective ways to deal with conflict skillfully and positively. Other avoiders simply pretend that there is no conflict. “Others may think that because there is a conflict I am not competent.” Or, like many of us, they mistakenly assume that time will heal wounds and the conflict will disappear.

Others sidestep confrontation with the other party. Inwardly they acknowledge that there is a conflict, yet they refuse to confront the other party. They perceive confrontation, telling the other as strictly unfriendly behavior that destroy the (non-existing) harmony and a battle will ensue. Another reason is they may feel they would not belong anymore if they confront someone else.

Why the Avoidance approach does’nt work

People who avoid may be depriving themselves of opportunities for their own personal growth. Avoidance merely postpones dealing with the conflict and usually allows it to worsen. This does not imply ‘jump on every difference of opinion!’. Sometimes it may be wise to temporarily postpone dealing with a conflict if the timing, location, or mood of one or both parties involved might not be conducive to healthy dialogue.

Avoidance leads to misperceptions and unclarified wrong constructions of reality and feelings linked to it.

3. The Bargaining Approach

With bargaining, many people associate the core words of “demands” and “interests” and often the world of selling and buying and haggling over the price of goods. Success is defined by how much each party concedes. This age-old custom does not hurt anyone and can even be fun. But when people or Groups use only the bargaining approach in dealing with conflicts involving needs, values and personal feelings, effective conflict resolution is not served. Each party does not give up the same amount in conflict resolution. What can happen when bargaining is: “ We agreed on something, but nobody is happy about it.” Effective and sustainable conflict resolution is not assured because the parties involved compromise.

Why not bargain?

- The focus is on *demands* each party is making while ignoring the needs, perceptions, values, goals and feelings that are the heart and soul, the core identity of people involved. How do you compare the worth of a goal, or feeling, or value to another person’s?
- The bargaining approach defines power in terms of what one party can either coerce from or get the other to give up. If this strategy “quid pro quo” works, the successful party then brags about how powerful they were. This is an unhealthy pattern for relationships and can drain valuable energy from the alternative of doing such things as emphasizing mutual benefits rather than what each party can wrest away from each other.
- Spin-off conflicts are often created by the bargaining approach as each party manoeuvres for advantage and continues to make unrealistic demands that will not be accepted. Such demands create the appearance that the other party is unwilling to compromise because they never agree to any of the demands. The party or group being asked to do things becomes increasingly angry, refuses to discuss the conflict further or strikes back.
- The bargaining approach often obscures the *relative* value of needs, interests, and so on held by the parties in conflict. It is easier to bargain with numbers than it is to get to the heart of a conflict. The mindset may be easier, but it damages the relationship in the long run.

4. The Quick-Fixer or Bandaid approach

Many people feel so unwell when in conflict that they reach for whatever quick-fix solution they can find. Weeks calls this the ‘bandaid approach’ because the net effect is similar to putting a bandaid on an infected wound.

Why the quick-fixer slaps ineffective bandaids on conflicts varies from person to person. Perhaps the quick-fixer has little confidence in conflict resolution skills, or perhaps he or she is worried that if the true nature of a conflict is allowed to emerge, the threat of emotions becoming heightened also increases. Others may fear it might expose their personal vulnerabilities that might suggest a definite need for improvement in some aspects of their behavior.

Why the Bandaid approach doesn’t work

- The bandaid approach creates the illusion that the fundamental problems of a conflict have been addressed, “all will be fine now” thereby allowing some important matters to go unclarified and unresolved. This usually results in a worsening of the conflict.
- As there is no lasting improvement this approach often produces or heightens a lack of confidence in conflict resolution. Each party remains entrenched in blame and holds rigidly to its own point of view.

- This approach often temporarily rewards the quick-fixer, who can cleverly create the illusion that the part of the conflict he or she is able to put band-aids on are actually the gaping wound.
- The band-aid approach disempowers all parties because they do not develop a *process* they can use effectively in future conflicts.

5. The Role-Player Approach

During our lifetime we probably fill many diverse roles. Child, family member, student, worker, friend, spouse, parent, boss, member of groups: Endless. Although there are many situations in which people must make decisions and deal with issues using their role responsibilities, far too many unnecessarily hide behind their roles in dealing with conflicts. Rather than relating to others as people, they relate only from a persona: boss to employee, teacher to student, parent to child, and so on. Often barriers to a more flexible, fulfilling relationship are put up when the answer to the question “Why” is answered with: “Because I told you so!” This approach often creates worse conflicts later because the needs of the entire person, who is much more than just the characteristic of a particular role, were not considered and specific problems were not resolved.

In a conflict, when people act only from their roles, those in roles of lesser status and power will usually be further disadvantaged. This inequality is a fertile environment for the emergence of damaging conflict and ultimately a disintegration of the relationship.

What makes a role player act as such? Sometimes it is the fear he will lose the protection he perceives his role provides if he deals with the other party as a person, not just a role. Sometimes the reason may have to do with feelings of insecurity the role player has about his or her inadequate conflict resolution skills. Some role players believe that their role gives them the right to dominate people in lesser roles, especially in situations of conflict. They use their roles to tyrannize others.

Negative effects of the Role-Player Approach

- It can perpetuate an unfair relationship or system and block needed changes in that relationship or system.
- This approach cheats the conflict resolution process out of the valuable contributions a person in the less socially powerful role can make.
- It restricts the options for resolving the conflict.

While reading about these five ineffective approaches- and there may be more-perhaps you were looking for patterns that you may have a tendency to fall into when dealing with conflict. Fed from our personal “underground”, understanding what our tendencies are is an important step in identifying those things we need to work on and improve.

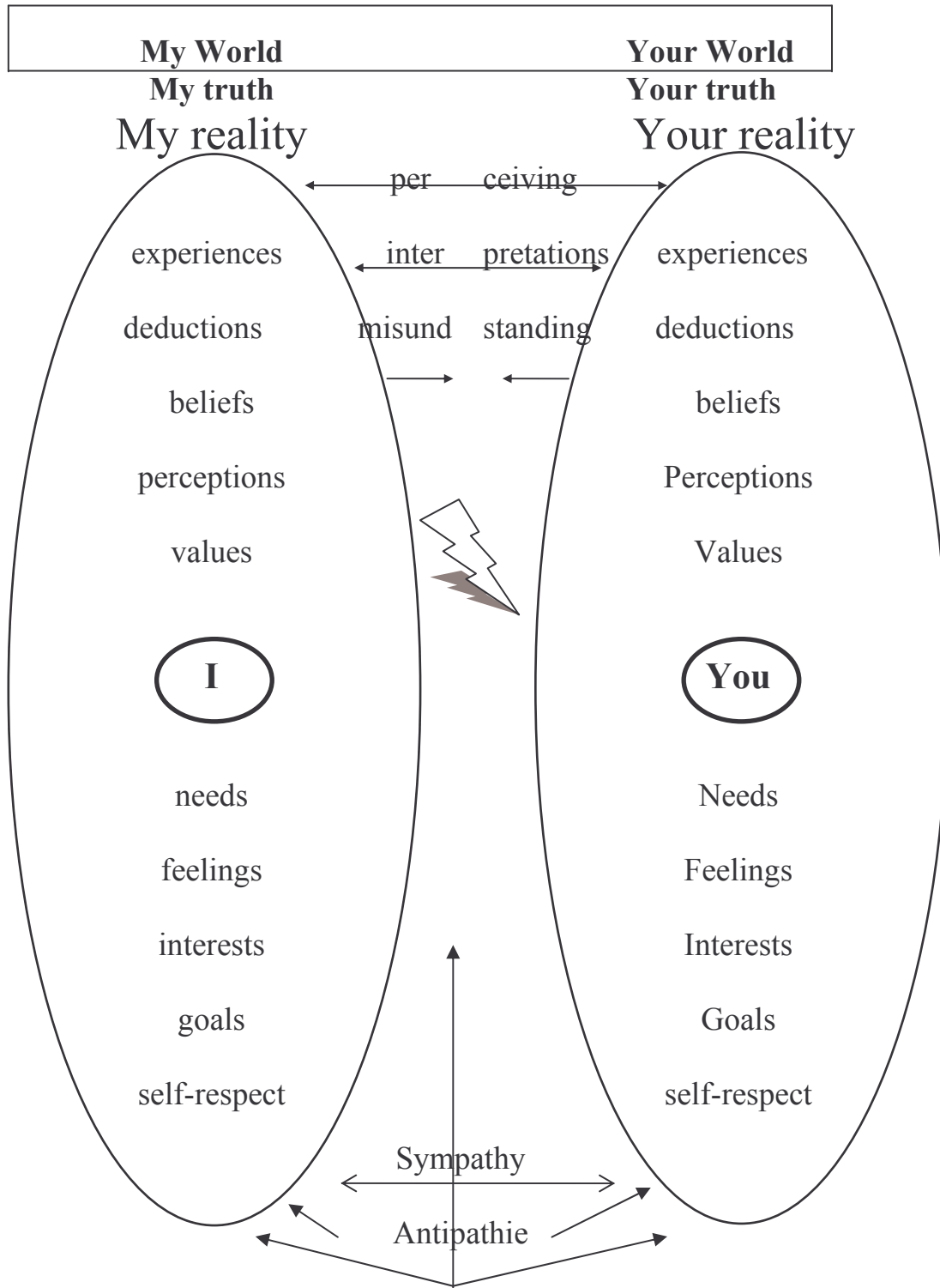
The Ingredients of Conflict

I find it a challenge to gain a clearer understanding of conflict experiencing the complex processes of the interplay between “systemic- objective” factors and the way they are subjectively digested by the people involved. The literature on conflict is full of topics like “causes of conflict”, “types of conflict”, “dynamics (escalation/de-escalation) of conflict” and “resolution methods.”

In order to reduce and structure the complexity I shall follow Dudley Weeks ‘*seven basic elements*’ that characterize most conflicts.

Before I do that, some *introductory remarks* about DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCES.

I share Weeks’ view that one of the basic problems connected with conflicts is the way people handle the “normal”, healthy aspect of human society DIVERSITY. Instead of celebrating diversity, seeing it as part of adventurous human life, people fear it or perceive it as a threat. Within our diversity as humans there are difference in perceptions, needs, values, power and many other components of human interaction.



Experiences in life and their personal „digestion“

Depending on the way we deal with these differences and disagreements, conflict can either be positive or negative. When working with conflicts, the point is not to *remove* the differences but to *use* those differences

- To clarify our understanding of each other and the relationship
- Consider ideas and possibilities we may not have thought about
- See if there are aspects of the relationship on which we can build effectively.

Diversity is an integral part of conflict and I assume that if you take the time to consider what the value of diversity in family, friendships and work place is, you will find many answers. We have the choice to promote diversity and thereby even stimulate conflict, but if we transform the way conflict is perceived, and if we employ effective conflict resolution skills, differences can be used to explore a wealth of possibilities, work for mutual benefits and clarify and improve relationships.

NEEDS

Needs are conditions we perceive we cannot do without, or that we believe are critical to the well-being and development of a relationship. The most fulfilling and mutually beneficial relationships are those in which the needs of both parties are met. The meeting of needs is essential to survival and development, conflicts over needs can be quite serious. Discord arises when one or both parties ignore needs, obstruct the meeting of needs, confuse needs with desires, or experience incompatibility over certain needs that one or both parties define as essential. Needs may be to feel appreciated, power, belonging, not to appear selfish or the need to contribute fully to the relationship.

Conflicts can arise when we ignore :

- the needs of the other party
- our own needs or
- the needs of the relationship

Conflicts may also arise when **needs are obstructed** either by another person, by the way the relationship is structured or by the systems of a workplace. If for instance no process is established through which assembly-line workers could contribute their suggestions for workplace improvement then this obstructs the workers' need to feel respected as intelligent and valuable people.

Needs and desires are not the same but they are often confused. Needs are more critical to person's life than are desires. Desires are not needed, they are *wanted*; they are not essential to the well-being of a person or group. People often desire something so strongly they interpret that desire as a need. Understandably, people become more intense and uncompromising, when pursuing needs than when trying to satisfy desires. Consequently for effective conflict resolution focussing on needs is essential, but at the same time we need to clarify which issues are needs and which are desires.

If parties perceive **needs to be incompatible** the ensuing conflict can be extremely frustrating and damaging.

PERCEPTIONS

I guess you have noticed: People interpret reality differently, but does that mean there is no *true* reality? Paul Watzlawick says we do not discover reality but we invent it. Can we conclude that **real** is after all that, which is called **real** by a sufficiently large number of people? Is then **reality** an agreement between people and can therefore be the result of communication? Of a particular event that happens in a certain way people can have different perceptions about how and why the event happened and what the event means. Some of these differing perceptions may be "incorrect", or, to use another word, they may be misperceptions; but if the perceiver believes the misperceptions are true, in effect, they become reality to that person. It becomes the source of action.

Many conflicts are the direct result of perceptions and misperceptions. Some conflicts grow out of *differing* perceptions. People in conflict might disagree on how something should be perceived, but unless they first clarify how each is actually perceiving the situation, effective

conflict resolution is unlikely. Some conflicts can just fade away if perceptions are clarified and the parties can understand and live with the world of the other.

Dudley Weeks gives us four types of perceptual conflicts: conflicts arising from (1) *self-perceptions*, (2) perceptions of the *other party*, (3) differing perceptions of *situations*, and (4) perceptions of *threat*.

Two categories of self-perception conflicts can be noted.

The **first** contains conflicts occurring because people base their self-perception on the perceptions or expectations others have from them, or the way they are treated by others. People who, in order to know or define themselves, must constantly check how they are being seen by others, or what others expect of them, are creating a breeding ground for damaging conflict.

Another expression of this first category of self-perception conflict comes when a person or group adopts a self-perception based on the way they are treated by others. Examples arise in relationships in which one party is treated as though she or he is inferior, or is oppressed or persecuted. If victimized people focus only on their victimization and see themselves as inferior or only as victims, conflicts usually arise. Why? Because the relationships become dominant-submissive, with the victim adopting a submissive role and sometimes lashing out at others in preemptive self-defense.

A **second** type of self-perception conflict occurs when a person's perception of his own values is unclear, or when his behavior is inconsistent with his values. If important values are not clear then it may happen that this value gets trampled or pushed aside by the values of others. Such values can also be those of one's parents.

Conflicts involving perceptions of the *other party* can have several manifestations.

One arises from the way a person or group perceives conflict itself. If one or both parties tend to see the existence of differences as a battle between adversaries, the other party is usually seen as a foe. When dealing with foes there is a great temptation to perceive the other party in their most negative aspects, often to the exclusion of their positive potential.

Another way perceptions of the *other party* can contribute to conflict centers on *images* of others that we allow to develop in our minds. Perhaps the images stem from rumors or gossip people accept as fact without finding out whether or not the rumors are actually true. Perhaps the images stem from judging the other party on only one especially disliked act, ignoring all of the more positive acts that person or group has committed. Or perhaps the images stem from stereotypes based on perceptions of race, gender, profession, political or religious preference or a host of other rigid categorizations of people and groups. Dealing with others as rigid images also tends to create within those people and groups a degree of frustration and anger because they feel they are being judged unfairly. That feeling often leads to and perpetuates conflict. Creating images is not only a "lazy" way of conducting relationships but also a potential producer of conflicts.

A **further manifestation** of conflicts caused by perceptions of the *other party* comes from intentional distortions of how the other party is perceived. Some people create false perceptions of others in a self-serving attempt to make the other party appear of lesser value. Often this is based on the illusion that "I can make myself seem better by making someone else appear wrong, weak, or of lesser value."

When people **perceive *situations*** differently, conflict can result if no direct clarification takes place.

Some conflicts arise from **perceptions of *threat***. A threat is an intention to inflict pain or injury, or a person who is regarded as a possible danger. Feelings of fear and insecurity may come up. We all know that there are events, situations, and people that do pose a real threat.

But people often choose to see threat where it does not „really“ exist, or to view anything that differs from their own way of thinking as a threat. *Reasons* why we allow ourselves to *feel threatened* can be:

- One is insecure in his or her beliefs and cannot allow the test of differing beliefs.
- One feels that to be powerful he or she must be in total charge of the situation, and any divergent opinion or behavior threatens that power.
- One may feel there are no effective skills to deal with differences and conflict, and that every conflict is thus a potential disaster. In addition the expected conflict is against ones own striving for harmony.

Power is another essential ingredient of conflict. How we define power, and how we use it, greatly influences the number and nature of conflicts within our relationships and the way we deal with those conflicts.

Weeks *defines* power as the capacity to act effectively and the ability to influence. Many people, however, behave as though they see power as the ability to make others behave as they want them to, to exert control, or to gain advantage over someone. When this definition of power guides behavior, damaging conflicts are inevitable, primarily because one of the parties in the relationship is, in effect, disempowered and made dependent on the other person's agenda for the relationship. I find it “fascinating“ when I meet leaders who “only want to do their best for their institution“ and at the same time they block decisions to realize improvements put forward by employees.

Values are something we consider to be of significant importance such as the value not trying to belittle someone as a way to try and make oneself seem better or a moral value such as being a vegetarian. A value can involve a belief, a principle, or even a pattern of behavior we have come to perceive as extremely worthwhile. Some values are of such critical worth to a person that there is little, if any, chance that the value will be changed or sacrificed, regardless of the situation. Other values are of lesser importance and may be altered or changed for the sake of the relationship.

Values can contribute to conflicts in several ways:

- Values and principles can lead to conflict when people jump to the conclusion that the conflict they are involved in is one of values or principles. It gives people a greater justification to defend their position and to go after what they want with fierce, self-righteous, unyielding energy. In reality, however, the conflict may be over *preferences*. Values and principles often involve ethical and even moral beliefs, which take on more importance in a person's life than do preferences. Many conflicts are caused when parties exaggerate the importance of preferences to such a degree that they become perceived as values and principles.
- Another way values lead to conflict occurs when one party refuses to accept the fact that the other party does indeed hold a particular idea, goal, or behavior as a value or principle rather than merely as a preference. It may be helpful to be more conscious of the differences between values and preferences and use this for a clarifying process.
- Another type of value conflict arises when the parties hold seemingly incompatible values. The key question becomes, How important is that particular value to the overall relationship? It may be crucial, or it may be of lesser importance than other values in the relationship.
- Finally, conflicts can emerge when one or both of the parties is unclear about its own value. Being „foggy“ or inconsistent about one's own values can cause great frustration and conflict in relationships. Clarifying one's own values- which are priorities and which are not-becomes a critical step in the process of effective conflict resolution. Conflicts over values and principles are among the most difficult we face.

Feelings and emotions are mostly part in conflict processes. There are many ways people deal with their emotions. In many cases, people let feelings and emotions become the primary determiners in dealing with conflict. In other cases, parties in conflict do the opposite, trying to ignore feelings and emotions, often because they fear that if they express them, they may seem out of control or may obscure what the conflict is really about. Some people just have not been able to develop the sensitiveness to perceive the effect their behavior has on feelings and emotions in the other party. In other cases, people acknowledge that feelings and emotions are involved, yet try to intellectualize them to the point that the other party never realizes the intense feelings a particular conflict is causing. All of these approaches to dealing with feelings and emotions can contribute to conflict. Human beings are feeling, emotional creatures of the stoneage, and thus feelings and emotions often play an important role in conflict and conflict resolution. If we do not touch the emotions *first* we cannot carry on with the content of the conflict. Whose feelings do we touch first and who is responsible to do this?

Conflict does not always involve another person, often severe conflicts occur *within* a person. Such **internal conflicts** are sometimes not recognized as internal and they create conflicts within relationships. It is important to understand that the initial conflict is sometimes internal.

Internal conflicts can be caused :

- When people are not sure what their values are, or of who or what they want to be
- When people are not sure what type of relationship they want with another person
- When people have diverse internal voices urging them to respond in various way, and deciding which voice to follow becomes a conflict producing dilemma.

Conflicts can arise also from different internal voices. How many times have you been in relationships and heard inside a variety of voices competing for dominance? They confuse us and we do not know which way to go and perhaps we let the loudest at the moment take over. Among the various types of conflicts people become embroiled in, perhaps none is more complex than internal conflicts. Often people do not want to admit that the source of the conflict they are having with someone else is actually within themselves. They find it much easier to blame the other party, thus creating a damaging conflict with that person instead of taking responsibility for and working on their internal conflict. In cases in which there is a combination of an internal conflict and a conflict with someone else, dealing effectively with one's internal conflicts first can greatly assist in dealing well with the other party.

Cornerstones for a growth oriented view of conflict

Dealing to some extent with ineffective approaches and the ingredients of conflict carries among others one important message: Whether we are in the role of being in conflict ourselves or the role of a mediator or conflict moderator, to be successful in conflict resolution we need some common understanding relating to conflict.

How we understand, our attitude towards conflict influences how we approach conflict resolution.

Conflict is an outgrowth of diversity and differences. As such, conflict is not always negative. Conflicts can be used to clarify relationships, open up alternative possibilities, and provide opportunities for mutual growth.

Conflicts are not always limited to battles between interests and desires. Needs, perceptions, power, values and principles, feelings and emotions, and internal conflicts are critical ingredients of our relationships and the conflicts that are part of them. We can also share the understanding that the dynamics of conflict hint as causes at systemic and human-psychological sources. Understanding which components are involved in a particular conflict is essential to resolving the conflict effectively.

The Conflict Partnership Process



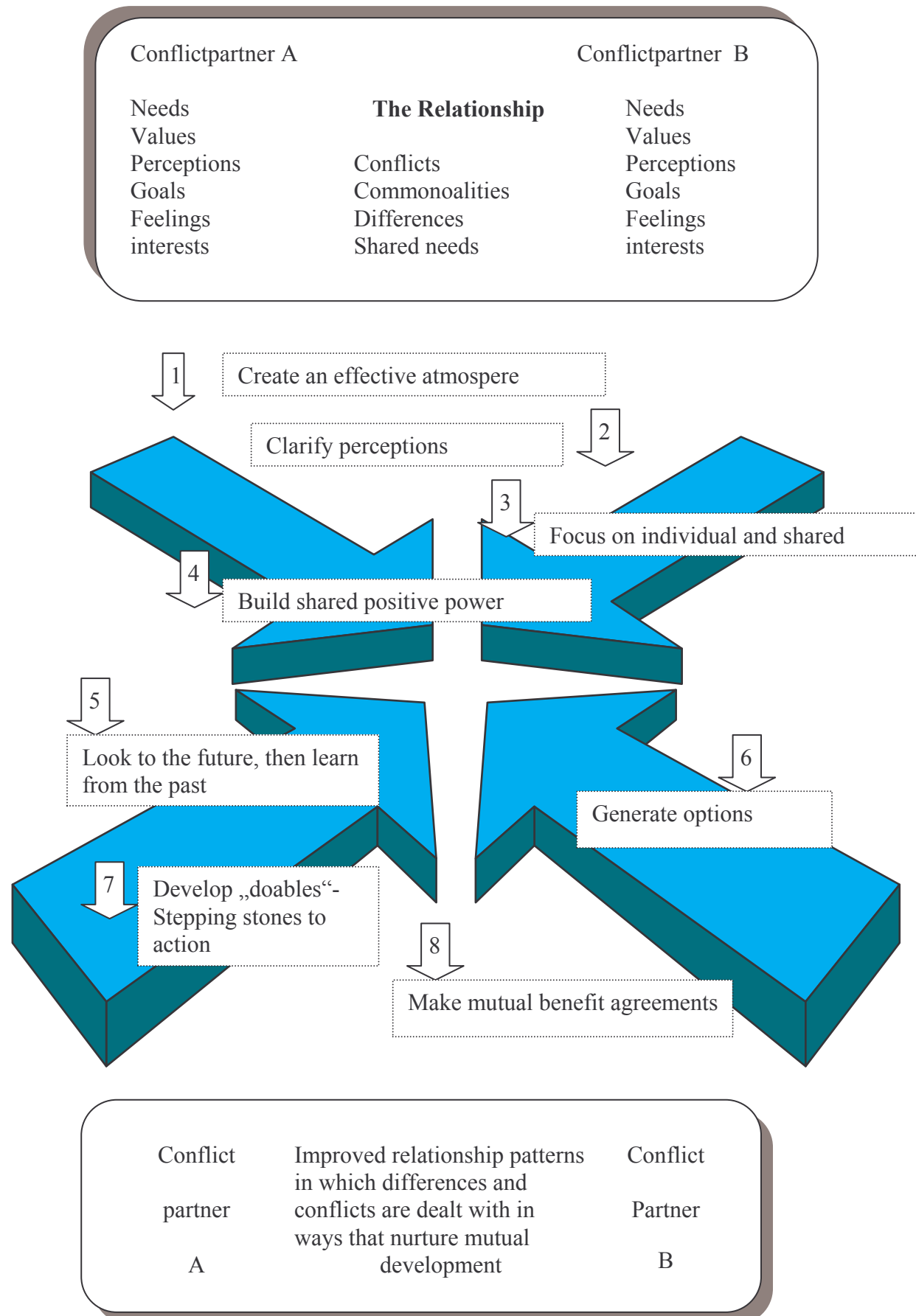
Conflict partnership is a process consisting of eight skills, or steps, that can empower people and groups to build mutually beneficial relationships and to resolve conflicts effectively. In the fertile ground of this process are **five basic principles** concerning how we can deal effectively with conflict.

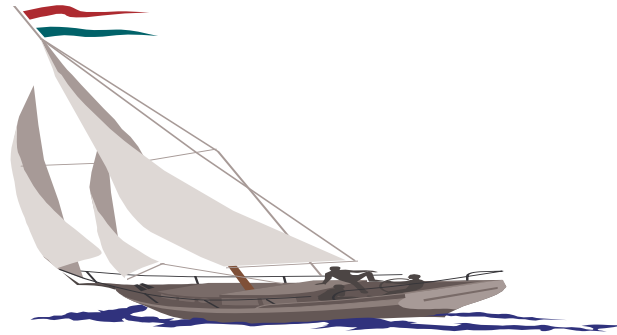
<p>1. WE; NOT I VERSUS YOU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The adversarial, combative I-versus-you pattern often found in conflict is transformed in something like: “We are working together to improve our relationship and to deal with our differences”. • Each partner needs the other if the conflict is to be dealt with successfully 	<p>2. CONFLICTS ARE DEALT WITH IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OVERALL RELATIONSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • people often lose sight of the needs, goals and other positive aspects of the overall relationship when in conflict, so keep them in mind! • a single conflict is not allowed to <i>become</i> the relationship
<p>3. EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION SHOULD IMPROVE THE RELATIONSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some apparent solutions to a specific conflict can actually harm the future relationship (e.g. quickly „negotiated“ or bandaid solutions) 	<p>4. EFFECTIVE RESOLUTION RESULTS IN MUTUAL BENEFITS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all parties must feel they have received something of benefit from the process, the benefit may not be the one they expected when the process began
<p>5. RELATIONSHIP - BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION ARE CONNECTED</p> <p>The process can be used to rebuild relationships on a more mutually beneficial foundation, and even to avoid future</p>	

If we compare this approach with the traditional conflict resolution/negotiation approach we can look at the following chart.

From	To
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An I-versus-you battle for victory and/or advantage over adversaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared <i>we</i> responsibility and opportunity to clarify and improve the relationship while resolving, with mutual benefit, particular conflicts arising within the relationship
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solely a rescue-squad reaction aimed at putting out conflict fires or temporarily fixing them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both a proactive process through which healthy relationships can be built and strengthened and a process to deal effectively with conflicts once they occur
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An event that begins when parties in conflict sit down to negotiate and ends when a temporary agreement is reached on a conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A process consisting of skills and steps taken both alone and with the other party before, during, and after working out a mutually, beneficial resolution to a conflict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way of dealing with conflicts that focuses on making demands and then on trading portions of those demands to gain advantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A process based on needs, both individual and shared, on clarified perceptions, on improving the relationship, and on mutual benefits, not domination

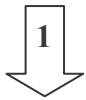
The Conflict-Partner Pathway to Effective Conflict Resolution





Perhaps we agree that learning to sail *well* takes some time to learn. And learning to deal *well* with conflicts, I believe, takes a life time. So when we sail along the eight steps there will be some comments with the idea: You, we can decide to follow with a clear vision and on the way just use all kinds of situations to practice and become a master in dealing with conflicts.

The Steps



**Create an
effective/
growth
oriented
Atmosphere**

Trees grow in an „atmosphere“ that offers the needed nutrients. The Germans have a saying “the beginning is the A and O for a successful interaction.“

It includes attention to, among other things, your personal preparation, the timing, the location, how to utilize the informal level, and the initial opening statement the parties in conflict make once they are together.

PERSONAL PREPARATION

- Besides preparing for the “case“, people involved etc. it is helpful to get your mind set. You can remind yourself, conflict is a chance to clarify and improve a relationship, you and the other party need each other as partners to *work* on the conflict.
- Go through a brief review of the steps and you will know where you want to pay special attention. You know your strengths and weaknesses best- and where to improve.
- Avoid locking yourself into rigid demands or expectations what the solutions must be. Options can be developed with the other party and it may be helpful if you have a few mutual-benefit options in mind, not too much in detail. In doing this, you “walk a few steps in the moccasins of the other“ which helps you not to get stuck in your own shoes.

TIMING

- Rather than jumping spontaneously into an intense conflict resolution process prematurely, do some ground work. Do both parties accept there is a conflict?
- Whose problem is it?
- Choose a time that is long enough and free enough from outside distractions
- Based on the characteristics of the individuals involved in the conflict, try to choose time that maximizes concentration and communication skills
- Choose a time that does not give an advantage to one party over the other, but maximizes the positive skills of all parties

PLACE

Except in cases for which there is no choice, determining where a conflict will be worked on should be a conscious decision. Location can have positive or negative influence. It is therefore recommended:

- Choose a place that is non-threatening to all parties, one that helps all

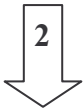
parties feel positively empowered to work effectively on the conflict. The imposing office as a location? Management and workers meet in the plush boardroom or on the factory floor?

- Choose a place that promotes a relationship of being connected in a partnership rather than being in an I-versus-you battle.
- In conflicts involving differing cultural or socioeconomic parties, choose a place that does not offend cultural values/mores or favor one party over the other

INITIAL COMMENTS OR OPENINGS

- There is no one perfect opening for every conflict. Much depends on the specific situation, are we part of the conflict or in a moderating role. If you ask for instance at the beginning: "How do we want to communicate here" and the answers fit into a dialogue culture then you have a solid fertile ground.
- The opening comments should address the partnership atmosphere e.g. by saying "we are dealing with our relationship and with our conflict". You can try to affirm the belief that options and feasible steps to improvement can be generated through a shared effort, and that you are open to suggestions. Let your conflict partner know that you believe it is both possible and healthy in a relationship to agree to disagree on certain points, and that there are other aspects of the relationship that remain strong even though you may be in conflict on a particular matter.

More suggestions on openings in Weeks, p.82ff.



We can clarify perceptions in three critical areas: Perception of the *conflict*, the *self* and of the *conflict partner*.

CLARIFYING PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONFLICT

We should take great care not to let a particular conflict define the entire relationship in our perceptions. People in conflict often assume they know what the conflict is about- and Mohammed might add: It is true, but incomplete.

Clarify

Important questions to ask first are:

Perceptions

⇒ Is the conflict over one rather isolated event that shows little consistency with the rest of the relationship, or is it but the latest in a series of conflicts revealing problems within the relationship as a whole?

⇒ Am I sure this is a conflict with the other party and not a conflict within myself?

⇒ What do I think the conflict is about? What is it not about?

⇒ Going through some issues in the past: Is the conflict over values or just preferences, is it over needs or desires, over goals or methods?

⇒ What are the components of the conflict? Which do I feel most strongly about?

Which parts should be dealt with first, which later?

Sorting the components of a conflict

Conflicts are not “monolithic“, they have various components we can identify. Some have to be dealt with immediately and others? The possibilities are limitless.

- We can attempt to find components we can use as starting points in the conflict resolution process. This may help building trust or confidence to work together.
- We try to identify parts of the conflict one or all parties feel are priorities, as for instance a common goal.
- We identify parts of the conflict in need of clarification, e.g. checking on (false) assumptions.
- We attempt to identify components that will need to be dealt with eventually, but should not be dealt with first.

We try to sort out what is primarily an internal conflict within one of the parties but what is being perceived (or selfishly used) as a conflict between the parties.

Dealing with value Conflicts

As mentioned earlier, when it is clear we *are* dealing with value conflicts, the following steps can be taken:

Clarify how important the value is to you and how important it is to the worth of the relationship, e.g. “Are there enough other values the other party and I share in our relationship to keep the relationship alive?“

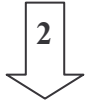
Clarify how important the value in conflict is to your partner

Understand that there are at least three options in dealing with value conflicts

1. The parties do battle until one of them gives in and changes position.
2. The parties agree to disagree on that value, and because the value is so critical, one or both parties end the relationship or find ways not to meet in future.
3. The parties agree to disagree on that value but find other parts of the relationship important enough to continue the relationship.

CLARIFYING PERCEPTIONS OF THE SELF

When in conflict we must clarify our perceptions of ourselves, otherwise no conflict resolution. Some questions, a kind of pre-conflict resolution self-



awareness checklist, can help to accomplish this task.

- How am I perceiving the conflict and its resolution? Terrible? A Chance?
- What are my needs? Which are the most vital and immediate? What does the relationship need, Will the relationship or will I be damaged if my need is not met? Do *my* needs obstruct needs of the *relationship*?
- What are my *goals* for the relationship, and how do my goals for this particular conflict affect them? (short-term versus long term goals)
- Are my *expectations* positive yet realistic? Are my expectations based on conquest view, rigid with no room for process, are they shaped by other people or groups, are they taking into account the other party's needs, values, and so on?
- What have I done to contribute to the cause and perpetuation of the conflict? Some people can allow for themselves this question, others need a more specific way to answer this question.
- What are my "buttons" and how might I recognize them and deal with them effectively? Perhaps I can learn to pause and work on alternative reactions.
- Do I tend to use my role as the first recourse in dealing with conflicts?

CLARIFYING PERCEPTIONS OF THE OTHER PARTY

Two general factors frequently obstruct our ability to clarify the perceptions we have of others.

1. Stereotyping: many people do by locking individuals and groups in stereotyped boxes, e.g. idiot, liar, authoritarian boss, especially in situations of conflict³. The other party then feels violated, misunderstood, and helpless to show the world who you *really* are. The enemy to fight against becomes the stereotyping. Stereotyping damages both parties and the conflict resolution process.

2. Ineffective Communication Skills: operate throughout the process of clarifying perceptions of the other.

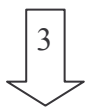
Listening well, really trying to understand what the meaning of what is being said by the other is an art. We often know how bad we are listening.

During the dynamics of the communication process sensing is most important, because we can perceive feed back and other informations from the other party. Sensing means being receptive with the assistance of our senses for all the verbal and especially *nonverbal communication*. I believe some authors of books have overemphasized sensing, "crossed arms means this.". Nonverbal communication is a holistic phenomenon and we take it as receivers very serious.

Asking clarifying questions is being capable to switch from making statements about concerns, needs to, for instance "What I understand you are telling me is (thus and so)". Important questions to ask can be:

- Is the conflict partner perceiving conflict negatively and perceiving conflict resolution as a threatening battle?
- What are their needs? I'd like to understand why you say you need that?
- What has led them to think or behave as they do?
- Am I trapping myself in a "fixed-image" perception?
- What buttons or vulnerabilities do they have, and how can I avoid using them?

³ Our perception narrows because stoneage-man in conflict is in stress.



**Focus on
individual
and
shared
needs**

Before going into the different needs that can be considered when there is conflict it may be helpful to point out on a general level:

- Needs form one of the essential foundations of relationships
- We often confuse needs with desires
- In relationships, the personal needs perceived by individuals should allow for consideration of the needs of the relationship.
- Conflicts often arise when needs are ignored or obstructed, or appear to be incompatible.

Weeks distinguishes between four sets of needs present in relationships: personal needs, the partner's needs, relationship needs and shared needs.

DEALING WITH PERSONAL NEEDS

Several questions we can ask ourselves when dealing with our personal needs

1. Looking at the current conflict, are any of my needs being ignored or obstructed? If those needs were being met, would there still be a conflict?
2. If I don't get what I say I'm needing, how will I be damaged?
3. What do I need to feel positive in this relationship? Are those needs being met? Does the current conflict have anything to do with those relationship needs? Does this particular need help promote the goals I have for the relationship?
4. Have I made my conflict partner aware of my needs, and have I clarified those needs so that they can be understood?
5. Try to picture what your life, or the relationship, will be like during the next week, month, or year, if you cannot have what you say you are needing.

DEALING WITH THE CONFLICT PARTNER'S NEEDS

We must be just as concerned about our conflict partner's needs as we are our own. Some of their needs must be met too if the conflict is to be resolved effectively and the relationship improved. Often we convince ourselves we know what the others need. Frequently, our assumptions are based on what we want the other party to be or to have. Rather than assuming ask your conflict partner two essential questions:

1. What do you need our relationship to provide?
2. What do you need as an outcome that will make you feel strengthened (or more enriched) as a person and that will help you feel our relationship has been improved?

DEALING WITH THE NEEDS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Sometimes particular personal wants (or even needs) one of the parties in conflict is feeling may not seem as critical as she or he first assumes when the needs of the overall relationship are considered.

Sometimes there are situations in which some lesser personal needs may have to be toned down or postponed because they may harm the overall relationship.

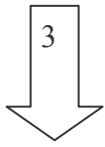
Helpful questions in this context can be:

What are the things you need most? and

What do you think the (workplace) relationship needs so that you can avoid the recurring battles you have been having?

If you do not get this particular item, will you be greatly hampered?

In the process of conflict resolution the parties can compare personal needs with relationship needs and work out their own priorities.



DEALING WITH SHARED NEEDS

Shared needs are the connecting points forming a weaving strong enough to allow the uniqueness of each partner to contribute value. Each partner has individual needs, but the partners also have needs they share. Often only personal, individual needs are voiced and accentuated, shared needs are not perceived. In order to recognize, develop and build upon shared needs we can **ask** the conflict partners:

At what points do you think your needs and their needs intersect; how do you need each other in order for you and your relationship to be strengthened and improved?

Needs are the foundation of existence and the building blocks of effective conflict resolution. Many people and groups locked in conflict focus their energy on making demands they want the other party to meet, or on assumptions they make about the other party, or on the perceived desires and interests incorrectly assumed to be the heart and soul of oneself and the other party.

Only when the energy of conflict resolution focuses on the four sets of needs operating in every relationship (personl, partner's, relationship and shared needs) will the conflict resolution process be effective and the relationship improved.



**Build
Shared
positive**

Power

Power seems to fascinate people, many books have been written on it, and scientifically on sources, kinds of power and ...I believe people choose on the basis of their personal backgrounds how they use power. We can use power negatively or positively. Conflict partnership employs positive and it is not a passive escape from confrontation that urges parties in conflict to be nice to each other; it is a *powerful* process. Many definitions and perceptions of power accentuate some sort of control over other people or groups. Weeks suggests the following **definition**:

Power consists of the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and behaviors that give people and groups the ability to act or perform effectively.

We can choose which of these elements of power we adopt and produce either positive or negative results. The type of power we use greatly influences the quality of relationships and the lasting effectiveness of conflict resolution.

NEGATIVE POWER has four characteristics:

1. It attempts to disempower the other party in an attempts to increase one's own power
2. It focuses on specific attempts to gain advantage over the other party and ignores or deemphasizes the negative effects those attempts have on the overall relationship.
3. It focuses on a „power over“ rather than a „power with“ relationship.
4. It uses what Weeks calls „seesaw“ power which relates to a playground game of one up one down with the meaning that one party believes their power is in part derived from making the other party weak or at least lessening its power. My power is dependent on how much power you have.

POSITIVE POWER

1. Seeks to promote the constructive capabilities of all parties involved in a conflict
2. Energizes a „power with“ process rather than a „power over“ pattern.
3. Avoids seesaw power, the misguided perception that weakening the conflict partner will somehow strengthen one's own power.

In relationships and conflict resolution processes three sets of power are inherent: self power, the partner's power and shared power.

For effective conflict resolution we need to

DEVELOP POSITIVE SELF POWER which

- *Involves having a clear self-image* and being clear and honest with ourselves. It means we base our perceptions of ourselves on what we believe to be our own needs, capabilities, priorities and goals.
- *Involves having a clear understanding of our values and a consistency between our values and behavior* otherwise partners become confused and lose respect.
- *Involves being in charge of yourself.* When you allow the negative behavior of your conflict partner to determine your own behaviour you are not in charge of yourself. To say „I had to react so and so because the other party said this and that“ is not taking responsibility for one's own action.
- *Involves learning and applying effective relationship and conflict resolution-skills.*

Further we need to energize

THE POSITIVE POWER OF THE CONFLICT PARTNER.

We can achieve this if we



- *keep reaching for the partner's positive potential and power*
- *don't define the other party only by their negative power and behavior otherwise we stereotype the other as e.g. irrational, bully, cold person)*
- *realize and act on the principle that you need the other party to be positively powerful and to use that positive power*
- *help create a process that leaves options open for the partner to make use of positive power*

SHARED POSITIVE POWER actually constructs the process and moves it toward effective conflict resolution. With positive self power and the positive power of the partner actively working, the remaining link in the interconnected process of positive power is formed when the conflict partners combine their power. This shared, dynamic, positive power is stronger than the individual power of each of the partners.



**Look to the
Future,
then
learn
from
the past**

Resolving conflicts effectively requires that we deal with the past, present and future. The past provides an experiential landscape for the present and the future, but the past is *not* the soil in which the present and future are irrevocably rooted. The past can impede conflict resolution, the present and the future are inseparable and the future develops in the womb of the present.

THE PAST CAN IMPEDE CONFLICT RESOLUTION, some ways are:

- *People sometimes allow the past to hold present and future possibilities prisoner by thinking that because they did not deal well with a conflict in the past, they cannot deal effectively with a current conflict.* For them it is futile to believe that they can ever act differently or even try to apply improved relationship and conflict resolution skills. Those who use this pattern usually say it is the other party who is incapable of improving. Such a stance hinders the development of positive power and positive influence in both parties.
- *People sometimes see only the past negative behavior of their conflict partner, refusing to see the positive potential, even if their partner's present behavior is encouraging.*
- *People sometimes blame themselves for what they were or did at some time in the past and continue to punish their own lives and their relationships in a subconscious attempt at penance.* Perhaps no misuse of the past is more agonizing and complex than allowing a past mistake to cover with guilt and shame one's own self-image in the present and future.
- *People sometimes are unwilling to let go of a particular demand or behavior they expressed in the past, even though that demand or behavior is no longer relevant or helpful in the present.* „I've done things that way all my life and I'm not going to change now!“ To admit something they did as damaging or ineffective they see as an admission of failure or they fear the unknown of trying new patterns.
- *People sometimes romanticize or glorify the past to such a degree that present behavior or relationships can never compare favorably with that past behavior or that past relationship.* Pleasant memories of the past time, event, behavior or relationship are wonderful and cherished gifts, but we must beware of using them as nostalgic hindrances to resolving conflicts effectively and making the present and future the best we possibly can.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST means we do not allow ourselves to be defined by the past, to be trapped in perceptions that use past patterns. Weeks mentions three major steps we need to take to make our conflict resolution efforts effective.

1. We need to *try* to focus on what we can do now and tomorrow, no matter what has occurred in the past, no matter how difficult it may be for some not to confront the past.
2. We need to understand the part that past events have played in creating a particular conflict.
3. We need to develop and use skills that can help us learn from the past so that the way we deal with our differences and our relationship in the future will be improved.

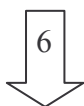
Understanding the part played by the past

1. Trace the relationship back to the point before the conflict began to emerge. What positive things gave your relationship strength and meaning?



2. Try to identify and understand what specific acts or events/issues played apart in creating the current conflict. Then it may be helpful to look at a specific, „typical“ issue in detail how you and the partner perceived what happened and why. This may lead to understanding reasons and motives and takes the focus away from the negative effects of the behavior.
3. Ask yourself and the conflict partner what each of you needs to have done about that past event in order to move beyond it and deal with what you can do now and in the future to improve the relationship. Apologies may sometimes be apt but watch out! Insisting on apologies can frequently turn into a needless ego battle.

If in conflict resolution we FOCUS ON THE PRESENT-FUTURE we encourage that a successful process can evolve because conflict resolution is not an event, it is a process.



Generate

Options

Our ability to discover new possibilities within relationships and within conflict resolution is often impaired by the "packaged" truths and limited vision we hold onto in times of stress, insecurity and conflict. Generating options can often break through the preconceived imitations we bring with us into the conflict resolution process. Before the parties work *together* both need to take their time individually for a PREPARATION PHASE before entering into a dialogue. Preparing can involve several tasks:

- Trace the conflict back to a time before it reached its current level of difficulty and ask yourself what options you may have left unexplored as the conflict increased step by step. This may help you to focus more on the present-future.
- Come prepared with several specific options you have determined meet some shared needs, require shared power to be implemented and can become specific steps toward dealing with the conflict and improving the relationship. Do this with the approach of a brainstorm, generating options as starting points. You can work on the feasibility later in the process with your conflict partner.

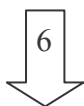
When doing this we can be aware of the possible trap of "preconceived answers" that might not serve as a viable option to the other party.

Where are possible commonalities within the seemingly incompatible options?

If prepared options seem incompatible clarify where disagreements are, set aside those options and work together to generate other option toher parts of the relationship or conflict. This may mean we are wisely acknowledging that an impasse has been reached on only one part of the conflict.

Before entering the dialogue we can use our capability to IMAGE OPTIONS. You can look at a particular conflict you are experiencing in the relationship. Imagine yourself in the future, after the conflict has been dealt with effectively. Image the way you want to feel, the way you want your partner to feel and the way you hope the relationship will be after dealing with the conflict. This can be quite specific like your imaged future relationship may include an nonthreatening, constructive, clarifying dialogue on a particular bothersome difference in values. Or it may include an agreement for each of you to stop doing a particular thing that always seems to cause conflict.

When you start the conflict resolution step of generating options, ask for the options of the other party first. LEARNING YOUR CONFLICT PARTNERS OPTIONS. This is especially important if the other is feeling disempowered and it also helps us avoid the temptation of becoming trapped in our own preconceived answers. If you ask the other party for options, often they meet your own preconceived answers; they may also lead you to let go of your own preconceived option because there are good ideas you have not thought of.



In FREE-FLOW OPTIONING you can brainstorm *and* imagine some of their possible effects. The process is as follows:

1. All parties are encouraged to set aside temporarily the previously suggested ideas and to make new suggestions.
2. Someone has the responsibility to record all suggestions such that all can see the growing list.
3. Before going into the feasibility discussion, the pros and cons have at



least four or five new ideas. Also, care must be taken that the list does not become too long.

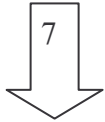
4. Rather than discussing each idea separately it can be effective to look at the list for common threads among the various suggestions.
5. When the list is narrowed down to those suggestions involving common threads the next step is to image the possible outcomes of the common thread options. Do they meet shared needs, promote shared positive power and improve the relationship for the present-future?

I suggest some room for humour in an otherwise tense environment.

Now the most possible options KEY OPTIONS can be identified.

A key option

- meets one or more shared needs
- meets one or more indiviual needs that are not incompatible with another party's individual needs
- requires mutual positive power to be implemented
- has the potential of improving future relationship patterns and is itself a "doable" (see step 7), or it has one or more doables within it.
- can at least be accepted or, even better, enthusiastically supported by all parties.



***Develop
"Doables":
the
stepping
stones
to Action***

The previous six steps can be seen as the building stones toward the crucial task of implementing those specific actions that parties in conflict can take to improve their relationship and resolve conflicts within the relationship. From time to time I have made the experience that parties expect to jump straight to the grand "solution", the outcome that they have predetermined is the only circumstance indicating that conflict resolution has really worked. But very often in life every journey begins with a single step. In order to develop it is helpful to be clear non WHAT IS A DOABLE?

A doable is an action that embodies the following

1. It stands a good chance of being accomplished
2. It does not favor one party at the expense of other parties
3. It usually requires the participation of all parties involved in the conflict in order to be implemented successfully.
4. It uses the positive power of the conflict partners, ideally involving shared positive power, in which the partners need each other to make progress work.
5. It helps build trust, momentum and confidence in working together.
6. It adds another stepping-stone along the pathway to improving the overall relationship and reaching mutual-benefit outcomes of particular conflicts within the relationship.

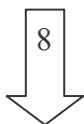
Getting to the point at which doables can be identified and acted upon can involve all the conflict partnership skills discussed so far. Some are especially crucial. *Focusing on shared needs* provides doables with their building blocks, *shared positive power* gives doables the energy and strength that make them work. *Generating options* can reveal possible doables and *identifying key options* from among those generated can reveal that some of the key options can indeed become doables.

TAKING CARE IN CHOOSING DOABLES

It is tempting to see every tiny step parties in conflict can agree on as a doable. Such is often not the case and we need to be attentive what can serve as viable-stepping-stones leading to mutually beneficial ends.

- Make sure that the doable is not just a temporary quick-fix Bandaid.
- Make sure that the doable is not a delaying tactic favoring only one of the parties.
- Doables are not ends in themselves. they are steps that can move conflict partners closer to mutually healthy decisions on major issues. Flipping a coin and the loser made life miserable for the winner would be such a practice.
- A conflict is not completely resolved just because a temporary agreement is reached.

Doables play a major role in resolving conflicts and improving relationships they either lead to the final step which Weeks calls "mutual benefit agreements", or are significant enough to be mutual benefit agreements in themselves.



***Make
Mutual
Benefit
Agreements***

For agreements to be effective and lasting, they need to be based on individual and shared positive power the latter becoming the energy of the improved relationship. Some other elements of mutual-benefit agreements are also important:

MUTUAL-BENEFIT AGREEMENTS REPLACE DEMANDS

Effective conflict resolution and healthy relationships cannot thrive in the atmosphere created by demands. Demands tend to lock relationship parties into patterns characterized by negative power, a struggle for dominance and the assumption that conflict resolution is simply the trading of portions of demands. In the conflict partnership process, the parties in conflict move beyond the ineffective pattern of seeing each other in terms of the demands each has made. Instead of demands, the parties focus on developing agreements that can meet some of each party's needs, accomplish some shared goals and establish a precedent in which power is defined as positive mutual action through which disagreement can be dealt with constructively.

MUTUAL-BENEFIT AGREEMENTS ARE BUILT ON DOABLES

Mutual-benefit agreements on major issues usually become possible only after the conflict partners have developed some doables on matters involving less volatile components of the conflict. Smaller steps (doables) are often a precondition for the development of agreements on major issues. *The work of conflict resolution is not finished just because some doables have been accomplished. In many cases the more difficult issues still await attention and decision; they await mutual-benefit agreements.*

Mutual-benefit proposals usually deal with the most difficult issues and combine steps of improvement into a comprehensive agreement. Some cases show that mutual-benefit proposals could finally be developed as much as a year after the first doables were accomplished.

BEING A CARETAKER OF THE PARTNER'S WELFARE

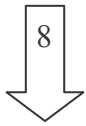
This means that all conflict partners serve as caretakers for the welfare of the self, of the other partner and of the relationship. Each partner needs to evaluate agreements based on mutual benefits.

MUTUAL-BENEFIT AGREEMENTS NEED TO CONSIDER GIVENS

As we develop mutual-benefit agreements, it is important to realize that in almost every conflict there are certain components (situations, needs, values, goals and so on) that are of such critical importance to one or both of the parties that they *cannot be altered* or compromised. I find this a very crucial field in conflict resolution. We must caution ourselves to resist the temptation of incorrectly identifying everything we want in dealing with a conflict as a given. To do so is perhaps an attempt to secure our *demands* by claiming that a particular desire is not open to discussion. *It is important to take special care not to use the idea of givens as a manipulative tool.* To do so will harm the relationship and obstruct healthy conflict resolution. Givens can be for instance values and beliefs on a particular issue so the conflict partners can agree to disagree on the issue and continue from there.

CLARIFYING SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES

What can happen after parties have agreed that in the next few days or weeks confusion comes up as to what each party had actually agreed. They had not made sure that they understood the specifics of their mutual agreements before ending their discussions. This makes clear, the specific



responsibilities and agreements have to be clarified and written down.

KEEPING THE CONFLICT PARTNERSHIP PROCESS ALIVE

As I mentioned in the introduction I believe dealing with conflicts is also a very personal thing that touches every part of our own personality we have developed till now. At the same time we can say to ourselves: Aren't we lucky that we have to live with conflicts because they offer us the chance to continue the adventure of our own development. It may be better to travel than to arrive and for this journey some suggestions:

Keep reminding yourself that the conflict partnership skills are not just for conflict resolution. They are also relationship-building skills that you can use whether a conflict is present or not.

2. Look through the eight steps and check which ones you most frequently ignore or violate. Work on those particular skills first and utilize all kinds of situations for practicing. I believe it to be difficult to throw out old patterns but we can internalize new patterns.
3. Keep reminding yourself that whenever you use the skills, you are empowering yourself, your relationships and your conflict partners be this in your family or work life.
4. Use step 2 in the conflict partnership process, *clarifying perceptions*, as soon as the first signs of a conflict appear. It is a vital skill that is fairly to set in motion. Many conflicts do not escalate because perceptions are clarified at an early stage.
5. Share what you have learned with others you come upon (in a non-patronizing way). This may empower them so that they can empower others, and: Keep the skills alive in yourself.



Recommended Literature:

Friedrich Glasl: Konfliktmanagement, Bern 1992

Christop Thomann: Klärungshilfe. Konflikte im Beruf, 1998.

Erik J.van Slyke: Listening to Conflict. Finding Constructive Solutions to Workplace Disputes, 1999.

Dudley Weeks: The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution, NY 1994.