Conflict management in the workplace

Understand, navigate, prevent

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Perspectus Kommunikation

CONTENTS

1. Introduction

This book looks at what happens when conflicting opinions arise about how an issue should be resolved or when there are feelings of irritation concerning the behavior of others. In particular focus here are workplace conflicts, but the contents of the book are largely relevant to conflicts occurring in other contexts as well. Differences of opinion and feelings of irritation are natural, everyday phenomena, but they can be handled in different ways. Conflicts that are allowed to drift over onto destructive paths can have various negative consequences, the most obvious of which are the personal frustration and suffering experienced by those directly involved – which, if worst comes to worst, can lead to illness absence from work and burnout. People who find themselves involved in a conflict often have great difficulties communicating and cooperating with each other, which leads to work of lower quality. Poor handling of conflicts affects the atmosphere at the workplace as a whole; it also leads to energy being spent on struggling with the conflict (and its psychological and practical consequences) – energy that could have been spent on something better. If the person in charge does not assume responsibility for dealing with a conflict that the involved parties cannot resolve on their own, confidence in the organization's leadership will be undermined. This may have repercussions for the entire workplace, over and above the specific conflict at hand.

In connection with my courses on conflict management, I meet a great many people from different parts of working life. One tool I often use in these courses is the 9-step model of conflict escalation presented in Chapter 3. I usually ask participants whether they have personal experience of conflicts that have reached Step 5 or more in the escalation ladder, that is, conflicts that have become so severe that they have caused almost irreparable damage to the relationships between the involved parties. If the course participants are more experienced leaders, human relations specialists or union representatives, it is typical for well over half of them to

respond in the affirmative to this question. This means that even if you have not yet experienced such a difficult conflict, there is a relatively good chance that you will do so sooner or later.

Having knowledge about conflicts, and the skills to manage them, is not, however, only a matter of avoiding unpleasantness. Skillfully managing a conflict may result in tangible benefits for both individuals and the organization. There is hardly any experience that can create such a strong feeling of trust and confidence as that of successfully dealing with a very difficult situation in a dignified and constructive manner. At a workplace that has never really been put to the test, one does not know what to expect of others even if the work atmosphere has been good so far. Skillful conflict management may even serve as an important driving force in the organization's development and learning processes, particularly when people learn from what has occurred and take measures to solve underlying problems that enabled the conflict in the first place.

Conflict management skills

When we get involved in conflicts, we are part of and affect their course – whether we like it or not. Sometimes imprudent reactions get the upper hand; sometimes we try to do what we think is right, but things don't turn out like we wanted. Even with the help of knowledge about and skills in conflict management, there is no guarantee that all the conflicts one faces can be resolved in a way that will satisfy all of the involved parties. However, conflict management skills can make a great difference in the outcome for oneself and others. If one also works purposefully toward building up and maintaining a robust collaboration culture, an environment can be created in which conflicts are very unlikely to become destructive in nature. I have a German colleague, Volker Buddrus, who compiled a report with the provocative title *Konfliktermöglichung in der Schule* (Enabling Conflict in the Schools). His idea is that we have to enable open, constructive work with conflicts, as opposed to suppressing or ignoring

them. To be sure, it may not be particularly well-advised to invest time and energy in all of the conflicts we hear about, but it is nonetheless desirable to defuse conflict situations and to see them as manageable – and perhaps at best as opportunities for development.

The book's contents

The subsequent chapters provide tools for seeing, understanding and managing conflicts. Chapter 2 and 3 offer concepts and models that allow us to perceive and understand conflicts. The field of knowledge concerning conflict management is normally associated with skills in constructively dealing with disagreements and collaboration difficulties. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the challenges posed when one takes on the task of trying to manage conflicts constructively. In Chapter 5, we look at self-awareness and the consequences of lack of self-awareness, which is one of the most important aspects of developing conflict management skills. Chapter 6 deals with the craft of communication, that is, how we use the two main elements of communication – listening and advocating – as problem-solving tools. Being able to deal skillfully with conflict situations is a valuable capacity, but it is only one of three important tasks (Figure 1.1).

Prevent – Manage – Learn

Figure 1.1 The three tasks of conflict management

In the long run, being able to prevent conflicts by establishing a robust collaboration culture in which disagreements and feelings of frustration are typically dealt with directly and constructively is a more important skill

than being able to deal with acute conflict situations. Having a robust collaboration culture entails having good communication practices and tools for recognizing emerging conflicts and steering them onto constructive paths. With these things in place, there is a low risk of conflicts developing into protracted, destructive processes. This concerns much more than preventing conflicts, because it involves how we communicate with each other, how we collaborate and how we create work communities in which genuine learning takes place. Among other things, a learning organization is one where people actually reflect on what is not working and search for ways to prevent similar problems from arising in the future. Chapter 7 provides suggestions of strategies for managing conflicts that are not quickly and easily resolved. Finally, in Chapter 8, we look at organizational strategies for long-term work with building up robust collaboration cultures and with making it as easy as possible for employees at the workplace to resolve issues at early stages.

Power, rights and needs as the basic approaches in conflict management

One of the eternal questions facing us humans is how we should deal with disagreements and feelings of irritation. Various approaches have prevailed throughout history and across cultures. In a broad perspective, it may be fruitful to consider three conflict management approaches that have played a prominent role in working life in the West: the power-based approach, the rights-based approach and the needs-based approach (Ury, Brett & Goldberg 1988).

Looking back in history, we see that the power-based approach prevailed. This means quite simply that when differences of opinion or cooperation difficulties arose, the leader decided the outcome and the others had to accept it. For this approach to work, there had to be clear power hierarchies and power resources enabling those in power to enforce their decisions.

One advantage of the power-based approach is that conflicts can be resolved quickly. One disadvantage is that it is totally dependent on the motives and skills of those in power. If the way is clear for an unprofessional, ignorant, egocentric or neurotic leader to do as he or she pleases, the result can be a great deal of misery for employees.

The growth of a rights-based approach was a reaction to the drawbacks of the power-based approach. With this new approach, rules, rights and principles were established to constrain those in power and protect their subordinates. When difficult conflicts arise, it is not the discretion of leaders that determines the outcome. Instead, the issue is addressed through procedures that are guided by laws, agreements and other principles. If, in the situation at hand, the principles are crystal clear, then there is no need for negotiation: One only needs to adhere to the principles. The rights-based (or principle-based) approach is of particular importance to those who find themselves in vulnerable positions. The disadvantage of this approach is that it requires that general rules and principles be formulated that are equally applicable in all situations. This means that one must be able to predict and describe the situations that might arise and stipulate what is to be done in each of them. This is not an easy task. For this reason, a rights-based approach will primarily be used in late-stage conflicts, and it only has a limited number of alternative solutions to offer. One good example here is the legislation on discrimination, which requires proof that one has been subjected to what the law describes as discrimination. If one is successful, one can receive damages and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing one's employer penalized. But what actually occurred is seldom resolved. Moreover, the procedure is not intended to promote lessons being learned from what occurred – lessons that might enable prevention of similar events in the future.

The great accumulation of collaboration problems and conflicts that the power-based and rights-based approaches leave unresolved constitute the breeding ground for the needs-based approach. This approach builds on a search for ways to meet the involved parties' needs, the idea being that the

conflict can be resolved in a way that will promote good relationships. This typically involves creating various kinds of investigative dialogues, in which the parties' views, desires and needs are formulated and in which possibilities to achieve a common view of what constitutes a good solution are sought. There are many types of needs-based approaches, everything from informal conversations in staff meetings and mediation, to interventions run by consultants who, along with the involved parties, use various techniques to work through the conflict's constituent parts.

All three of these approaches are used today in working life. Sometimes one of them pre-dominates, sometimes all three are used depending on the situation, and at other times arguments ensue as to which approach is most appropriate. A sound workplace is organized so that all three approaches can be used: (1) forums for problem-solving dialogues and negotiations, (2) forms and guidelines for managing foreseeable disputes, and (3) clear mandates for legitimate unilateral decision-making when solutions cannot be achieved through dialogue and negotiation (see Chapter 8). In many cases, conflicts become prolonged and hostile because attempts have been made to resolve them using an approach that is ill suited to the situation. It is easy to see how the brutal exercise of power may aggravate a conflict, but it is just as common for too little use of power to result in a malignant course of the conflict. One of the challenges particularly leaders and human relations specialists face is to ensure that the individual workplace has tools that allow these three approaches to be used to prevent and manage conflicts.

2. The ABC of conflict

For many people, the word "conflict" stands for something major, dramatic and extraordinary. However, most people who work with conflicts on a professional level prefer to regard them as natural, unavoidable, and not necessarily negative elements of human relations. There are advantages associated with viewing conflicts as a natural part of everyday life and, as such, as something we need to be able to deal with in a satisfactory manner. My definition of the term encompasses the entire continuum, from more or less trivial conflicts to dramatic and vitally important ones. The definition identifies the forces at play in conflict situations, i.e., the forces we need to be able to deal with constructively.

The definition has four parts:

A conflict arises
(i) when one or more parties have desires they are not willing to give up, and
(ii) when they feel that someone else is obstructing fulfillment of these desires.
(iii) When this obstruction of important unfulfilled desires remains, frustration arises.
(iv) This compels at least one of the parties to act in some way in relation to the other party.

In this view, the frustration caused by someone else obstructing one's important desires provides the energy that spurs the conflict forward. Being frustrated is unpleasant and, thus, the feeling turns into an internal pressure to act: As long as we are frustrated, we are compelled to do something to avoid it. Unless we are prepared to give up our desires, the only alternative is to try to make the other party stop obstructing us.

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│                             │
│         DESIRES             │
│      one won't give up      │
│             +               │
│        OBSTRUCTION          │
│      by someone else        │
│             │               │
│        FRUSTRATION          │
│             │               │
│          ACTION             │
│                             │
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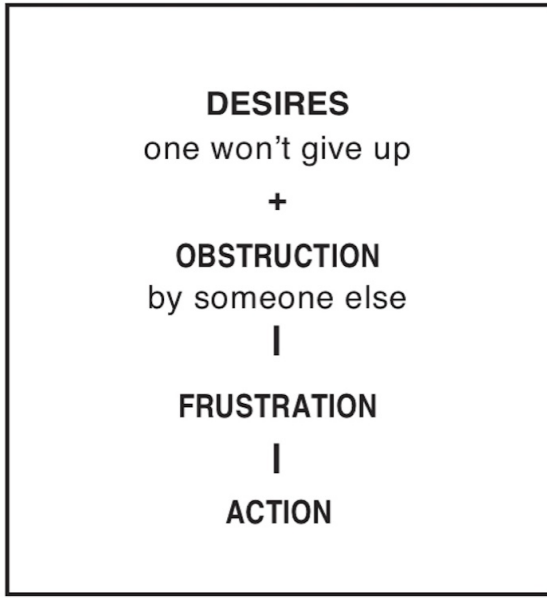
Figure 2.1. Definition of conflict

If the obstruction continues, and if one's desires are experienced as too important to give up, then the frustration will build up constantly. One tries different ways of getting the other party to stop obstructing fulfillment of one's desires. At the same time as one realizes, through experience, that some methods of handling the conflict do not work, one is also successively using up the tools in one's repertoire. This often leads to an escalation of the conflict; i.e., one or more of the parties involved lose any hope of resolving the question through dialogue, and instead begin resorting to different means of pressuring the other party. Thus, according to this point of view, the parties' increasingly antagonistic behavior can be explained in terms of the frustration caused by all of one's tested methods having failed.

The above conflict definition also implies that the parties having different opinions or disliking each other is not enough to qualify as a conflict. At least one of the parties must act in some way to try to fulfill his/her obstructed desires.[1] Thus, we can talk about a conflict existing even when one of the parties denies that there is a problem. It is sufficient if only one

of the involved parties acts on the perception that his/her own desires are being obstructed by someone else.

As I see it, it is important to point out that the first two parts of the definition are necessary for a conflict to emerge. It is not only the other party's obstinacy that creates the conflict, it is also one's own attachment to certain desires. There are often very good and tenable reasons for not wanting to relinquish one's desires, though it is not always the case that one's priorities have been duly considered. It is actually very common for parties involved in conflicts to not have put their own obstructed desires into words, even for themselves. One is fully occupied with being annoyed by what the other party has or has not done. Taking stock of the obstructed desires the parties have at present is often a constructive way of making the conflict more comprehensible and manageable.

The definition is very broad and primarily aimed at pointing out the factors driving the course of a conflict. In the following sections, a couple of tools are presented for "unpacking" conflicts, i.e., sorting them according to causes and sub-components.

The causes of conflicts: three levels to work with

In working life, conflicts usually arise as a combined effect of circumstances on three levels: the individual, relational and systemic levels (Figure 2.2). The parties involved usually have their own explanations for why a conflict has arisen.

Individual level
Characteristics of individuals

Relational level
Characteristics of relationships

Systemic level
Characteristics of systems
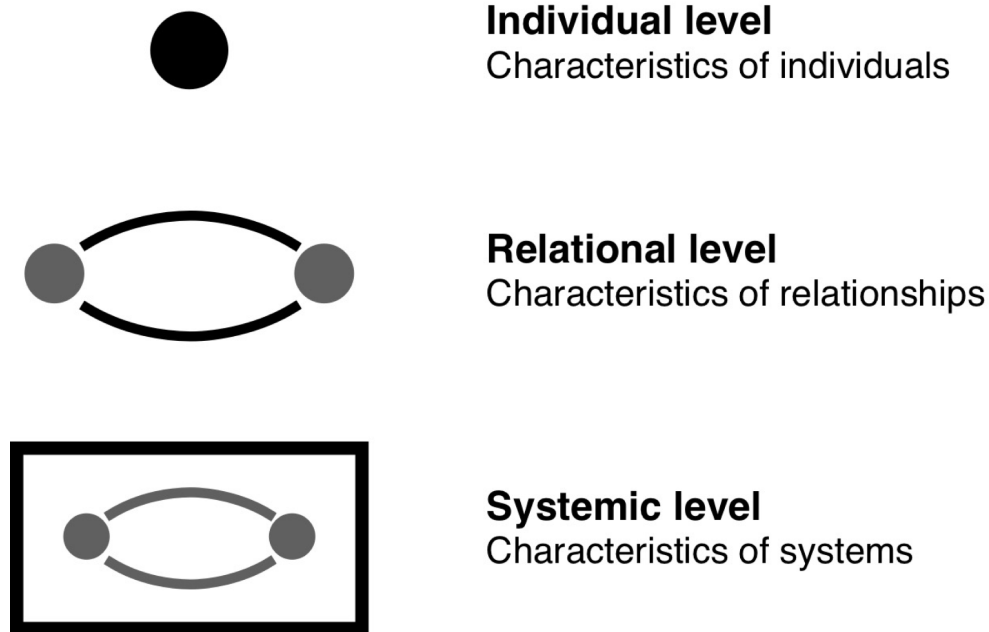
Figure 2.2 The individual, relational and systemic levels

Ideas about what has caused a conflict direct our attention and may lead to hasty conclusions concerning what can be done about the situation.

The *individual level* perspective implies that individuals' personality, behavior patterns and life situation are seen as decisive causes of the emergence of a conflict. If the conflict is observed only from this perspective, some of the persons involved will be seen as having caused the emergence of the conflict. If this is the outlook, it will be natural to attempt to cope with the conflict by using measures aimed at the person in question. This may involve speaking with the person in order to give feedback, set limits, and perhaps threaten with certain consequences, or even to take measures such as warnings, transfer, notice or dismissal.

If the *relational level* is in focus, conflicts are considered to emerge from the relation between the parties. "It takes two to quarrel." Here, the reasons for the conflict are sought in incompatible interests, communication problems, frictions due to personality differences, or a history of

continuously worsening relations. With a relational outlook, it is natural to see conflicts as issues that should be resolved. Can concrete issues be resolved? Can the parties achieve better understanding and mutual respect? Is it possible to develop forms of cooperation that reduce the sources of irritation? Is it possible to sort out what went wrong in the past so that the conflict can be settled?

At the *systemic level*, the focus is on how work organization, allocation of resources, organizational culture and the like contribute to the emergence and continuation of conflicts. Conflicts are seen as possible symptoms of inadequacies in the organization, such as unclear goals, strategies and distribution of roles, weak management and lack of a well-functioning forum for problem-solving. When the focus is on the systemic level, conflicts are dealt with through organizational development, that is, by ensuring clarity with regard to goals, roles and norms as well as ensuring good prerequisites for well-functioning leadership and approaches to problem-solving.

If we use these concepts, we can ask productive questions when faced with a conflict:

– What is the role of the individual level, i.e., of the involved parties' personalities and life situations?
– What is the role of the relational level, i.e., what are the obstructed desires and what has happened to the relation between the parties?
– What is the role of the systemic level, i.e., what are the organizational factors that have enabled the emergence and continuation of the conflict?

We can also continue by asking questions about how the conflict is being handled:[2]

– What should be done on the individual level, i.e., do we need to conduct dialogues with a certain individual or consider taking measures to solve a problem related to that individual?

– What should be done on the relational level, i.e., do we need to sort out unresolved issues or dysfunctional relations?
– What should be done on the systemic level, i.e., do we need to sort out the work organization or to work with general norms and attitudes?

The ABC model[3]

The ABC model, also known as the conflict triangle, is a simple method for obtaining an overview of various aspects of a conflict. The model was developed by the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung in the late 1960s. Since then, it has been used in many contexts.[4]

According to the ABC model, a conflict can be depicted as a triangle (see Figure 2.3), the respective corners of which represent three important aspects inherent to all conflicts. The A corner stands for *attitude*, the B corner for *behavior*, and the C corner for *conflict* or *contradiction*.

B **B**ehaviour

A

Attitudes,
narratives

C

Conflict:
Issues,
Obstructed desires
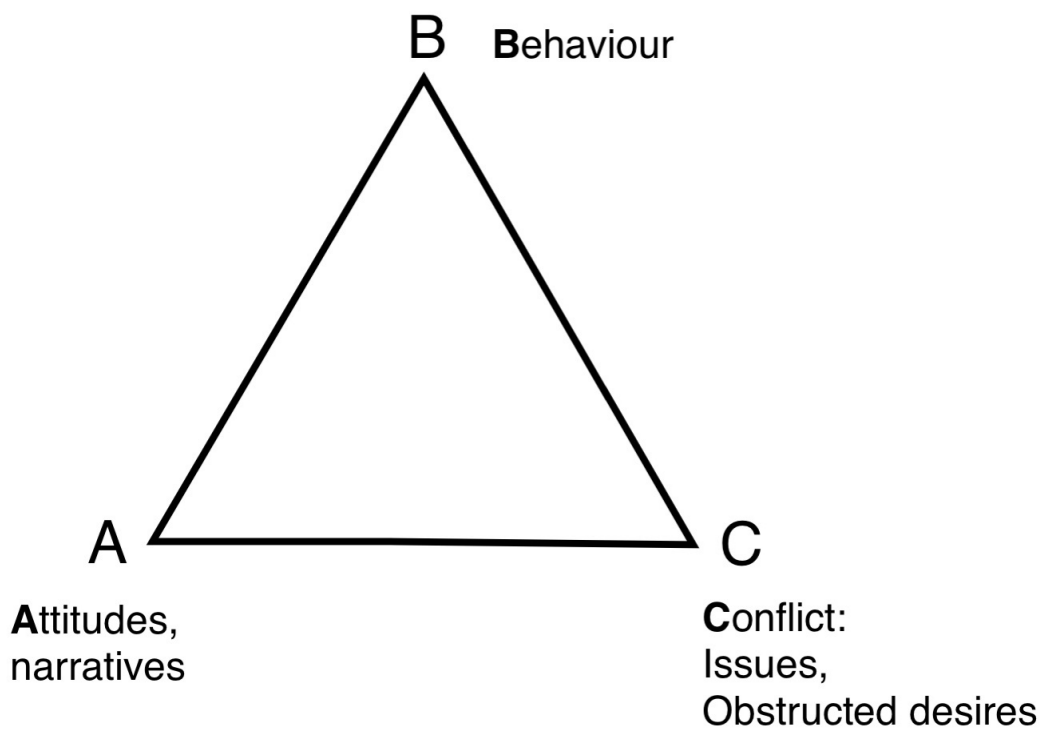
Figure 2.3. The Conflict triangle

Thus, when we encounter a conflict, we can ask what the A, B and C corners look like in this particular case. In this way, the ABC model can help us identify what aspects of a conflict are important both to understanding its causes and to determining how it should be dealt with.

C: The conflict issues

Starting out in the C corner is simplest, because it focuses on the concrete conflict issues. According to the above definition, conflicts include obstructed desires, and these are the points at issue. These issues are not always explicit, and the parties may not even be aware of them. I will return to this topic later on.

Experience suggests that it is useful to talk about five common themes and, consequently, that there are five common types of conflicts. These are (see Figure 2.4) *distribution conflicts, position conflicts, structure conflicts, behavioral norms conflicts*, and *conviction conflicts*.[5]

In a *distribution conflict*, the parties are competing for something that can be divided (Friberg, 1990; Glasl, 2013). This may, for instance, involve money (e.g., room for salary increases, budgets, cutbacks), workload (e.g., the distribution of cases or clients) or time (e.g., how much time can be allocated to different work assignments).

Distribution conflicts concern how the available resources are divided up between parties. However, this is not always a matter of resources the parties want more of, but may also concern "negative" distribution issues, i.e., wanting to avoid costs, work, time-consuming activities, etc. In a pure conflict of distribution, none of the parties questions the others' positions or the prevailing rules of the game; they are only at odds about the

distribution. However, distribution conflicts are seldom so pure, but are often based on different outlooks on overall goals or convictions as to what would be the best solution.

Distribution conflicts, e.g. about
• money
• workload
• time

Position conflicts, e.g. about
• who should be assigned a certain role
• who should have the last word

Structure conflicts, e.g. about
• order of delegation and authority
• distribution of responsibility and roles
• routines, rules and regulations, and order of priority
• organizational structure

Behavioral norm conflicts, e.g. about
• treatment or communication style between colleagues, or between manager and staff
• ways of handling work assignments

Conviction conflicts, e.g. about
• which approach should serve as a guide
• which are the best methods

Figure 2.4. Five common workplace conflict types

In a *position conflict*, the parties are competing for a resource that is (or is perceived to be) indivisible, i.e., a position within a system (Friberg, 1990; Glasl, 2013). This may concern, for instance, the role as project leader, an attractive position, a stimulating work assignment or the only spacious office at the workplace. Position conflicts may also be informal in nature; they may concern, e.g., who is the most competent and should, therefore, have the last word, or who has a central position in the group. At any given time, only one party can achieve the coveted goal. There are negative

position conflicts as well; there may be, e.g., a position that has to be filled, but that no one is willing to accept (because it involves, e.g., a thankless work assignment). Position conflicts are often more difficult to resolve than distribution conflicts are, because, in most cases, only one of the parties can or must accept the position. This often results in a win-or-lose situation.

Structure conflicts concern what order is to prevail in the organization. This may be, for instance, a matter of organizational structure or it may concern delegation, authority, decision-making processes, goals, routines, priorities, choice of methods, or distribution of roles. Choices that concern structural issues often have consequences for the distribution of time and other resources, such as when new routines force staff to dedicate more time to administrative duties. By definition, structure conflicts are brought about in connection with organizational changes. They often stir up strong apprehensions and desires, because the new order put into effect frequently constitutes the framework that will apply for a long time to come. However, structure conflicts may also be relatively informal in nature, such as when members of a small work team are irritated about a distribution of responsibilities that has emerged in the absence of any discussion or decision-making.

Behavioral norms conflicts (or simpler behavioral conflicts) concern the interpersonal order, i.e., which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. This is the type of conflict that the parties most commonly need help with if they are to identify it and put it into words. Behavioral norms conflicts often concern how the interrelations between the involved parties function, i.e., how they communicate with each other, what kinds of attitudes they have toward each other, how much they stand up for each other, and so on. But they just as often concern the critical attitudes that managers and colleagues may have toward others' behavior in relation to their work assignments. For example, it may be a matter of how much responsibility is assumed for work assignments, the work pace or treatment of clients, service users or students, whether fixed routines are followed, the length of pauses taken, the care taken with quality and safety, and so on. Behavioral

norms conflicts are often particularly difficult for the parties to talk about constructively, and to resolve. There are several reasons for this. One reason is that it is difficult to distinguish between the problem and the person, because it is actually the person's behavior one is critical of. When criticism or discontent is brought up it can easily be experienced as a personal attack, and the risk that there will be unpleasantness may be perceived to be great. Another reason is that one's reactions to the attitudes and behaviors of others are highly subjective, which often makes it difficult to agree on how reality should be described. If one party considers that the other does sloppy work or has a condescending attitude, it is highly likely that the other party will not agree that his/her own behaviors match that description.

Conviction conflicts are special in nature (moral conflicts or value conflicts are closely related concepts; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). They have their roots in the parties' personal convictions about what is morally right and wrong, in ideological value systems, and in deeply rooted beliefs about what does and does not work. The conflict itself concerns which outlook should serve as a guide in the organization. Employees often experience that they are not able to work according to their deeply felt values owing to time pressure and lack of resources. Conviction conflicts are often concretely manifested as distribution, position and structure conflicts. In conviction conflicts, the chances of achieving real consensus via dialogue, discussion and negotiation are often quite limited. Conversely, the risk that the parties will start making moral judgments about each other is great. Therefore, when facing conviction conflicts, it is very important to try to enable the parties to feel a reasonable amount of respect for one another, even if they think the other party represents an outlook that they find mistaken or even reprehensible. In conviction conflicts, one faces the need to make a decision about which order of things is to apply, despite the fact that consensus is out of reach.

B: Behavior

The B corner of the ABC model concerns how the involved parties act to promote their own interests in the conflict. Behaviors include direct verbal communication, non-verbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice, body language) and various kinds of actions. The way in which the parties act is of great importance to how conflicts develop. If the parties stop speaking to each other, put the blame on each other, pass negative judgments or fail to listen to what the other party has to say, then the conflict will grow worse. In many conflicts, the key to beginning a process of resolution is for the parties to stop behaving destructively and to start behaving constructively. However, it is often difficult – both emotionally and practically – for one party alone to begin behaving constructively. In a conflict, one is frustrated over being obstructed by the other party. One feels powerlessness – as if the other party is forcing one to react and act in certain ways. This feeling is often mutual: Both parties in a conflict feel that the other party has the power. Moreover, both feel that it is not they themselves who choose to act as they do, but that the other party is responsible. They are unable to see the long chain of actions and reactions back and forth between the parties during the course of the conflict; instead they only see their own actions as unavoidable reactions to what the other party has done (Ballreich & Glasl, 2011). Glasl's model of conflict escalation (Glasl, 2013; and see chapter 3 below) describes how each party loses hope of achieving a result by acting as one "should," because the other party is constantly obstructing them. The frustration that has emerged compels one to act more forcefully. This pattern gradually changes the behavioral norms that the parties feel obliged to (or not to) adhere to. As the conflict continues to escalate, increasingly destructive behaviors may come to be seen as justified, or at least excusable.

A: Attitudes

The A corner of the ABC model concerns everything that is happening inside the parties involved, i.e., the subjective aspects of the conflict. We can divide the A corner into three parts: What the parties are *thinking* (the

cognitive aspect), what they are *feeling* (the affective aspect) and what they *want* (the motivational aspect).

The *cognitive* aspect of the A corner concerns the parties' thoughts on, for example, right and wrong, good and bad, as well as the images or narratives they construct regarding what is going on and one another. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance people's tendency to construct narratives has in relation to conflicts (Winslade & Monk, 2000). Consider the following situation:

Andrew is the unit manager at a social welfare office. He is 57 years old and has adult children. He has recently been appointed to a position that he wanted because it offers interesting challenges. A new area of activity is going to be developed, where staff will be working with a promising model. Because he is deeply committed to the task, he wishes to engage his employees in ambitious, quality-oriented development work. Cecilia is one of the employees on the unit. She is 31 years old and has three children. She has just gone through a difficult divorce that has taken a heavy toll on her and her children. Even after moving to a smaller home, she still has a hard time making ends meet. The factor that triggers friction between Andrew and Cecilia is that she does not seem to be as committed to the development work as Andrew wants his employees to be. She is often 15-20 minutes late for work, she uses quite a bit of working time to make private phone calls, and it takes her a long time to learn and then use new documentation guidelines. On those occasions when she does not avoid participating in planning days altogether, she attends but is very passive.

Given this scenario, it is not difficult to imagine what Andrew's narrative about what is going on might look like, and how Cecilia's narrative about her everyday life might unfold. Andrew's field of vision is filled by an exciting and meaningful development project that will result in much better services for citizens. On the other hand, Cecilia's field of vision is filled by her struggle to protect her children from harm, to solve the practical problems of housing and private finances, and to make it through the

working day without breaking down in tears. Andrew and Cecilia may agree completely on objective facts such as late arrivals, telephone calls, performance of work assignments, and participation in planning days. What is crucial here, however, is that their disparate narratives entail that they are attributing to these facts completely different meanings. According to Andrew's narrative, these facts mean that Cecilia is showing inadequate commitment, which constitutes a threat to implementation of the vision Andrew and the rest of the unit have. In light of Cecilia's narrative, Andrew appears to be an insensitive and demanding manager who gets hung up on petty details. As long as they pass judgments on each other and only view factual matters in relation to their own respective narratives, they will have great difficulties communicating and finding a reasonable solution.

We all have our own narrative about the kind of drama that is taking place in front of our eyes. It is the drama as a whole that determines which events are important or unimportant, good or bad. During the course of a conflict, the parties' narratives about what is occurring and about what kind of person the other party is usually diverge more and more, until these narratives are finally so different that communication becomes all but impossible. An important task for the person who is to resolve the conflict is often to turn this process around and to assist the parties in working toward a common description of reality. A particularly important aspect of the model's A corner is the image of the other party. In serious conflicts, downright hostile attitudes may develop, in which the other party is perceived as dishonest, unreliable, destructive, aggressive and scheming.

The *emotional* aspect deals with what feelings are aroused in the parties during the course of the conflict as well as what attitudes the parties develop toward each other. Fear plays a major role in most conflicts, particularly fear of missing out on something one would very much like to be in a certain way. Anger often arises as a reaction to fear. Anger mobilizes the parties' energy and ability to take action, thus allowing them to defend their respective interests. Naturally, the entire spectrum of human feelings – including disappointment, irritation, confusion, low-spiritedness,

resentment, anxiety and despair – may play a role in conflicts. Experience shows that people involved in conflicts often lack conscious contact with their emotions, but are driven by them all the same (Jordan & Lundin, 2002).

In many conflicts, the parties rapidly develop very fixed attitudes toward each other that are shaped by emotions, personal opinions and diagnoses. These may include feelings of antipathy, distrust and discomfort. One's attitude is marked by viewing the other party as, e.g., difficult, unreasonable, arrogant, unreliable, dishonest or inflexible. These attitudes are often deeply rooted and are perceived as truths about the other party. At this stage, the points at issue are often obscured, and the other party stands out as the main problem.

The *motivational* aspect concerns the parties' goals, motives, desires, intentions and endeavors. Perhaps the most important aspect of motivation is what we may refer to as "good intentions," i.e., whether the parties involved are truly motivated to try to resolve the conflict. After having had many frustrating experiences of each other, the parties often lose hope that it will be possible to come up with any acceptable solutions. At this point, any good intentions have been used up, which makes it difficult to motivate the parties to participate constructively in the search for possible solutions. If the worst comes to the worst, the frustration is so strong that the parties instead want to cause each other discomfort as a kind of retribution for perceived injuries. In many conflicts, mobilizing the parties' "good intentions" is the key to changing a destructive development into a constructive process.

The ABC model as a diagnostic tool

Reflecting on a particular conflict using the ABC model may provide a first impression of the factors that are crucial in the conflict. In which corner of the triangle is the conflict's center of gravity found? Is the C corner in

focus, i.e., is it a matter of disagreement about distinct issues? Or is it more about the A corner, i.e., ingrained attitudes, hostile images and emotions? A less frequent, but not unprecedented, situation is when the conflict primarily concerns the B corner, i.e., when a destructive jargon has developed that makes it impossible to smoothly resolve any problems that emerge. In which corner should one begin when setting about to work with a conflict? Is it possible to focus on resolving the concrete issues, leaving personal feelings and frictions out of the equation? If it is, a rational approach can be used, discussing the C corner's issues, desires and consequences with a view to arriving at the most reasonable solution.

Sometimes the parties' negative views about each other in relation to the conflict issues are at such a deadlock that making any progress in the C corner requires some preparatory work in the A corner. The parties may need an explanation for why the other party has acted in a certain way, thus providing at least some understanding of the other party's situation. When such an understanding has re-established, respect between the parties and the strong feelings have abated, the result is often that the points at issue suddenly become much easier to resolve.

In strongly escalated conflicts, where the parties are behaving very destructively toward each other, it may be impossible to work with the C corner or the A corner until after the B corner has been dealt with, i.e., until the destructive behavior has ceased and rules for how the parties are to behave toward each other have been introduced.

Each conflict is unique and requires an approach suited to the particular case. The ABC model can enable a quick initial diagnosis of a conflict – a diagnosis that is clear even to someone without detailed knowledge of conflict theory or psychology.[6]

Disputes and relationship conflicts

The ABC model can be used to discern two different groups of workplace conflicts (see Figure 2.5; also Jehn, 1997). One group consists of conflicts that clearly have their center of gravity in the C corner. In these conflicts, differences of opinion concern factual matters related to operations rather than personal difficulties related to co-operation. Putting the substance of the conflict into words is easy, and the parties involved stand by their respective standpoints. I refer to these kinds of conflicts as *disputes*. In disputes, commitments and emotions are frequently stirred up. However, as long as the center of gravity remains in the C corner, the conflict is guided by the parties' positions on the points at issue, and the A corner plays a more marginal role.

Disputes
Conflicts that emerge based on differences of opinion regarding delimited points at issue.
They cease when an agreement has been reached.

Relationship conflicts
Conflicts in which the parties are frustrated over others' behavior *patterns*.
They involve negative expectations.
They do not cease when the point at issue has been settled.

Figure 2.5. Disputes and relationship conflicts

The second large group of workplace conflicts are those whose center of gravity is in the A corner. These are the *relationship* conflicts. A common manifestation of such conflicts is when one or more of those involved are frustrated over the behavior of another person or another group of people. Because relationship conflicts often concern behaviors and attitudes, it is unavoidable that they become personal. In such cases, it is difficult to follow the advice invariably given in conflict management manuals, which is to distinguish between problems and persons. In relationship conflicts

this may feel impossible to do, because the other party's personality is thought to be the real problem. In such situations, there is a great risk that the other party will perceive any attempt to initiate a discussion as a personal attack. In addition, in many relationship conflicts, only one of the parties thinks there is a conflict. For example, one person may be greatly annoyed by a colleague's habit of not keeping his/her papers in order, to the extent that the colleague does not remember scheduled meetings or complete work assignments in time. The colleague in question may display a lack of understanding of this irritation, feeling that such trifling matters are hardly worth quarreling about. In cases of disputes, focusing on the issues often works quite well, even though the A corner must be handled with care in disputes as well. In contrast, in relationship conflicts, merely resolving the concrete issues seldom helps, because the basic problem is that the trust between the parties has been damaged. To improve the ability to cooperate, it is necessary to work with the relation between the parties, so that they can achieve a mutual understanding of their respective experiences and narratives, and agree on how to treat and behave toward each other.

Formbound and formless conflicts

Disputes often concern recurring points at issue, e.g., salaries, schedules, division of labor, working methods or position appointments. This means that there are frequently established methods of managing the disputes: certain patterns of negotiation are used; the issue is discussed and voted on at a workplace meeting; the matter is referred to mediation or arbitration; or, following consultation, the manager is authorized to settle the matter. Management of certain disputes is even regulated by law or agreement. If there is an established procedure for managing the conflict, it is said to be *formbound* (Glasl, 2013). This is often advantageous, because it entails an at least partly predictable course of events. What will happen next is known, and the parties' behavior is governed by rules or established norms. To a certain extent, the probability of one or another outcome can be estimated. Disputes are frequently, but not always, formbound conflicts.

In contrast, relationship conflicts are often *formless* (Glasl, 2013). Few workplaces have well-functioning procedures for how one should respond to irritation over a colleague's behavior. In formless conflicts, established procedures are lacking, which makes it difficult for the parties to predict the consequences of the various initiatives taken. It is hard to know how the other party as well as other involved parties will react and act; one needs to be prepared for the worst possible scenario. This may cause one to avoid bringing up the issue, the consequence being long-lasting frustration that will later leak out into the environment in different ways. Formless conflicts involve considerable scope for fantasizing about what others may do. In some cases, this may accelerate escalation of the conflict, because the parties act to avoid being thwarted by the other party.

It may be worthwhile reflecting over whether there are permanent conflicts involving obstructed desires, and whether one or more parties perceive these conflicts as formless. If the answer is 'yes,' then there is a great risk for a constant stream of new frustrations. In such cases, it may be wise to consider whether the issues can be formalized, i.e., to decide or agree on appropriate procedures that enable the matters to be sorted out constructively and at an early stage. For example, in a working team, irritations may arise over the fact that different persons handle routines in different ways. An appropriate measure here could be to hold a (brief) weekly meeting to give employees the opportunity to comment on how the routines have worked during the past week.

The Iceberg Principle

In summary, we now have a conflict triangle, the respective corners of which represent three important aspects of a conflict: attitudes, behaviors and conflict issues. If we change the conflict triangle into a three-legged pyramid, we can also illustrate the notion that conflicts have both visible and invisible aspects (see Figure 2.6).

The pyramid in Figure 2.6 has three levels. The first level is the visible part of the conflict: the *presented problem*. This represents what the parties themselves claim that the conflict is about (the C corner) as well as the strategies (B corner) and standpoints/emotions (A corner) that the parties reveal to those around them. This part of the conflict can be likened to the tip of an iceberg; thus, it is just a small part of the entire conflict.
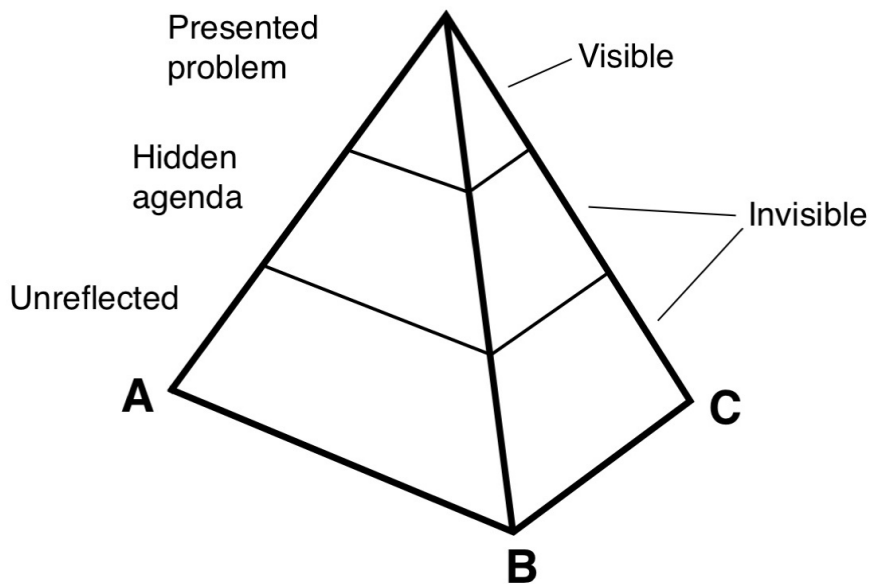
Figure 2.6. Visible and invisible aspects of the conflict triangle

The next level is the *hidden agenda*, i.e., the aspects of the conflict that the parties are aware of, but unwilling to reveal openly. These aspects may include, for example, intentions, measures or interests that they do not want to display for tactical reasons, because doing so would impair their position in a negotiation. In addition, something the parties know is morally doubtful may be involved (e.g., striving after power over others), or there may be something else they are ashamed of revealing openly. The hidden agenda of the B corner may consist of different kinds of actions carried out behind the scenes. To the extent that the core of the conflict involves hidden agendas, making progress without uncovering at least some of them is obviously

difficult. Individuals involved in an extended conflict frequently develop fantasies about the other party's hidden agenda. These fantasies then become important contributing reasons for the parties' various lines of action in the conflict. Even if the other party does in fact have hidden agendas, any fantasies about them are most often off target. Thus, it is wise to reflect on how well founded one's own assumptions about others' hidden agendas are.

The deepest level contains factors that play a role in the conflict, but that are also *unreflected* on by the parties themselves. Some things have passed unconsidered or unnoticed, and thus one is not aware of them. In the A corner, this may concern images as well as thoughts, emotions and motives. One is not completely aware of the strength of one's own values concerning certain issues; one has made unconscious assumptions about the motives of others; or one has feelings that one is not really aware of, but that are nonetheless manifested in different ways. The B corner may concern aspects of one's actions that one it not aware of, e.g., one may have a body language or tone of voice that others perceive as unsympathetic or condescending, or unconsciously disregard others by not giving them important information. The C corner may concern deeply rooted needs that the respective parties are not aware of, e.g., a need for respect, freedom, recognition, or being liked. Instead, such needs may be manifested in demands for a higher salary, different work assignments or complaints about others' lack of commitment. Given the importance of this theme, a special section below will be devoted to the role basic human needs play in conflicts.

If much of the core of the conflict is hidden and if, at the same time, there are obstacles to making it visible, then dealing with the conflict using solely verbal means is often difficult. In such cases, it may be fruitful to sidestep all rationalizations and verbal standpoints by instead using non-verbal methods. Using drama, pictures or metaphors, one can express and process the hidden aspects of the conflict, without having to force the deadlocked

verbal defenses. Non-verbal methods can frequently uncover circumstances that have been overlooked or denied using reason.

Needs

Those of us who work with conflicts usually put great emphasis on talking about basic human needs, both in conflict management training programs and in our active conflict resolution efforts (Burton, 1990; Rosenberg, 1999). There are several reasons for this. One reason is that conflicts are often basically a matter of needs that have not been met – needs that the involved parties are not always completely aware of. Another is that it is easier to respect the other party and find creative solutions in deadlocked situations if attention is paid to the needs that the parties are trying to meet, rather than to their demands and standpoints. If one can see that the other party is actually only trying to safeguard a basic human need, then it is easier to understand his/her actions, even though one feels he/she is wrong. For example, one person may think of a colleague as being dismissive and cold-hearted toward clients in need of support. However, if the person understands that the colleague's behavior is his/her way of maintaining a reasonable workload, it is easier for the person to bring up the topic in a constructive way and in the spirit of problem-solving, instead of only expressing criticism.

As an aid to more easily identifying what needs are important driving forces in a certain situation, Figure 2.7 presents a list of needs that occur in workplace conflicts.

Trust	being able to trust other people
Respect	feeling respected
Recognition	receiving recognition for one's own contributions and qualities
Intelligibility	feeling that one clearly understands the rules of the game
Fairness	feeling that things are done correctly
Solidarity	feeling that one is accepted and belongs
Safety	having a reasonable degree of economic and other safety
Reasonable workload	feeling that one's work situation is sustainable
Control	knowing what is going on, feeling a reasonable degree of predictability
Effectiveness	being spared unnecessary waste of time, obstacles and complications
Autonomy	having a reasonable degree of freedom to control one's own existence
Stimulation	having interesting assignments and scope for learning, developing and creating
Quality	knowing that one's work is of good quality and is meaningful
Protecting others	protecting others from harm, providing for their needs
Self-respect	feeling competent, efficient and successful
Strength	feeling strong and capable of handling the situation
Peace	enjoying good relations and harmony; being spared tension

Figure 2.7. Needs that often play an important role in conflicts

These are the kinds of needs we all have in common, although there are individual differences in their strength. We sometimes have different opinions as to the amount of effort or accommodating that is reasonable for a certain person's needs to be met. Nonetheless, from a needs perspective, it is obvious that we have to give other people the right to safeguard their own needs. Thus, we should not flatly dismiss desires and demands that are expressions of basic needs without good reason, provided there is a way to meet them.

The dynamics of the conflict triangle

The ABC model may also give an initial insight into the dynamics of conflicts, i.e., how conflicts emerge and develop. The three corners of the triangle are connected with each other, such that an event in one of the corners will affect the other corners as well. Conflicts often start in the C corner with some kind of obstructed desire. As long as there are no extensive changes in the A and B corners, the focus of the conflict may remain in the C corner. This is the case, for example, in normal salary negotiations where the parties are on good terms with each other, respect each other and adhere to accepted methods of negotiation. Here, the conflict issues have center stage, and one works on them until an acceptable solution has been found. However, if a solution cannot be found, the focus of the conflict may shift toward the A corner. Negative attitudes toward the other party arise, the parties become frustrated and anxious about not being able to realize their plans, and their motivation is increasingly aimed at removing the other party. If a solution still cannot be found, the focus may shift toward the B corner, which entails intense confrontations and attempts to completely disregard the other party.

During a process of conflict escalation, all three corners of the triangle are strongly affected. At first, the conflict concerns the C corner, i.e., concrete issues. However, as the conflict escalates, the issues often recede into the background, and the parties become increasingly focused on each other and themselves. Each party becomes anxious to defend his/her own self-image, to obstruct the other party's scope of action and, if possible, to remove the other party from the picture. In the B corner, the focus on verbal communication characteristic of the early stages is gradually abandoned; futile discussions are given up and replaced by action. This can occur by trying to present the other party with a fait accompli. If this does not work, the behavior can be more directly focused on hurting the other party. The most complex changes occur in the A corner (cf. Glasl, 2013):

Cognition. Perception becomes more selective; others' negative sides and one's own positive sides are noted, but not the reverse. The perspective becomes increasingly narrow in time and space, such that an overview of the long-term consequences of one's actions is lost. The ability to handle complex and conflicting information decreases, such that the parties' pictures of cause and effect become increasingly less nuanced. The power of insight into the other party's situation is drastically reduced.

Emotions. The parties become increasingly emotional and irritable. Complex emotions in relation to the other party and oneself are replaced by one-sided attitudes: sympathy within one's own ranks, antipathy toward the other party. The parties try to avoid showing each other what they really feel. The ability to feel sympathy is drastically reduced.

Motivation. Mobilizing good will and focusing on developing solutions become increasingly difficult. The parties' flexibility is reduced, causing them to cling to fixed standpoints. Ends and means are coupled together so that each party sees only one way of achieving a satisfactory solution. From a focus on one's own interests and visions, the motivation is shifted to a wish to hurt the other party and, thus, win the duel.

Symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts

The ABC model may be simple, but it provides a powerful tool for understanding different conflict dimensions. Complementary approaches may be needed, however. One such complementary approach is the power dimension, e.g., the question of whether the parties are on equal footing or whether the distribution of power is highly uneven (Glasl, 2013).

Symmetrical conflicts involve parties who have equal status and who can imagine negotiating with the other party as an equal. In contrast, in *asymmetrical* conflicts, there are considerable differences in power resources between the parties: One party is in a strong position, and the

other one is at a disadvantage, in the worst case not even recognized as a legitimate negotiating party. If this is the case, getting recognition as a legitimate party is one of the central issues of the conflict. In an organization, it may be a matter of a manager and an employee, where the manager wishes to exercise his/her right to make decisions, thus settling the conflict without consulting the employee. In asymmetrical conflicts, the stronger party, who relies on his/her position of authority to force through his/her wishes, is often unwilling to engage in conflict resolution processes. The weaker party then looks for effective methods of having some influence. One such method may be similar to guerilla tactics: making hidden attacks, then temporarily going underground. If the weaker party feels the issue at stake is important and those in power are completely unreasonable, he/she may resort to methods such as sabotage and mudslinging. In asymmetrical conflicts, a key issue is how one can get the stronger party to participate at all in attempts to resolve the conflict.

Hot and cold conflicts

"Hot" and "cold" conflicts function very differently (Glasl, 1999, 2013). One conflict management strategy that works well with a hot conflict may not work at all if the conflict is cold. It may therefore be important to recognize the respective characteristics of hot and cold conflicts, even though many conflicts are neither markedly hot nor markedly cold.

In *hot* conflicts, the parties are strongly committed and convinced that they are right. They are advocating something that they feel is good and right; they feel their intentions are good, so they want an opportunity to argue for their outlook and convictions. In hot conflicts, the parties try to make contact and are open about disclosing their thoughts. Owing to their strong commitments, meetings between the parties can easily become heated. Hot conflicts are often turbulent and eventful, and the confrontations may well be fierce.

Cold conflicts are characterized by the parties having lost hope that a positive change is possible. There is an atmosphere of disappointment, disillusion and frustration. In contrast to hot conflicts, the parties are not driven by ideals worth defending. They are rather focused on protecting and defending what they can. In very cold conflicts, the parties are marked by cynicism: Having visions, believing in a better future, is seen as naïve. They think that the other party is driven by egoistic motives, and justify their own lack of commitment to the common good by claiming to be realists, who know how the organization really functions. In cold conflicts, the parties avoid making contact with each other as much as possible. To the extent that they are obstructed by the other party, and thus forced to take action, they do so covertly, indirectly or formally. Because the other party is also conducting warfare from a protected position, a pattern develops in which the parties avoid exposing themselves. They often deny the existence of a conflict, especially that they are themselves involved in one and, thus, have a common problem to resolve. In prolonged cold conflicts, the parties' self-esteem is undermined because they are not safeguarding any values or ideals. They feel powerless and unable to act, and may easily find themselves in the position of a victim.

In *hot* conflicts, the parties normally prefer to work in the full glare of publicity. Therefore, without a long preparatory effort, a mediator can bring the parties together, openly work on the conflict issues, mutual perceptions, attitudes, behavioral patterns and relations. In hot conflicts, however, it may be difficult to get the parties to work systematically on organizational matters concerning, e.g., distribution of roles, rules and structures. This cannot happen until the heated emotions have been ventilated. An important role of the mediator is to slow down the pace so that the hot feelings can cool a bit, and the parties can begin to listen to each other.

Cold conflicts entail a great deal of denial and unwillingness to talk to each other directly and openly. Frequently, it is even difficult to get the parties to recognize that there is a conflict, particularly in public. The mediator may have to start the process by meeting the parties individually. The parties do

not believe in their own ability to contribute to a resolution. An initial task is therefore to arouse at least some hope that a positive change is possible. One way to encourage a certain commitment may be to reason about what future scenarios may arise if nothing is done to improve the situation (an escalation prognosis). Sometimes, the mediator has to try to "thaw out" the conflict through interventions that stimulate confrontation and commitment. In cold conflicts, the parties are more willing to work on organizational than on personal aspects. The parties believe the problems are the result of anonymous mechanisms and deny their own responsibility. One can thus intervene by working on the parties' methods of avoiding communication and confrontation.

3. Conflict escalation

Glasl's model of conflict escalation[7]

Friedrich Glasl's model of conflict escalation (Glasl, 1999, 2013; see Figure 3.1) has proven to be a highly valuable tool in understanding how conflicts work. Most people who become familiar with the model recognize their own experiences of conflict in the patterns it proposes. This sometimes gives rise to alarm, because the steps in the escalation ladder enable us to see in what ways we have participated in causing conflicts to grow worse.

Friedrich Glasl, an Austrian, is one of the best known conflict consultants in Europe. He has more than 50 years experience of working as an organizational consultant and as a teacher in conflict management at universities in various countries, among other contexts. Glasl developed his model of conflict escalation based on the work he had done as an organizational consultant of the Dutch NPI-institute for organization development. He noticed that the parties to a conflict whom he had interviewed while working on organizational conflicts often talked about important turning points in the conflict's history. He became interested in these turning points and began systematically asking the parties about how things had functioned before and after the critical incident in question, as well as about whether there had been any other important turning points during the course of the conflict. Glasl believed he could see a pattern in the conflict escalations that was tied to these turning points. Based on his observations and on numerous tests, he developed an escalation ladder – a model consisting of nine steps of conflict escalation.

The solid core of the escalation model is what occurs in the conflict's B corner (where B stands for *behavior*; see Chapter 2). In all contexts where people have to deal with each other during a longer period of time, norms develop concerning how they should behave toward each other. Sometimes these norms are clearly formulated in agreements or rules, but for the most

part they are implicit tacit agreements. People simply develop a feeling for what is and is not acceptable to say and do. They know that certain kinds of comments or actions would trigger strong reactions from others because these behaviors violate notions that prevail in the group concerning how one should behave. Norms are not always a matter of what is viewed as desirable, but rather of what one can expect of others and what one must consider normal behavior. Conflict escalation can be described as a step-wise change in these norms, such that increasingly destructive behavior comes to be viewed as normal and defensible.

The escalation ladder starts from a "zero state" in which no destructive conflict behavior occurs. In real life, however, the starting point is not always Step 0.[8] Behaviors belonging to Step 2, 3 or 4 in the model may be "normal" features of everyday working life, in the absence of any concrete conflict. Nonetheless, it is easier to understand how escalation processes work if we begin at a kind of ideal state.

0 Dialogue	1 Hardening	2 Debate and polemics	3 Unilateral actions	4 Images and coalitions	5 Loss of face	6 Strategic threats	7 Limited destructive blows	8 Fragmentation of the enemy	9 Together into the abyss
Emerging disagreements or irritations are solved through dialogue.	Positions start to take form, parties identify with articulated standpoints.	Debate between fixed positions.	Discussions are experienced as meaningless, unilateral action is the only possible way to move forward.	Formation of a stereotypical image of the counterpart that includes inherent characteristics that makes him/her/them difficult to deal with.	Experience of being able to see the other party's real (immoral) nature.	The other party is seen as dangerous and untrustworthy.	Attempts to inflict considerable, but not unlimited pain on the other party in order to force concessions.	Attacks against vital functions in order to permanently incapacitate the other party	The other party is experienced as such a great threat to what is good and right that he/she/they must be crushed, even if the cost is one's own ruin.
The parties are interested in and listen to each other's points of view.	Parties line up arguments for their standpoints and counterarguments to the other party's position	The other party is perceived as impervious to reasonable arguments.	The other party is presented with a fait accompli.	Attempts to undermine/marginalize the other party's position in the group.	Firm conviction that the other party is fundamentally corrupt/incompetent/unaccountable/hostile.	Threat of painful measures is seen as the only means to limit the other party's destructive behavior.	Parties try to design attacks that can be seen as proportional to the situation	Attacks can aim to harm the counterpart's body, mind, finances, position, etc.	There is no turning back.
There is a willingness to find solutions that are acceptable to all.	Discussions are held in an attempt to help the other party recognize the merits of one's own standpoint.	Attempts to gain the advantage through manipulative debate techniques.	Less verbal communication gives great scope for fantasies about the other party's real motives and intentions.	Veiled harassment aimed at making the opposite party feel insecure, shame, fear, frustration.	Public losses of face may be staged.	Ultimatum and counter-ultimatum.	Focus: to force the opposite party to back down.	The objective is to eliminate the other party.	Total war of annihilation.
Focus: to come to an agreement		The other party's arguments are portrayed as irrelevant ignorant, misleading, extreme, etc.	The ability/inclination to feel empathy for the other party decreases drastically.	Spiteful gossip about individuals.	Conviction that efforts to reach agreement are meaningless; belief that the other party does not feel bound by moral obligations.	Focus: to gain control over the other party in order to prevent destructive actions.			Focus: to crush the other party at all costs.
		Negotiations concerning issues	Focus: to realize one's own desires through unilateral action.	Groups are formed around antipathies and sympathies toward individuals.	Focus: to exclude the other party from the social community.				
	Beginning irritation over the other party's unreasonableness.	Groups form around standpoints		Focus: to marginalize the other party.					
	Conviction that a solution can be found through fair argumentation.	The undertone of what is being said becomes increasingly important.							
	Focus: to convince the other party.	Difficulties in trusting the other party's openness and good intentions.							
		Focus: to win the debate and/or secure the support of third parties.							

| | *Threshold:* Argumentation about positions. | *Threshold:* Manipulative debate methods. | *Threshold:* Action without consultation. | *Threshold:* Deniable punishment behavior | *Threshold:* Loss of trustworthiness. | *Threshold:* Threats and ultimatums. | *Threshold:* Attacks intended to cause considerable pain | *Threshold:* Attacks on the other party's vital functions. | *Threshold:* Total war of annihilation. |

Figure 3.1: The nine steps of conflict escalation

Step 0: Dialogue

The point of departure is that a difference of opinion on an issue emerges or that someone is frustrated over another person's behavior. As long as the parties are at Step 0 – *Dialogue* – they make use of problem-solving talks to arrive at a solution. They take up the issue, talk about alternatives and jointly arrive at a solution that both parties feel is sensible and reasonable. In this way, they can get through a large number of disagreements and feelings of irritation without any conflicts developing. Thus, Step 0 does not necessarily entail that a completely harmonious and positive atmosphere prevails, or that everyone likes one another. It does mean, however, that the parties adhere to the norm saying that any emerging problems should be dealt with through dialogues that lead to agreement on what the best solution is. The parties do not attack, try to exert pressure on or steamroller each other; they do not allow irritation to grow and develop into permanent tensions and rifts.

Step 1: Hardening

According to the model, conflict escalation begins when the parties are not able to arrive at an agreement by simply talking to each other. Based on the definition of conflict presented previously, a conflict consists of two main components:

1. desires that one or more of the parties are not willing to give up
2. perceived obstruction, by the other party, of opportunities for these desires to be fulfilled

As long as both of these conditions remain, a driving force for conflict escalation exists. If the dialogue at Step 0 fails because one or more of the parties do not wish to change their position, then feelings of frustration will grow and the parties will find other means of removing the obstruction. At Step 1 – *Hardening discussion* – there is still a hope that one can convince the other party, as long as one's arguments are strong enough. The parties accumulate and formulate their arguments. These arguments are assembled into an increasingly coherent position consisting of different, mutually supportive parts. Counter-arguments against the other party's standpoints are formulated. The dialogue transitions into this kind of discussions, which often become absorbing and, with time, charged with feelings of impatience and irritation. The parties have still not stopped believing it is possible to reach an agreement through rational discussion or negotiation. But if the conflict cannot be resolved using rational arguments, feelings of frustration will increase. At this point, things begin to happen in the A corner (where A stands for *attitude*; see Chapter 2), for instance, triggering of feelings of irritation, worry and disappointment, formation of a picture of the other party as inflexible and unreasonable, a negative change in attitudes toward the other party or formation of a stable negotiating position through stronger attachment to certain demands. Above all, the parties no longer believe that the key issue will be settled by the strongest rational arguments winning, but instead by which of the parties has the strongest position.

Step 2: Debate and polemics

If the discussions do not lead to removal of the obstruction, feelings of frustration will grow. The parties experience each other as being impervious to objective arguments. The hope of being able to use reason to resolve the matter is dwindling rapidly. Each party has heard the other party's arguments repeatedly and can recite them by heart, but neither side is convinced by what is being said. At this point, there is a great risk that the parties will abandon an important norm that has applied thus far: Common problems should be solved through rational discussions. At Step 2 – *Debate*

and polemics – the discussions transition into debates. In a debate, there is no real belief that one can convince the other party by using good, reasonable arguments. Instead, a debate is a kind of game that involves earning points through skilled rhetoric. One hopes to be able to present one's views so cleverly that the other party will be dumbfounded, or at least that one will recruit supporters among those who have previously been neutral. Thus, Step 2 is more a matter of defeating the other party than of discussing the issue until there is a resolution. There is a certain feeling associated with being in such a situation, and this has consequences. One notices that care must be taken in choosing one's words, so that no openings are left that the other party can use to earn points. There is also a certain temptation to earn points by (often more or less unconsciously) using manipulative debate techniques. Many such techniques exist; for example, one can:

– claim that the other party's position is based on ignorance or naivety
– intimate that the other party actually has different, less noble reasons for his/her standpoint than those he/she states openly
– exaggerate the other party's views and arguments to make them seem unreasonable
– formulate incisive, either-or alternatives that induce the other party to choose the middle course
– provoke the other party to flare up emotionally, then use this to show that he/she is unbalanced
– use sweeping and strong value-charged words to describe one's own and the other party's standpoints

It is the use of manipulative debate techniques that constitutes the threshold between Step 1 and 2. When one or more of the parties begin employing such techniques, they violate the norm saying that discussions should be based on rational argumentation. The parties notice right away that the other party is not adhering to purely rational reasoning that is intended to be convincing. Because the goal of debating is to gain a verbal advantage, one can no longer trust that the other party is being honest and fair. The purpose

of what is being said is not to supply the conversation with relevant views, but instead to earn points at the other party's expense. It is in this way the parties begin losing confidence in each other and suspecting that the other party has hidden designs.

In rather early phases of many conflicts, the choice is made to resort to rule-governed procedures to resolve the issue: One makes a decision based on the order of delegation or pursues the matter along formal paths, thereby trying to push one's own desires through without being able to change the other party's opinion.[9]

People's perceptions here are highly selective: The parties view each other as difficult and notice everything that confirms this image.

When the parties feel the debates are fruitless and that no progress is being made, feelings of frustration grow. There is an increased risk that one of the parties will conclude that continued talks are meaningless and will be tempted to violate the norm saying that one should not act without first having come to an agreement by talking or a legitimate decision has been made. The threshold to Step 3 is unilateral actions, that is, when one party acts to push his/her standpoint unilaterally, thereby presenting the other party with a fait accompli.

Step 3: Unilateral actions, not words

Step 3 – *Unilateral actions, not words* – is thus marked by the parties having concluded that it is meaningless to try to reason with the other party and transitioning to action. There are two basic kinds of unilateral action, and which is used depends on the power relation between the parties. If one party has power over the other, then he/she can make a decision that the other must comply with. The other type of unilateral action is when one party presents the other with a fait accompli. This may involve making a unilateral decision about how one is going to act or doing something the

other party is not in agreement with. Perhaps, after a series of fruitless discussions, one party will decide to work based on his/her own conception of the schedule or working methods, in the absence of any mutual agreement.

At Step 3, there is no belief that talking can solve the problem. One thinks that the other party is unreasonable, perhaps to the point of being impossibly difficult to cooperate with. Nonetheless, one still adheres to the norm that everyone at the workplace has the right to be treated in a correct way. The instances of unilateral action that have occurred are related to the C corner (where C stands for *conflict* or *contradiction*; see Chapter 2); that is, one has tried to push one's own desires through with regard to the concrete issues. At Step 3, hostile actions are not directed at the other party as an individual to cause him/her harm. To the extent that others are upset, feel slighted or in any other way maltreated, these feelings should be viewed as unfortunate side effects of unilateral action one felt forced to take.

If the conflict issue cannot be resolved through unilateral actions feelings of frustration tend to grow. Given that all attempts to solve the problem through discussion, negotiation and even unilateral action have failed, the other party now emerges as the great problem. The parties perceive each other in terms of negative and stereotyped patterns of behavior and attribute negative attitudes to their opponent. The focus has shifted from the concrete issues at hand to how one can reduce the other party's ability to stand in one's way. The threshold to Step 4 has been reached when one begins aiming covert attacks at the other party's position as a person with equal rights.

Step 4: Images and coalitions

Step 4 – *Images and coalitions* – is best understood by considering what is happening in the conflict's A corner. When things have progressed to the

threshold to Step 4, feelings of frustration over the insurmountable obstacle have become so strong that one begins to think things like: "There must be another reason why the other party is so reluctant and unreasonable." The other party is perceived as being hopeless to relate and talk to and unreceptive to sensible arguments. One begins to think and feel that the other party is simply impossible to deal with, or that he/she is lacking the knowledge and skills to solve the problem. Perhaps one has come to the conclusion that the other party's personality is such that any functioning collaboration with him/her is impossible. If all hope that the issue can be resolved by talking, discussing or even unilateral action has been lost, then the other party as a person emerges as the overriding problem. The actual issues are overshadowed by what has become the major problem: the other party's personal style and/or incompetence to fulfill his/her job. When this happens, the only thing I can do is to weaken his/her position, perhaps by ensuring that he/she is marginalized in some way.

The increasingly negative image of the opponent has its counterpart in a distorted mirror image of oneself, as incarnating all the good qualities that the opponent lack.

At Step 4, one may use open or public personal attacks, or instead covert means of undermining the other party's position. One key concept for Step 4 is "deniable punitive behavior." Punitive behavior refers to actions aimed at causing the other party discomfort or pain of some kind in order to achieve one's goal. The aspect of deniability means that one is punishing the other party in a way that allows refutation of any malicious intent. This may involve rolling one's eyes, using other body language or a certain tone of voice to show one thinks the other party is ridiculous or hopeless. One may make disparaging remarks or spread malicious gossip, later denying it. The other party's life could be made somewhat unpleasant by, for example, forgetting to notify him/her of a meeting. He/she should be made to feel unwelcome, awkward, incompetent or something similar. On the surface, however, one maintains a façade of playing by the rules that apply between people who belong to the same social context. Thus, one can deny violating

norms that require people to stay within the bounds of propriety, but exceed these bounds nonetheless. Common behavior at Step 4 involves various forms of harassment. Through gestures, insinuation, irony, tone of voice and small acts of harassment, one causes the other party to feel unwelcome, insecure, ridiculous, stupid and weak. It is a matter of intimidating the other person into assuming a lower profile.

It is important to understand that this behavior is not, in most cases, part of a premeditated strategy one is using to win. Instead, it is more a matter of perceiving that the other party's personality is so seriously flawed that he/she constitutes a threat to a well-functioning workplace, or at least to the smooth flow of one's own work. This enables one to vindicate oneself for treating the other party in a condescending or disagreeable manner. The other party simply has him-/herself to blame for persisting in upsetting work operations. For the sake of the workplace, this person must not be able to obstruct things for others. He/she must be marginalized and, thereby, never taken seriously. It is often the case that colleagues who are irritated with a person talk to each other and develop a common image of the person as being difficult, incompetent and a barrier to good operations. There is often a tendency to try to form a coalition of people who share a similar image of the other party. The goal is that the flawed person should not be given opportunities to influence the work.

Naturally, it is entirely possible that the other party is, in fact, difficult, incompetent, neurotic, power-hungry, an addict or in some other way constitutes a tangible problem. The escalation model reveals the mechanisms that lead to certain behaviors in the context of conflicts, irrespective of whether or not the involved parties' perceptions are well founded.

The behaviors that are characteristic of Step 4 can mark a workplace climate for many years, particularly if the parties are fairly equal in strength.

Step 5: Loss of face

The threshold between Step 4 and 5 is often the most dramatic of all thresholds in the escalation process till now. Both the threshold and the step are called loss of face. The parties are driven to loss of face when the behaviors at Step 4 cannot remove the obstruction and when the two components of the definition of conflict are in full force, that is, when desires exist that are too important to give up and the other party obstructs fulfillment of these desires. Feelings of frustration increase even more, and one feels an even stronger need to eliminate the obstruction.

The perception that dealing with the other party is hopeless is here further reinforced. One begins to view the other party as such a serious threat to workplace operations that one cannot continue doing things as usual. Something has to happen. The other party is perceived as morally corrupt (i.e., as being driven by destructive motives), not only as incompetent, even as mentally disturbed or unable to function at the workplace for other reasons. He/she is also seen as dangerous, perhaps not to oneself personally, but to the reputation of one's organization. Again, the self-image of the parties becomes increasingly idealized in a stereotyped way, in opposition to the negative properties attributed to the opponent.

This conviction often becomes very deep and involves the other party losing *social face*, which includes the aspect of *face management*, meaning what we do to maintain both our own and others' face, or our social face. In all social communities, members have a certain right to be treated with respect by others. Even when an individual actually has negative opinions about someone, he/she is bound to adhere to the norms guiding how a person belonging to the social circle is to be treated. Loss of face means that one no longer believes the other party can claim to be a morally responsible member of the social community, with all the rights this entails. A person who has lost his/her face has lost his/her credibility. On the contrary, one thinks that the other party must be stripped of his/her status as someone

who can demand that others treat him/her with respect. There are two kinds of loss of face: *external* and *internal*. They often go hand in hand, in that internal loss of face is a prerequisite for external loss of face. Internal loss of face is the experience of finally understanding that the other part is completely hopeless and dangerous. When this occurs, one has no confidence left in the other party at all. He/she is seen as incapable of being reliable, predictable, and respectful. For this reason, one completely loses any belief that it could be meaningful to try – even with the assistance of a third party – to come to agreements with the other party, because he/she neither wants to nor can keep such agreements. When one, at this point, perceives the other party as basically destructive, the conclusion is that the only line of action is to either get rid of him/her completely or ensure that the external monitoring is so strong that he/she would not dare or be able to act out his/her destructiveness. Internal loss of face means that one no longer views the other party as someone who is worthy of respect. If the other party is such a danger to the reputation of the community, one may begin to see exposing him/her as a moral duty and ensure in some way that he/she no longer poses a threat. It is in such situations one purposefully stages external losses of face, that is, events intended to publicly reveal the other party's true nature. This can occur in the form of, for instance, open accusations of untruthfulness, autocratic behavior, sweeping incompetence, moral inferiority, mental disturbances and the like aiming at destroying the face of the enemy. Internal losses of face do not always lead to attempts to "expose" the other party, but because protecting the workplace from his/her destructiveness can be seen as a moral obligation, it is common for varyingly dramatic incidents to take place.

An isolated incident of a person losing face – perhaps by making a fool of him-/herself or being caught doing something embarrassing – is not automatically related to Step 5. Conflicts escalate to Step 5 when the parties involved are convinced that the other side is unable to act in a morally correct manner and when they attack the enemy's moral credibility.

At Step 5, typical goals include the other party being dismissed, transferred, suspended, relieved of all duties involving contact with colleagues/customers/clients, or losing his/her status so fundamentally that no one will take him/her seriously. A conflict may remain at Step 5 for a long period of time, particularly if the parties do not use external, public losses of face as weapons against each other. In such cases, Step 5 is characterized by the parties completely lacking trust in each other, being prepared for the other party to resort to dirty tricks (and therefore being on the alert) as well as refusing to have more to do with each other than is absolutely necessary.

Steps 6–9

The remaining four steps in the escalation ladder can be discussed more generally. If loss of face at Step 5 is not enough to remove the obstruction, then the next step in the escalation is to try to get the other party to give in by making threats of very painful measures. Because one believes the other party is capable of manipulation, lies and breach of faith – or incapable of following the normal rules of the game – it seems as though the only way to make progress is through use of force or even physical violence. The other party is not receptive to reasoning or normal pressure; instead the only thing that can help is the fact that he/she wants to avoid extreme unpleasantness. Thus, at Step 6 – *Strategic threats* – the parties use their imagination to make up threats for measures that would cause so much unpleasantness that the other party will feel forced to yield. Threatening gestures may appear very early in the escalation ladder, but what characterizes Step 6 is that one views them as the only means to gain control over the other party's destructiveness. Use of threats per se, therefore, does not imply that the conflict is at Step 6. Only if loss of the face has been established, strategies of threat in the true meaning are applied.

Step 6 is highly unstable and usually does not last very long. When one makes threats and ultimatums, the situation changes quickly and one is

more or less forced to carry out the threatened measures to maintain one's credibility. People and groups in the midst of severely escalating conflicts seldom give in to threats, but instead take them as evidence that the other party is dangerous and that counter-attacks in terms of counter-threats are necessary. The conflict then advances to Step 7 – *Limited destructive blows* – at which one carries out measures intended to cause the other party serious damage. At this step, one does not yet want to eliminate the other party, just force him/her to give in. If these attempts are not successful, then Step 8 – *Fragmentation of the enemy* – lies near at hand, because it means actively intervening in order to once and for all put the other party out of action. This can mean that the enemy's economic base is destroyed, or that the enemy's personality is destroyed completely, or even killing or physical destruction. One tries to destroy all of the other party's chances of functioning by, for example, pulling the resources he/she needs or creating conditions for him/her that are completely unsustainable. Forcing the other party into bankruptcy, ensuring that he/she is dismissed or ends up in prison, smearing his/her name so completely that he/she cannot go out in public are some examples of what Step 8 can entail. The final step in the escalation ladder is Step 9 – *Together into the abyss*. This step is reached when one goes so far as to ignore the self-preservation instinct. It occurs when the other party is perceived as being such an extreme threat to everything that is good that one wants to annihilate him/her, even if the price is one's own ruin. The other party will not get away with this, even if I have to file bankruptcy, go to jail or get dismissed.

The escalation ladder as a kind of vaccination

In real life, conflicts seldom develop according to the clearly delimited steps described in the escalation model. For instance, some people might move very quickly to the behaviors that are characteristic of Step 4, without any gradual escalation in relation to a concrete issue. But the model can still help us see more clearly the workings of a given conflict, that is, the behavior patterns that mark the conflict and the forces acting on the parties,

causing them to engage in further escalation. Using the escalation model, it is easier to understand how one party's actions have contributed to a destructive development, because the model shows that the party could not see any alternatives to resorting to stronger means. The model also shows, however, that it is very risky to violate the norms that keep interaction at a civilized level. The threshold between Step 4 and 5 is particularly important here. If outright losses of face occur, it is very difficult to reestablish the trust between the parties – trust that has at this point been destroyed. Thus, the escalation model can increase our motivation to ensure that conflicts do not escalate beyond Step 3. And if we observe that the conflict escalates we can choose the appropriate interventions.

We sometimes have very good reason to behave in a way that escalates a conflict. This is particularly true when we feel we are protecting the needs and interests of a third party, for example, vulnerable colleagues, children, clients or customers. In such cases, the escalation model can be used to reflect on skillful and unskillful methods of escalating the conflict. Unskillful conflict escalation involves behavior that damages trust, respect and relationships to a greater degree than is necessary. In an upcoming section, we will discuss the concept of "skillful steamrollering", which is an attempt to formulate a skillful way of moving down to Step 3 on the escalation ladder.

In the description of conflict escalation, the role of the thresholds has been emphasized, that is, on actions that violate the norms indicating how one should and may behave toward others. If we are aware of these thresholds, we have a better chance of ensuring that occasional violations will not lead to real conflict escalation. If someone violates the prevailing behavioral norms, conflict escalation can be avoided if the incident is brought up, identified as a norm violation and if it can later be agreed that it was an exceptional event, which should not be repeated. If one commits a violation oneself, offering an apology (even if one believes one was on the right side of the issue) for one's behavior may go a long way toward preventing escalation. If one is a manager, one can meet with those involved and

discuss what has happened as an unfortunate incident, explaining how such incidents can be avoided in the future.

The escalation model offers quite a few clues as to what needs to happen to de-escalate conflicts, that is, to move upwards on the ladder. The greatest hinder to getting the parties to deal with the conflict in a more constructive manner is when they have lost all hope that constructive efforts can succeed. For this reason, during escalating conflicts, it is of central importance that the parties have concrete experiences of actual improvement and of the other party being willing and able to make constructive efforts. It is, therefore, often wise – regardless of whether one is directly involved in the conflict or a third party – to try to arrive at agreements on less important issues first. This makes it easier for the parties to be accommodating and paves the way toward gradually building up trust and hope regarding the chances of improving the situation.

4. The challenges of conflict management

Using a simple pedagogical model, this short chapter provides an introduction to the tasks associated with conflict management. The model is connected to the ABC model and allows us to see more clearly what challenges and solutions are at hand when we face discussions in the midst of a conflict. Whereas the previous chapter looked at conflicts primarily from an out-sider's perspective, this and the following chapters will be aimed more directly at those who are involved, as parties to the conflict or leaders.

From confrontation to problem-solving in three steps

Ultimately, conflict resolution concerns what we do in the conflict's C corner, that is, how we deal with the concrete issues that constitute the obstructions between the parties. It is a matter of solving problems in a constructive manner. When two parties discover that there are differences of opinion or feelings of irritation that they cannot deal with simply by talking, they often end up in a confrontation, tug-of-war or deadlock, which can be illustrated in the upper part of Figure 4.1. Party A has certain desires and Party B has others, and they pit these desires against each other. As long as both are fully occupied with trying to get the other person to concede, the way is paved for a deadlock.

Reframing of the situation from conflict ...
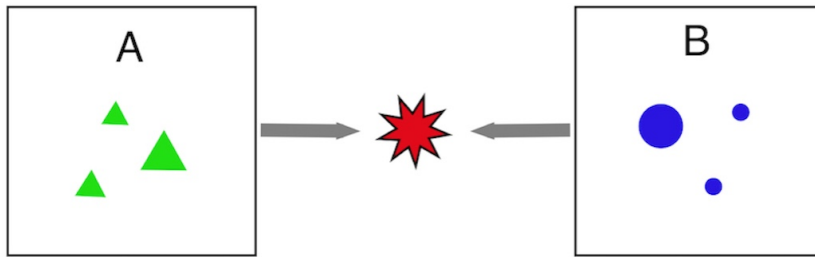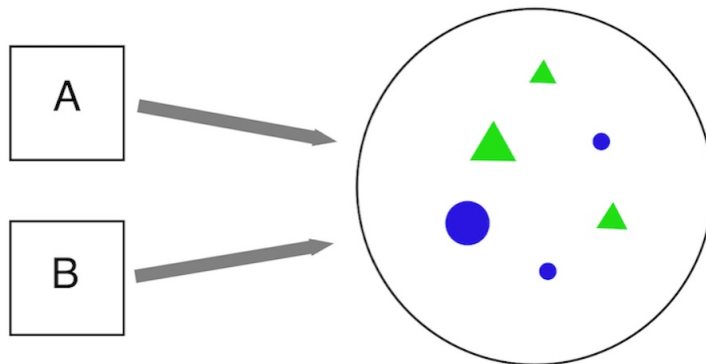

... to problem-solving

Figure 4.1 Reframing from conflict to problem-solving

The aim of constructive conflict management is to get the parties to view the situation as one requiring problem resolution rather than as a struggle to defend one's own viewpoints (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011). In the lower part of Figure 4.1, Party A and B have both laid their desires on the table; they are standing side-by-side looking at the whole picture. With this starting point, they can begin to work to try to find a mutually acceptable solution. To accomplish this, both parties to the conflict need to do something that is often difficult in the context of a conflict: recognize that the other party's desires and issues are part of what needs to be managed.

There has long been a number of good, proven methods for resolving conflicts. The problem is not a lack of knowledge about how the problems

underlying conflicts can be solved. There are many professional conflict managers who claim that all conflicts can be resolved, as long as one condition is met: The parties truly wish to resolve the conflict. There is certainly a great deal of truth to this. However the main problem is that, in the context of many conflicts, the parties do not wish to cooperate in solving the problem. Resistance to conflict resolution is such a common element of conflicts that working through it to mobilize the parties' goodwill must be seen as a major objective of conflict management. Figure 4.2 contains a list of several typical reasons parties to a conflict give for not being at all prepared to view the conflict as a joint problem to be solved in collaboration with the other party.

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Some reasons for resistance to participating in conflict resolution

- Being strongly preoccupied with emotions and wanting to express them.
- Being strongly preoccupied with judgments and wanting to convince others about the rightness of those judgments.
- Being convinced about what the problem is and what should be done – it appears meaningless to continue talking.
- Feeling strong anxiety about having to deal with own and others' emotions.
- Feeling uncertain about ability to advocate own interests in a debate.
- Feeling anxious about possible negative outcomes (such as increased tensions, being regarded as a whiner.
- Believing that one has more to win by being confrontative.

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Figure 4.2 Resistance to conflict resolution

The first four points on the list are examples showing how what is triggered in the parties' A corner becomes an obstacle to their wanting to be skillful problem-solvers at all. When one has strong feelings, beliefs, diagnoses and is highly annoyed, one lacks the inner free space needed to focus on behaving in a constructive manner to resolve problems. This means that, in the context of many conflicts, we cannot begin in the conflict's C corner, that is, begin with negotiating how the issues at hand should be dealt with.

If I am personally involved in a conflict, my first task is to deal with my own A corner, that is, to deal with my own reactions in such a way that I *want* to be constructive and actually *can* be. If I am successful, then I face my next task: Figuring out what I can do to enable the other party to achieve the inner free space needed to want to be a skillful problem-solver.

What we have here is a basic model for conflict management that is relevant in most conflict situations one might end up in (see Figure 4.3). According to this model, conflict management consists of three primary tasks:

1. Managing one's own A corner (i.e., the reactions that are triggered in oneself)
2. Managing others' A corner
3. Managing the C corner (i.e., solving problems)
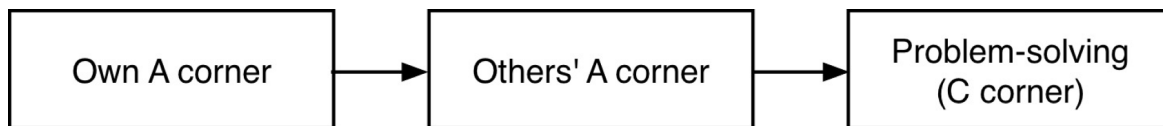
Figure 4.3 The three challenges of conflict management

The communication models and conflict resolution approaches described in handbooks and taught at courses concern the skills needed to manage these three tasks. Sometimes it is assumed that one has already completed the first task (i.e., managed one's own A corner) and is, thereby, ready to devote oneself whole-heartedly to the other two. This expectation underestimates the difficulties involved in dealing with one's own reactions. In the following sections, we will briefly discuss what the three tasks entail. Chapter 5 and 6 discuss these topics in more detail.

Managing one's own A corner

As we see, the first task is to manage the reactions triggered in oneself during a conflict situation. To do this, one must achieve the inner freedom required to want to be a constructive problem-solver. This is sometimes not a trivial task. In the midst of a conflict, it is often the case that those involved come to be so filled with feelings, images, judgments and attitudes that they cannot bring themselves to want to be constructive. One might think: "Why should *I* make an effort to be constructive when it's the other person who's behaved badly and should change?" Regarding the task of managing one's own A corner, one clear prerequisite is that one *notices* the internal processes that are triggered in a difficult situation. This ability is not at all obvious. Thus, one of the most important skills in a conflict manager's repertoire – a skill that must be built up through practice – is the ability to become aware of and observe one's own reactions. When feelings bubble up, when images of what others are like form, when one interprets why things have happened or what the other party's underlying motives are, it is very easy to let oneself be steered by these subjective reactions. To be a skilled problem-solver, however, one must acquire an inner freedom of action in relation to one's own feelings, interpretations and opinions so that one can truly act, instead of simply reacting.

When one has noticed one's own reactions ("Well, that really got me going"), the next step is to deal with these reactions so that one does not become hopelessly lost in them. We all have our own techniques for managing our reactions, at least as far as feelings are concerned. What do you do when you have a strong feeling of irritation that you actually don't want to have? Do you go out and jog in the woods? Make nasty faces? Complain to a friend? Reason with yourself? Do you write in your diary? You probably have several different techniques you sometimes use when you find yourself reacting in a way you do not like. If one wishes to develop skills in constructive conflict management, an important task is to work to develop one's own repertoire of techniques for dealing with one's own reactions (for further discussion, see Chapter 5).

In the conflict management literature, two techniques for dealing with one's own A corner are presented that one may not come up with oneself. Both are powerful, but it takes time before one can master and use them in acute situations. The first entails using one's own way of listening to avoid getting lost in one's own negative reactions (Schulz von Thun, 1981).[10] When one is provoked by others' unfair accusations, narrow-mindedness, insults or whatever the case may be, it is easy to become upset and mount a counterattack. However, if one truly wishes to solve an important problem (that is found in the C corner), it may not be best to become so provoked that one loses control, thereby ending up in a rapidly escalating quarrel. In situations like this, one can tell oneself something along these lines: "Here is somebody who is trying to express her feelings and needs, but doing it in an unskillful way." If one then focuses on liste-ning with the intent to discover what feelings this person is filled with and, more importantly, what basic human needs he/she is trying to protect, it is much easier to avoid being provoked. One can now see that the other person is only trying to preserve his/her self-esteem or is afraid of having his/her autonomy limited. If one understands what underlies the other person's actions, it is easier not to react so forcefully oneself and to maintain one's focus on solving the problems at hand.

The second technique involves coming into contact with one's own needs and feelings (Rosenberg, 1999). Experience shows that most of us are not really aware of what needs we are trying to protect when we enter into conflicts. Understanding and being able to put into words for oneself (and perhaps for others) what personal needs are important (see the list in Chapter 2) often provides more solid ground to stand on. The security gained by knowing what personal needs are at stake often makes one more stable and less easily provoked.

Managing the other party's A corner

Even after successfully managing one's own reactions and acquiring some freedom of action, the situation is normally still not ripe for moving on to engage in problem-solving. The next task is instead to see what one can do to encourage the other party to also be willing to try to be a skillful problem-solver. This involves considering the following question: "What can I do to help the other people involved in the conflict become willing and able to solve problems with me?" It is this task that is the focus of many handbooks on communication (see, e.g., Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011; Bolton, 1987; Ury, 1993; Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999; Rosenberg, 1999).

In this connection, there are a number of techniques that are well tried, but that sometimes require a great deal of practice if one wishes to use them in conflict situations. The first and perhaps most important technique is often amazingly effective if one is able to use it: taking in the message or, as it is more commonly called, active listening. A person who is upset generally wants to achieve two things: (1) reach the other party with his/her feelings and desires, and (2) get the other party to do what he/she wants. It is difficult to remember that these are two different things: One can certainly take in another person's message without, for that reason, doing what he/she wants. As long as the other party feels one has not received and understood his/her message, he/she will be fully occupied with trying to get that message across. If, under these circumstances, one offers objections, corrections, counterarguments or is dismissive, the result will often be to make the other party even more upset, causing him/her to try harder to get his/her message across. For this reason, it is often wise to decide to take in the message properly before making any attempts to present one's own viewpoints. It is only when the other party feels his/her message has been understood that he/she has the capacity to listen to someone else. Aspects of listening are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

Other techniques that are very helpful in dealing with others' A corner are: using "I statements", showing that one cares, cultivating respectful relationships, making it easy for the other party to be constructive as well as mildly, but firmly, directing the other party's attention to circumstances and

possible future consequences that he/she does not seem to be aware of. Several of these techniques are looked at more closely in Chapter 6.

Problem-solving techniques (the C corner)

It is only after one has managed to deal fairly well with one's own and the other party's A corner that there are good possibilities for working jointly to solve problems. At this point, more than half of the work is done, but if the conflict concerns issues where one or both parties are obstructing the other's desires, reaching a satisfactory agreement may be a considerable challenge. The third column of Figure 4.4 lists some of the most well-known techniques for managing the C corner (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011; Stone, Patton & Heen, 1999; Rosenberg 1999).

One primary task is to change the nature of the interaction– from a tug-of-war between established positions where both are trying to force their own viewpoint through, to attempts to create an inquiring atmosphere. In the latter kind of interaction, both parties can look at the situation and identify how it developed, what its constituent parts are, what the parties' respective desires are and what possible consequences one needs to consider. Such a conversation is more a matter of constructive problem-solving than of a competition in which the strong party wins. One basic approach to take into a conflict situation is to ensure that the conversation does not become a debate, but instead an opportunity for learning. Conversations marked by learning often involve the parties comparing their views on the situation in order to identify where the similarities and differences are. When they do this, they give each other the right to their own experience, instead of arguing about whose view of things is true. Naturally, it may be shown that one of the parties is wrong about certain issues or facts, but one must begin by examining what the parties' respective experiences actually look like.

I have, on several previous occasions, stressed that focusing on the parties' respective needs can be helpful in managing conflicts in a constructive

manner. This is also important when managing the concrete issues found in the C corner. Figure 2.6 (see Chapter 2) shows how conflicts often have a visible part ("the presented problem") that consists of the parties' respective standpoints in the conflict. These standpoints constitute the parties' respective notions about how they can safeguard their own needs. If, in the problem-solving phase, we set these standpoints aside for a while and instead ask what needs the parties are trying to protect through their standpoints, it is often possible to move beyond deadlocked positions. It is easier to be understanding about the needs a person has and wants to fulfill than to give in to unconditional demands. When one knows what needs are at stake, it is easier to think creatively about alternative ways of meeting the needs of both parties.

Adopting principles that serve as criteria for good solutions may sound abstract, but it entails trying to change the nature of the discussions – from a tug-of-war in which the strongest prevails to a negotiation whose outcome is determined by good arguments. One might ask: "I don't really understand why I should find that your standpoint is a reasonable solution to the problem. Could you explain your reasoning to me?" By posing questions like these, one is asking the other party to provide good arguments for the viewpoints he/she is offering. Another common approach here is to introduce a third, impartial perspective by trying to identify principled criteria in relation to which the standpoints can be evaluated. This may involve bringing in an outside expert who can make an assessment or investigate how others have resolved similar issues in the past.

If it proves to be impossible – despite real efforts – to arrive at an agreement, it may be necessary to move to Step 3 on the escalation ladder. That is, one may need to proceed with some kind of unilateral decision to end to the conflict. In Chapter 7, I discuss how such acts of steamrollering can be carried out in as skillful a manner as possible.

Techniques for managing one's own reactions (own A corner)	Techniques for managing others' reactions (others' A corner)	Techniques for problem-solving (the C corner)
• Listen for the feelings and needs that underlie unskillful statements (accusations, negative judgments, etc.). • Talk about the situation with someone who is a good listener. • Gain insight into the back-ground of others' behavior. • Try to identify and put into words one's own needs. • Practice the skill of noticing one's own reactions (anti-pathies, images of others, interpretations, feelings, etc.). • Consider which ways of behaving (on one's own part) would aggravate the situa-tion. Choose another way. • Develop a BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement). • Practice different attitudes and approaches in less charged situations. • Remind yourself of the possibility to influence the course of events and guide them in a constructive direction.	• Listen actively and take in what others are trying to say. • Use "I statements" when you present your own case. • Identify others' feelings and needs, and show that you care about them. • Find out what others are worried about and show your understanding. • Establish a respectful relationship irrespective of differences of opinion. • Avoid loss of face and acknowledge identities. • Respect the fact that people may need to express their feelings. • Make it easy for others to behave constructively. • Make clear to others the consequences of their behavior that they do not seem to be aware of. • Adopt a longer time perspective and a broader field of vision.	• Transform debates into dialogues that promote learning. • Transform struggles over viewpoints into joint problem-solving. • Differentiate between the problem and the person. • Examine differences in how the situation and roles are understood. • Describe your own observa-tions and interpretations as just that: your own image of things. • Invite complementary infor-mation. Compare narratives. • Describe your own feelings, values, needs and desires in as concrete and clear a manner as possible. • Find ways to meet the involved parties' underlying needs. • Adopt principles that serve as criteria for good solutions. ("Show me why your alternative should be viewed as fair/reasonable.") • If consensus is impossible, steamroller the parties in a skillful manner.

Figure 4.4 Conflict management techniques

5. Self-awareness and lack of self-awareness during conflicts

A challenging chapter

In the previous chapter, I stressed the importance of having the skills to deal with one's own A corner, that is, one's own reactions to what is happening. I mentioned that having the ability to actively pay attention to one's own reactions is a key to constructive conflict management. People direct attention toward what is occurring within themselves to varying degrees. The differences that exist between individuals – in how aware they are of their own feelings, thought patterns and judgments – result in great differences in how they react to and deal with conflict situations.[11] This chapter presents one perspective on the topic of self-awareness and the role it plays in how people function in everyday life.[12] It is the most demanding part of the book as regards the reader's concentration and motivation, but it offers a perspective that is very powerful and useful. This is particularly true for readers who are interested in personal development. If you feel the themes or discussions pursued here are not particularly relevant for you personally, feel free to skip this chapter and continue to the next one. I do think, however, that I can promise great benefits to those who try to understand the chapter's perspective.

Developing awareness of what is happening within us

As it is used here, the term *self-awareness* has a specific meaning: It refers to the degree to which a person notices the flow of sensory impressions, thoughts, feelings, personal opinions, desires and behavioral impulses that is always occurring in relation to everyday life events.

The perspective on human consciousness employed here is based on the psychology of Eastern wisdom traditions. In these traditions, one differentiates between consciousness as such ("pure awareness") and the content that fills our field of awareness. Here, all of the sensory impressions, thoughts, feelings, personal opinions and desires that are constantly flowing in the individual's momentary experiences are viewed as different sub-processes in how human beings work. They are viewed as functions that are built into the human organism. Our senses generate sensory impressions and the brain spins narratives about what these perceptions mean. The body, including the brain, generates feelings. The brain generates behavioral reflexes, judgments (likes and dislikes) and thoughts. Here, human consciousness is viewed not as the sum of all these "ego processes," but as a witness who perceives all of the feelings, thoughts, etc., that the body gives rise to. However, we are not born with a conscious awareness that this inner witness exists and is constantly perceiving our thoughts and feelings. For most people, their consciousness is so filled and occupied with feelings and thoughts that they perceive these to be the very core of who they are. Our senses, body and brain give rise to a constant stream of sensory impressions, feelings and thoughts. These are dealt with in the brain, which in its turn produces opinions, interpretations, new feelings and desires. For the most part, our attention is so occupied with the end results of these processes that we hardly notice the processes themselves. There is no attention left that can reflect on the processes as such and what actually happens during them. This lack of self-awareness means that one has no opportunity to actively and intentionally relate to the processes occurring within one. The self – the individual's conscious core – has become lost in ego processes and their products. Using more everyday language, we could say that this concerns a state in which one is so occupied with the experiences themselves that one cannot imagine posing questions such as the following: "Why do I feel like this right now? Do I want to feel like this? What was it that caused me to come to this conclusion? Do I want to react like this?"

Self-awareness develops gradually. Some people seem to have an innate talent for it. Others have grown up in an environment in which they encountered, from a very young age, questions that made them direct attention toward inner processes. Still other people have not had such favorable initial conditions, and for them any development must be based on their own initiative. Little is known about why some individuals take this initiative, while others fail to do so to any considerable extent.

One way to more easily understand the nature of self-awareness may be to see it as a skill or habit that develops in phases. The first phase involves noticing that processes are taking place within us – processes that sharpen our feelings, thoughts and desires. By carefully and patiently directing our attention toward these processes, we can develop an increasingly clear and nuanced familiarity with the features and characteristics the processes present. In parallel with this development of the ability to perceive inner processes, a position in our consciousness – which can be called the "witness self" – is also being trained and consolidated. The witness self is that part of the self that untangles itself from embeddedness in the complex of ego processes and experiences itself as a center of consciousness – a center that can observe what is happening internally, but without being completely consumed by it.

When the witness self has begun establishing itself, the process of freeing itself from unconscious embeddedness in ego processes can really begin. The second phase of develop-ment of self-awareness is when the witness self begins to relate actively to the inner feelings, thoughts and desires that arise and then disappear. This is a matter of a self that can observe the emergence of a certain feeling and that is free to decide what it should do with that feeling. "Should I give the behavioral impulses triggered by this feeling free reign? Is the feeling a primitive reaction that I should let go of after its energy has dissipated? Is this a subtle and valuable feeling that I should give more attention to and nurture?"

The third phase begins when this inner self-awareness subtly transitions from being embedded in ego processes to being at ease in the witness position. In this phase, the individual can continuously – in all everyday situations – notice what feelings, trains of thought, desires, behavioral impulses and opinions (likes and dislikes) are created internally without feeling tied to them. Instead, there is an inner subject – the witness self – who can reflect on, assess and take a stand on what should be done with these feelings, thoughts, desires, opinions and impulses. To give the reader a glimpse of what this can entail in practice, I present two excerpts from an email interview I conducted for one of my research projects (Jordan & Lundin, 2002). The woman being interviewed, Kathy, talks about how she reacts to certain kinds of incidents involving her boss, Anne.

Kathy: First my reaction is to deny and defend. Do I feel like I am being attacked? Yes. Then I calm down, and my thoughts head toward understanding as I try to explain what is obvious to me. Have you tried to explain metaphor to a fundamentalist? Or clouds to a sightless person? It feels like that. I explain. She is blank. I explain that to me, my impatience has nothing to do with anyone else; no one needs to change a thing. The only one who has anything to do about that is me. If others are hurt, I shall apologise. And when I go to them to do so, it is nothing. Nothing at all. They don't know what I am talking about. It is all in Anne's world.

Kathy's statement is quite eloquent, but given her sparing language, I was not completely certain I understood everything.

Interviewer: Do you mean like this:
1. You get criticized by Anne.
2. Your spontaneous reaction is to deny blame, and to defend yourself.
3. You notice that you feel attacked.
4. You deal with this feeling of being attacked, and therefore calm down.
5. You start trying to understand the meaning-making behind the critical words from Anne.
6. You try to explain to Anne why you did what you did.

7. You see that your explanation doesn't get through to Anne.
8. You get impatient because your efforts don't give the desired
result, in the form of mutual understanding.
9. You notice your impatience, and deal with it by telling yourself
that everything is OK, and that your impatience is entirely your own
responsibility, and that if others feel hurt, you'll simply go an
apologise.
10. You go to the people to whom Anne seem to have implied that you
behaved negatively, and apologise.
11. These people don't understand what you are talking about, they
don't feel that you have been rude.
Did I get it right?

Kathy: Yes, you have it exactly right.

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Kathy: One coping strategy. I want to like Jane. So I look for something to like about her. Right in the very moment I am so furious. It absolutely works. If I concentrate on her generosity, then in that moment I like her. However, (big HOWEVER) I have never been successful when she is in my face about it. This only works in situations where she is just being generally dense or disruptive. Second coping strategy: try to understand what is going on for her. If I can understand, I relax and find compassion again. It would go something like this. 'Shit she is being obnoxious. Look at how she screeches out over three aisles of desks to ask Barry if he can help her with the thingee there. Why does she do that? […] I remember she still goes to her ex-husband's house at Christmas and he cooks for her and takes care of her. Does she miss that in her life? Is a woman only a real woman who has a man to care for her? How fortunate I am to have one who cares for me. I know how she must feel' And presto. I am out of the antagonism, just like that. It's work and it works.

In the excerpts, Kathy provides several examples of how she notices her own reactions, assesses what she thinks about them and decides what she is

going to do with them. She has even developed certain strategies for transforming her own emotional attitudes toward other people. As we see in the excerpt, Kathy's ability to witness what it happening inside her does not always imply that she is in control or in a peaceful state. She is highly temperamental, but also aware of the processes that kick in and, therefore, able to actively deal with them.

Development of self-awareness in relation to internal processes

This chapter begins with a general overview of the nature of self-awareness and the witness self. In the rest of the chapter, we will look more closely at how awareness and lack of awareness are manifested in relation to different inner processes. These processes can be seen as functions, within a person, that give rise to a continuous flow of images, feelings, thoughts, opinions, behavioral impulses and desires.

The American psychologist Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) has constructed a theory of ego development that builds on an analysis of what constitutes subject and object in an individual's consciousness. That which is subject guides how the individual orients him-/herself, reacts and acts. Objects are the inner phenomena that the individual notices and, thereby, can have a conscious relation to. Kegan describes ego development as a course of events in which an increasing number of parts of the inner world become objects of consciousness, meaning they are no longer subject. I use a similar approach in this chapter. If a person does not recognize his/her own spontaneous judging as an inner process, differentiated from the self, then these opinions will serve as subject to him/her. These opinions directly control what the person says and do without him/her reflecting on their content. In what follows, we will look at six inner processes, or ego processes: perceiving, feelings and moods, thinking, judging, desiring and behavioral impulses. In an individual, these processes can either be subject

and directly control how one functions as a person, or objects to which one has an inner relation. Figure 5.1 provides an overview of the six ego processes and brief explanations of what it entails to have them as subject as opposed to objects of consciousness. It also includes the three phases of development of self-awareness and the witness self, which were described briefly earlier in the chapter. Below, I will discuss each of these six processes, pointing out several characteristic patterns as well as some consequences of not having self-awareness.

Ego processes	Subject Being absorbed in an immediate way by the element, in such a way that it dominates one's awareness, and directs reactions and intentions. The element is not articulated into distinct gestalts in awareness, and thus not available for reflection.	Object		
		I. **Noticing** Noticing and formulating in words or images for oneself or for others.	II. **Interpreting/ Evaluating** Consciously evaluating the element; forming opinions and assigning values in relation to it.	III. **Transforming** Intentionally dealing with the element, in order to achieve some kind of transformation of the element, or changing the role the element has in consciousness.
Perceiving: Organizing impressions and images of lifeworld experiences.	Images of experiences fill up one's field of awareness and dominates what one feels, thinks, and wants without being ordered into a coherent story that can be reviewed and evaluated in the mind.	Constructing a coherent gestalt out of isolated images of experiences, thus enabling oneself to reflect on what kinds of experiences one has had and has.	Evaulating the experiences. i.e. forming grounded opinions on various aspects of lived experience.	Intentionally working through and reinterpret one's own experiences, thus making them available for constructive learning, and enabling oneself to reach closure of experiences.
Feelings and moods	To be held captive by emotions and moods, such as bitterness, psychological pain, self-reproaches, hate, resignation, inferio-rity feelings. Lack of formulation of emotions prevents their becoming objects of conscious attention, evaluation and intentional transformation.	Noticing and articulating own emotions, feelings and moods.	Evaluating if it is good/bad, desirable/ undesirable that one has certain emotions, feelings and moods.	Intentionally acting in order to transform own emotions and moods, e.g. through diversion, acting-out in constructive forms, seeking out compensatory experiences, consultations with friends or therapeut, reinterpretation of causes and consequences, etc.
Thinking	To be unaware of one's own thought patterns, and to make interpretations and assumptions without being aware of the active part oneself has in making them, and therefore being incapable of reflecting on the character of one's own mentations.	Noticing that one has a propensity to think in certain patterns, and that assumptions and interpretations are made from a particular perspec-tive, and therefore possibly biased.	Evaluating if the typical thought patterns one has, and if specific interpreta-tions one makes are adequate and desirable.	Intentionally acting to transform one's own undesirable routine thought patterns and ways of making interpretations.
Judgments	Acting on spontaneous opinions, likes and dislikes about others or about events and circumstances without awareness or tempering by reflection	Noticing that one likes or dislikes various persons, events and circumstance.	Evaluating spontaneous opinions, likes and dislikes in relation to one's con-sciously chosen values.	Intentionally transforming own opinions, likes and dislikes through search for new information, inten-tional refocusing of attention, or other active reevaluating processes.
Desires	Letting oneself be driven by spontaneous wishes, desires and intentions without being aware of wherein they consist.	Articulating one's motives, wishes and desires, thus making them available for conscious review.	Evaluating one's motivation and wishes in relation to self-chosen and conscious values.	Intentionally working to transform own desires and wishes in order to align them with own deeply held values.
Behavioural impulses	Automatically acting on habitual behavioural patterns and spontaneous reactions without aware-ness of what is going on.	Articulating and characterizing how one has behaved and what typical reaction patterns one follows.	Evaluating the desirability of one's own habitual behaviours and automatical reaction patterns.	Intentionally transforming one's own habitual behavious and reaction patterns.

Figure 5.1 Self-awareness in relation to six ego processes

1. Perceiving

Here, the term perceiving is used to designate the process that organizes the information provided by the five senses into coherent and meaningful gestalts or even narratives. This process is underway continuously, as long as we are awake. Creating meaning by combining different pieces of information is a complicated process that varies in sophistication. Many people have difficulty organizing their direct experiences into coherent gestalts. To the extent one is unable to do this, there are great consequences for functioning in everyday life. A person for whom direct, unsorted experiences serve as subjects of consciousness will react to these experiences without placing them in a greater context. Every experience gives rise to its own reaction, without the person having reflected on what the individual experience means when it is viewed as part of a greater pattern. A single event – for instance a fierce argument at work – triggers feelings, judgments and behavioral impulses without the event being placed in an overall narrative that might give it a broader meaning.

In our interviews on individuals' experiences of workplace conflicts, we encountered several people who had great difficulty providing a coherent story of what had happened. It would seem that some people go through a workplace conflict without organizing the separate experiences into a coherent story about what occurred. In the interviews, these people were unable to tell the story of what they had gone through. They gave short, fragmented answers to the interviewers' questions. Their answers were unsystematic, jumping between separate incidents and details. Much of what they said contained opinions about other people and specific events, rather than descriptions of what they had actually experienced. To the extent the interviewees tried to say something about what had happened overall, their statements were vague, sweeping and chaotic. It was very difficult for the interviewer to understand what had occurred when the interviewees jumped back and forth between specific events and even mixed subjective impressions and opinions with the external course of events. This is not merely a matter of finding it difficult to tell the story to someone else, but also of having a hard time seeing the pattern of their own experiences by transforming them into objects that can be reflected on. People for whom

immediate experiences are subject live their lives in a very reactive manner and have great difficulty navigating through unexpected events. This also characterizes how they function in conflicts: They react to individual events but cannot see the whole, and for this reason they also cannot take constructive initiatives to influence the course of the conflict.

Adults who cannot put their experiences into meaningful contexts are in the minority. For most people, immediate experiences are the objects of perception and are combined to form relatively coherent narratives. This occurs spontaneously and in the absence of any highly pronounced awareness of these inner processes. The great number of diverse sensory impressions – which are in actuality chaotic – are sorted, ordered and combined to form meaningful images and narratives, which in their turn can give meaning to individual events and experiences. This allows the person to reflect on what has happened and is happening and to construe meaning in the various details. Specific experiences can be interpreted and reinterpreted.

The first phase in developing the ability to see perceptions and interpretations as objects of awareness involves noticing that one attributes meaning to the events one experiences and that the processes of meaning-making have certain features that one can consciously observe and reflect on. Perceptions and interpretations no longer fill up the entire self experience, but there is instead scope left over for attending to the particular ways one makes sense of perceptions. This type of awareness generally results in the insight that events could possibly be interpreted in different ways, leading to different narratives about the same set of events.

The second phase involves assessing and taking a stand on one's experiences in a conscious manner. This requires having some kind of overall picture, values, norms or another kind of perspective that can be used as a yardstick for evaluating individual experiences. The third phase, then, involves deliberately deciding to reevaluate one's experiences. People who do this notice the nature of their experiences, develop a well-

considered view on this nature and take different kinds of initiatives to test alternative ways of giving these experiences meaning. For a person who functions in this manner, immediate experiences do not passively or spontaneously generate certain emotional reactions, thoughts and behavioral impulses. Instead, such a person evaluates these experiences actively so as to give them a constructive and appropriate meaning. This third phase is crucial to making learning and personal transformation an integrated and important part of everyday life. It also entails the individual developing full insight into the fact that all meaning he/she gives experiences is self-constructed. It is simply the case that humans play a very active role in ascribing meaning to separate sensory impressions and experiences. This insight entails differentiating between actual events and the reactions they trigger within us. Using it, the individual can begin to actively influence and give shape to the meaning attributed to separate events. For instance, one can choose to interpret a frustrating event as something that can be used to learn more about one's own reactions. Actively choosing to interpret the experience in this way gives an originally negative experience a positive meaning. When the witness self is fully developed, it can observe events and experiences without being consumed by automatic reactions to them.

2. Feelings and moods

While the proportion of adults who find it difficult to organize their immediate experiences into meaningful contexts is relatively small, for many feelings and moods serve as subjects. Our mammalian organism continuously generates feelings as responses to external and internal events. This is a simple fact as well as a very central and universal part of our life as human beings. There is, however, great variation in how we relate to our feelings. A person for whom feelings and moods serve as subject does not experience being a self that has emotional states, but is instead simply consumed by feelings. When strong feelings are triggered in the organism/person, they completely fill up his/her experiential world. Among

other things, this means that feelings take control over the person's volition. There is no internal space where the person's consciousness can step back and observe these feelings as part of his/her experience. Instead, any consideration going on is done by the feelings directly. When one's feelings are the subject, it is often difficult to explain for one's self or others exactly what these feelings are. They are acted out directly in words, body language and actions.

Almost everyone has times when strong feelings rush in and completely take over, but this is not the same as feelings serving as subject. The crucial distinction here is that people for whom feelings are subjects do not notice what happened when the feelings took over control. People who can take their feelings as objects for conscious reflection are not always able to do so when these feelings are strongest, but as soon as the feelings begin to calm down, they understand what happened and can reflect on it.

People for whom feelings and moods serve as subjects may easily become helpless captives of negative emotional states, such as bitterness, low self-esteem, hate, depression, feelings of deficiency or resignation. Because these people do not have a self that can use feelings as objects of reflection – that can evaluate these feelings and decide to change them – they are lacking an important tool for taking themselves out of such states. Luckily, there are other ways of dealing with negative feelings, for instance waiting for them to pass on their own, distracting oneself with other activities, acting out or accepting help from other people.

When people with weak self-awareness into their own feelings find themselves in conflict situations, there is a great risk they will get stuck in a very negative kind of dynamics. When negative feelings are triggered in such people, they are of course aware of this, but fail to evaluate whether something should be done to change the external or internal conditions that might allow these negative feelings to be turned in a positive direction. These people become angry immediately when others suggest such change, because they experience these kinds of suggestions as criticisms and

attacks. And as long as one's feelings serve as subjects, this is reasonable: In such cases, feelings *are* a central part of the self. Every suggestion indicating the person should change his/her feelings is experienced as an attempt to change the person at his/her very core.

Another important aspect of lacking self-awareness into one's feelings during conflicts is that negative feelings can easily become the principle that guides all behavior in the conflict situation. There may be no willingness at all to reconcile, be accommodating or find a solution that is good for both parties. Negative feelings may cause, in the individual, the desire to create a distance, preferably get rid of the other party entirely and, if worst comes to worst, harm the other party in an attempt to restore one's violated self-esteem or vent one's aggressive attitudes.

The first phase of developing self-awareness in relation to one's feelings and moods involves noticing and describing for oneself the feelings and moods one has. In this way, feelings become visible objects for one's consciousness, which allows differentiation between feelings and the self. Feelings then become something that is part of the person's experience instead of part of his/her self, which creates scope for moving on to the second phase. In the second phase, the self can actively evaluate feelings. One is now able to observe a certain feeling and ask whether or not it is desirable and well-founded. If one then wishes to change something in relation to one's emotional state, it is time to start developing the third phase of self-awareness, which concerns the ability to intentionally transform one's feelings. This involves, among other things, taking responsibility for having certain feelings, "owning" them and developing constructive ways of dealing with them. Many people have developed their own techniques for working on feelings they want to get through and leave behind them. This can involve anything from simple tricks, like buying a cake or making faces, to more complicated methods such as keeping a diary, finding a more satisfying job, starting psychotherapy or learning a new meditation technique.

A fully developed witness self experiences the comings and goings of feelings, but is not consumed by them. There is always a sense of there being a self that both has the feelings and can relate to them. Feelings may be strong, but they are not imperatives that control what one does and wants. One may feel angry, sad, empty, bored or frustrated, but these feelings do not have the power to hold the self captive.

3. Thinking

Viewing the generation of feelings as a process that occurs within us and can be witnessed is probably acceptable to most readers. However, it is perhaps more foreign to see thinking as an almost autonomous process that one could step back from and observe. For many people, thoughts are what one experiences as oneself. The sense of self is embedded in the thoughts one has. In traditions that emphasize meditation and contemplation, however, part of the basic assumptions is the notion that thinking is a spontaneous process in our consciousness that we must learn to master. The goal of many meditation techniques is for the person to develop an ability to attain a state of mind that at least temporarily is free from thoughts and images, in order to experience awareness as such, without any content. During insight meditation, one experiences thoughts as things that spontaneously emerge in a constant flow. It often takes a long time to come to the point where gaps occur in one's thought production – gaps that allow one to feel awareness in its pure and empty form. Because the purpose of meditation is often to maintain and identify with a witness self, teachers typically instruct learners to try not to concern themselves with the content of their thoughts, but to instead attach as little importance and attention to them as possible. In the Western tradition, particularly in certain therapeutic schools of thought, great importance is placed on developing the ability to perceive the content of thoughts, reflect on thought patterns and evaluate the consequences certain trains of thought have for how one lives one's life.

A person who does not pay any attention to patterns of thinking will not notice that individual thoughts and more complex systems of thoughts, such as interpretations of events and belief systems, are the results of ego processes. Such a person will also not reflect on his/her own ideas, thought patterns and beliefs. He/she may act based on the untested assumption that the interpretations he/she has made are true representations of reality rather than interpretations that occur because he/he thinks according to certain habitual patterns.

One very important factor in conflict situations is that the parties often fail to question their own interpretations and lines of thought. They are not aware that others' thought patterns may have different starting points and may, therefore, follow different trajectories. Those who are not aware of thinking as a constructing process often tend to flatly dismiss reasoning and opinions that are in disagreement with their own ideas. Moreover, they are often very unwilling to entertain the possibility of alternative interpretations because they have no basic awareness of the fact such interpretations may exist and be justified to a certain extent.

The first phase of developing self-awareness in relation to thinking entails taking note of one's own thought patterns. When one's thoughts are objects of reflection, the typical result is in-depth insight into the fact that one's experience is dependent on how one interprets events. Another insight is that this is not only true for oneself, but also for others. Being conscious of thinking as an inner process tends to lead to increasing insight into how important it is that people see the world from different perspectives. This may arouse curiosity about what the characteristic features of one's own personal perspective look like in relation to those of others. For instance, one may realize that one has been formed, during childhood, by a specific culture, certain beliefs and a particular value system. This childhood environment consisted of ideas, thoughts, concepts and values that created the frameworks within which one's own thinking moves.

In the second phase, one routinely evaluates the thoughts and thought patterns flowing through one's mind. Perhaps one notices that certain recurring figures of thought constitute unnecessary limitations or distorted patterns of interpretation. One may also see that some lines of thought are guided by primitive basic assumptions about life, for example that "you can't trust people" or "I'm not good at anything anyway." It may become clear that the worldview one grew up with and accepted without question has actually been incomplete in a way that has made one blind to important aspects of the surrounding world. Critical scrutiny of these patterns may enable the individual to assess which thought patterns are desirable and which are not.

In the third phase, the individual purposely tries to transform certain thought patterns. This can be difficult work, because some habitual thoughts are deeply rooted and constitute central parts of the person's way of orienting him-/herself in life and interpreting events. A number of techniques have been developed to help people influence such habits. One of them is the use of affirmations. An affirmation is a positive statement – for instance, "I'm a strong, positive and capable person" – that is repeated many times using identical wording, the aim being to replace negative thought patterns with constructive patterns. More complex thought patterns, however, may require more sophisticated efforts. One of the most effective ways of paving the way for a transformation of one's own system of ideas is to purposefully immerse oneself in and become familiar with other perspectives. This can be accomplished by studying in various areas, for instance social anthropology or comparative religion studies. This can also be accomplished in everyday life by directing one's attention to and trying to understand how other people reason. Naturally, the greatest effect is felt if one tries to gain insight into perspectives that are much different from one's own.

Having intimate knowledge of the nature of one's own thought patterns typically leads to a rather relaxed relation to the products of thinking. One realizes that thoughts come and go, and one notices that the particular

thoughts one has have been formed by one's belonging to a certain culture, language, occupation, social group, etc. When this insight has been consolidated, individual thoughts and beliefs can no longer retain their status as the solid foundations of one's experience. Thoughts and conceptions simply do not have the same power and authority they did previously. The emergence of a witness self allows the individual to stop being tied to the thoughts that arise. A distinct feeling exists of a self that is stable regardless of the actual content of the thoughts that are coming and going. Naturally, thinking is always occurring, but it is now a tool for the self rather than the self's very core.

4. Judging

Being unaware that one's own opinions are formed through a subjective internal process is common, and this state of unawareness is an important factor in the course of many conflicts. The concept of judging is used here to denote the fact that we pass judgment and develop attitudes toward people and events. Expressed as simply as possible, we either like or dislike them. The process of forming opinions is closely tied to our emotions. Brain research has shown that the assignment of values (likes and dislikes) originate in the limbic system. For instance, when we meet a new person, our sensory impressions go both to the limbic system and to the cerebral cortex. The limbic system, however, works much faster in judging if something is good or bad than the cerebral cortex does in making its cognitive assessment. Thus, we "feel" whether we like or dislike a person before we have thought through things and assessed various pieces of information about the person. Our opinion can change based on the cognitive processing that occurs in the cerebral cortex, but this possible change occurs only after an initial judgment has already been formed.

When judgments serve as subject for an individual, he/she has no perspective on his/her own spontaneous personal attitudes toward other people, things and events. When this individual speaks, it is his/her

opinions speaking. Lack of insight into the fact that opinions are formed through a subjective process means there is no real awareness that the judgments passed occur within the individual and are primarily related to his/her frames of reference. On the contrary, it is often the case that opinions are experienced as a direct result of the qualities that are inherent in other people. For example, if Andrew thinks Sarah is unpleasant, then Andrew perceives "unpleasantness" as a property inherent to Sarah rather than as a feeling he has when faced with Sarah. Lack of self-awareness into the process of judgment can have drastic consequences, because people who have no clear awareness that their likes and dislikes are the products of a subjective process may also not be able to restrain themselves from acting based on their images of these "bad" others. If others are perceived to actually be bad people, then they also deserve to be treated as such. The result may be freezing people out, slander, harassment and ruthless confrontations.

Based on the stories we have heard in our research on workplace conflicts, it is commonly the case that judgments (likes and dislikes) serve as subject for people. This is manifested when colleagues and others are treated as though they deserve poor treatment. Judgments are acted upon directly. In contrast, people who are clearly aware that their opinions are formed through a subjective, internal process are likely to see these likes and dislikes are something private that should be weighed against the principle of every individual's right to be treated with respect, regardless of one's own personal opinions.

The first phase of developing an awareness of one's judgments is to notice that one has certain likes and dislikes as concerns individuals, events and other phenomena. This entails seeing judgments as subjective experiences rather than as a reflection of people's/events'/ phenomena's inherent characteristics. Having such an insight typically allows the individual to differentiate between what he/she thinks about things, on the one hand, and the principles guiding how situations should be dealt with, on the other. The second phase involves focusing one's attention on the discernable patterns

in one's opinions and evaluating whether these spontaneous judgments are in accordance with the values and norms one wishes to stand for. This may cause the individual to decide to not let his/her negative feelings about a colleague affect how he/she behaves toward this person at the workplace.

The third phase involves developing one's ability to consciously change the spontaneous opinions generated by one's limbic system. For instance, it is possible to realize that the negative attitudes one has toward people of a certain ethnic background are not in accordance with one's values. Based on this realization, one can develop a strategy for working through and changing these feelings. This can be done is various ways, for example by learning more about the ethnic group's history and culture, making efforts to get to know people who belong to the group or concentrating one's attention on the aspect of the group's culture that one respects and admires.

When one differentiates the self from the process of forming opinions, a certain freedom is created in relation to one's own subjective opinions. The witness self is able to observe subjective opinions that emerge spontaneously, but does not feel tied to them. These opinions are allowed to exist within the self without being attributed much weight when one is deciding how to behave in a given situation.

5. Desiring

Our behavior is controlled to a great extent by our ambition to achieve a certain goal; in other words, our desires, motives, intentions and longings play an important role. Human motivation is a highly complex subject. The things we want – our desires – are influenced to varying degrees by, among other things, instincts, reflexes, ego constructions as well as social constructions concerning what is desirable. A closer examination of this is not necessary here, but we can establish that the generation of desires is yet another ego process that an individual can be aware or unaware of. The human organism gives rise to a constant stream of new desires, cravings,

impulses, longings and intentions – whether we want it to or not. The crux of the matter is what kind of relation one has to these different forms of desire.

When the desires and longings that emerge serve as subjects in a person, they are taken for granted to be what the person wants, and they are allowed to control behavior. Thus, the person's behavior is impelled by the motive to satisfy his/her desires to the greatest extent possible. It is common, however, for people to use their desires as objects of reflection, because the nature of desires is that they tend to cry out for attention. For this reason, the greatest challenge to building up our awareness in this regard is not paying attention to the desires we are motivated by, but developing a certain degree of freedom in relation to the desires that arise within us.

A group of people who all experience their own desires to be the very center of what is important to them may easily find themselves in conflict with each other. In such a situation, individual desires and notions of what is desirable cannot really be put into perspective or compared and coordinated with the desires of others. Each person is fighting to have his/her own way. With luck, these individual wills will be in alignment, but when they are not the scope of action for modifying them to form a functioning whole is limited.

The first phase of developing insight into the generation of desires is to notice the desires, longings and intentions that arise within one. This is a prerequisite for being able to "own" one's desires, that is, to assume responsibility for having them rather than merely trying to satisfy them.

The second phase entails actively evaluating one's own desires by seeing them in relation to universal values or a greater whole. One could, for instance, consider whether it is right to allow one's own desires and preferences to guide how one behaves in relation to principles such as justice, caring about the well-being of others or respecting others' right to make their own choices. One could also try to see what one's own desires

look like when viewed in the light of others' visions and desires, or consider what the consequences (for an entire group or a project) would be if one were to unilaterally push one's own agenda without taking the whole into account.

The third phase involves purposefully working to change one's own longings and desires. Many people struggle with this daily in some way, for example when trying to quit smoking or stop overeating. However, the third phase of self-awareness into one's own desires is not a matter of checking the impulse to satisfy immediate desires, but of shifting the entire system of desire generation in a more satisfactory direction. For instance, through goal-oriented work or spontaneous insight, it is possible to realize that the goals one has previously always experienced as the ultimate good are in fact not satisfactory on a deeper plane. Achieving high social status and a high income level may, in the long run, be less satisfying than having a life that allows one to create something unique or do something that helps enrich other people's lives. In the most profound sense, having self-awareness into desire generation entails transforming the role desire as such plays in one's life. A fully developed and firmly anchored witness self is stable and free in relation to the longings and desires that come and go in one's own experience. The longing is there, but it does not have sufficient power to govern one's entire daily life. One is able to perceive one's desires and is free to choose whether or not they will control one's motivation. This does not mean longings and desires cease to arise, just that they are a part of one's experience that can be dealt with in various ways, rather than being the very core of what one perceives as one's self.

6. Behavioral impulses

Much of our everyday life behavior is controlled by "automatic" reactions and habitual behavior patterns. Some of these are controlled by genetically inherited behavioral reflexes that are triggered by certain situations. However, most of our behavior is learned – though not in the sense of

learning by studying. We primarily learn everyday skills in a very practical way: through action. This includes testing different ways of accomplishing something and choosing the way that works best, imitating how others do something or using behavior patterns that have worked in one situation in new, similar situations. Through trial and error and through imitation, we acquire an extensive repertoire of behavior patterns that, for the most part, are completely or largely unconscious. Some of these patterns were never conscious, while others were conscious when we were practicing them, but have eventually become part of the automatic behavior patterns that are triggered by certain environmental signals. A good example of this is all the behaviors required to drive a car. We must change gears, press down on pedals, look in the rearview mirror, and turn the steering wheel, among other things. We also have many behavior patterns and impulses in social situations, for instance when we react to others' body language and tone of voice with changes in our own body language and tone of voice – all without any real awareness of what is happening.

The automatization of certain behavior patterns is necessary and desirable. We do not have sufficient attentional capacity to consciously perceive and decide on everything that is occurring simultaneously in complicated situations. By automatizing certain behaviors that do not require conscious reflection, one can free up and focus one's attention on more important issues. The problem with this practical, automatized arrangement, however, is that one acquires behavior patterns that, in some situations, have consequences one does not like in the least. And given that these patterns have become automatic, they are more or less unconscious. For this reason, one can end up in situations where one's own behavior leads to undesirable consequences without realizing that one could, by changing this behavior, cause the course of events to shift in a more positive direction.

During conflict situations, habitual behavioral impulses often play an important role in the course of events. Different people have different behavior patterns. There are, for example, the well-know conflict styles of avoidance, assertiveness and accommodation. What one perceives as

personal reproaches and violations often lead to behavioral impulses such as raising one's voice, counterattacking, taking a defensive stance or withdrawing into one's shell like a tortoise. Automatized behavioral impulses are, by their very nature, outside the center of awareness and may, therefore, be difficult to observe. However, there is often a great deal to gain by looking at one's behavioral impulse patterns, thereby allowing one to choose how to act – in a situationally adaptive manner – to avoid negative consequences and achieve positive results.

People who have an unconscious relation to their behavioral impulses act them out without at all considering what has occurred. Everyday life behaviors are largely controlled by automatized patterns rather than being consciously chosen actions. All of us rely on automatized behavioral impulses every day (life would be very difficult without them), but there are great differences in how strongly such patterns dominate individuals' ways of being. When behavioral impulses serve as subjects in a person, he/she perceives them as being central to who he/she is. For this reason, the person may perceive criticism of his/her behavior patterns as a personal attack, which may result in strong defensive reactions. On the other hand, a person who perceives his/her behavioral impulses simply as impulses does not identify with them in the same way and can allow him-/herself and others to criticize these impulses without feeling that his/her value as a person is at stake.

The first phase of developing self-awareness in relation to one's own behavioral impulses involves noticing that one has certain, typical reaction and behavior patterns in certain situations. Such awareness can result in greatly increased understanding of the dynamics that emerge in interpersonal relationships.

The second phase entails taking a stance on the desirability of one's own behavior patterns, for instance the behavioral impulses that arise when one is criticized by other people.

The third phase involves freeing oneself from any identification with one's own behavioral impulses and working actively to change them. This can be done by, for example, practicing other, more constructive behavioral reflexes or developing the ability to have such strong presence of mind that one can immediately stop oneself from acting on behavioral impulses and instead choose how one wishes to behave. A strong and developed witness self can perceive behavioral impulses when they arise without being drawn into them and putting them into action.

Other ego processes

The previous section described six ego processes an individual may be more or less consumed by or, on the contrary, aware of. These processes were chosen because they are of great importance to how people function in conflict situations. In reality, they are not clearly delimited from each other, nor do they constitute a complete list of our inner processes. There are other functions operating in human beings that may be worth investigating more closely.

For example, one important process is the creation of images, that is, fantasies, pictorial symbols, metaphors and other kinds of non-linguistic symbols. Our intuition often makes use of images in order to capture things that are better expressed with pictures than with words. The process of image creation makes use of unconscious and semi-conscious information and is, therefore, a powerful instrument in orientation and understanding. The images we create to represent what kind of situation we are in may have a strong guiding influence on how we interpret separate events and circumstances, which is an important factor in conflict situations. Thus, raising the images one creates to the level of consciousness and actively making use of them constitute an additional dimension of self-awareness.

It is also possible to see the creation of a system of beliefs as a distinct ego process – a kind of sub-category of thinking. Assumptions about and

conceptions of the nature and meaning of the world (what is true, good and beautiful) constitute an element – conscious or unconscious – of how we orient ourselves in life. A person who is not aware of his/her own beliefs acts based on them without reflection, while a person who directs his/her attention to them can moderate the power they have over how he/she interprets events and behaves.

The self-awareness mandala: a map of awareness of inner processes

It is often easier to get an overview of complex contexts when one can use a graphical representation. The self-awareness mandala shown in figure 5.2 provides a map of an individual's degree of self-awareness into the six ego processes discussed above.[13] Note, however, that this model is one of many possible ways of describing and discussing awareness; it is certainly not exhaustive.

In the self-awareness mandala, the six ego processes and the three phases of development of self-awareness are represented graphically as a circle with six sectors and with three rings. The innermost circle symbolizes immediate experience in the absence of reflective awareness. The first ring represents the first phase of development of self-awareness, which entails noticing what is taking place in the various ego processes. The second ring represents evaluation of the ego processes, while the third stands for the ability to purposefully change the content of these processes.

The self-awareness mandala illustrates the great individual variation that exists both in degree of awareness as a whole and in how well self-awareness has been developed in relation to the different ego processes. In the figure, I provide an example of how one can map a person's self-awareness patterns by coloring the various cells in the mandala. I have rather arbitrarily chosen to use three shades of grey to represent a vaguely,

moderately and strongly developed self-awareness in relation to the six ego processes. The figure maps a person who notices the existence of all six processes and who has developed a certain inclination to take a stance on what is happening in every process. Active attempts to influence and change the patterns that exist occur only to a limited degree in relation to perceiving, behavioral impulses and feelings.

The self-awareness mandala is intended to be used as a starting point for reflecting on one's own patterns and development potential, as well as to illustrate how the people one encounters in professional or private life function.
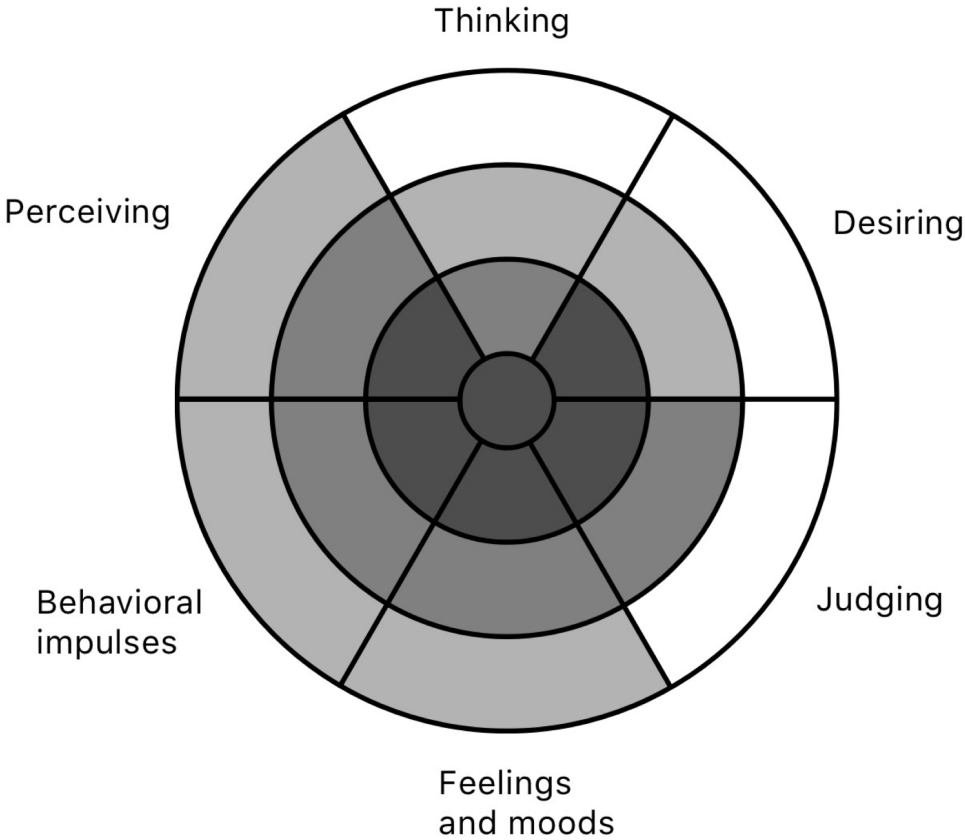
Figure 5.2 The self-awareness mandala

Self-awareness and the witness self

The perspective presented in this chapter includes two different aspects: the development of self-awareness and the growth of a witness self. Self-awareness can be seen as a set of skills. These skills may be varyingly developed and precise. A person may be able to make highly detailed and precise observations of what is happening within him/her, but this does not necessarily mean that anything has changed regarding what the person thinks is important or how he/she behaves in practice. The growth of a witness self entails a shift in the very core of the personality, from ego processes and their products to an inner position that is relatively free from these processes.

Self-awareness and the witness self may be differently pronounced in a given person. For instance, one person may have a highly developed witness self without having a particularly well-developed ability to observe and report in detail what is happening in his/her separate ego processes. Such a person is not strongly controlled by the thought patterns, feelings and desires that arise within him/her, but he/she cannot perceive and analyze the nature of these processes. Eastern methods of transforming consciousness do not typically stress the ability to actively perceive and take a stand on the content of ego processes, but instead focus primarily on promoting development of the witness self. Long-term practice of meditation often leads to a highly pronounced witness self, but not necessarily to a high degree of self-awareness.

Well-developed self-awareness and establishment of a witness self give the self a high degree of freedom from inner compulsions. Consciousness is bound up neither in ego processes nor in the needs that identification with these processes gives rise to. However, what the individual does with this freedom depends on what kinds of meaning constructions he/she has access to. Even a person with a pronounced witness self is strongly affected by culturally conditioned value and interpretation systems, his/her life history, familiarity with certain discourses and many other circumstances. Yet self-

awareness does provide good possibilities for active reflection on these meaning constructions.

One very practical consequence of developing the second phase of self-awareness is that all experiences in one's everyday life can be perceived as opportunities for self-observation, learning and growth. An unaware person who ends up in a serious workplace conflict that he/she does not have the power to solve and that prevents him/her from doing good work will be consumed by feelings of frustration, a desire to flee, negative subjective opinions about difficult colleagues and perhaps a desire to strike back. In contrast, a person with a high degree of self-awareness will notice all of these feelings, desires, thoughts and impulses and ask him-/herself: "How do I deal with my own frustration?" or "What emotional reactions does this trigger in me?" The person might tell him-/herself: "This is interesting, I'm not as patient as I thought" or "So this is how it feels to be powerless and angry: good to know."

Professionalism

The perspective presented above provides a good starting point for specifying what professionalism entails. According to the self-awareness model, within every human being there is a constant flow of thoughts, feelings, opinions, etc. This is not something we can normally control, but we can deal with these flows of subjectivity in a more or less conscious fashion. Unprofessional behavior is, according to this perspective, most often the result of weak self-awareness. A leader who acts on the basis of hasty conclusions constantly subjects others to his/her bad moods; one who cultivates "favorites" among the staff does so because he/she has a poorly developed awareness of his/her own ego processes. Professionalism requires that one have a clear idea about one's role and good contact with his/her own subjectivity. If both of these prerequisites are met, a person can reflect on responsible ways of dealing with his/her own feelings, values,

opinions, etc., so that they do not inappropriately conflict with the person's role in working life.

6. The art of constructive communication in conflict situations

This chapter deals primarily with useful communication skills when one is directly involved as a party to a conflict. The role of mediator – an impartial conversation facilitator when others are parties to a conflict – is considered in Chapter 7.

One can learn communication skills that increase the chances of positive outcomes

When one is in the midst of a conflict situation and faces a conversation with the other party, one should first be clear about what is most important for oneself: getting rid of negative feelings or achieving a certain outcome. If one's greatest desire is to express feelings of frustration or restore self-respect by yelling at someone else and if one does not care about the long-term consequences, then the art of conducting a constructive conversation is not particularly important (although there are varyingly destructive ways of expressing feelings). In the context of conflicts, this art is most important when one wishes to achieve certain goals or avoid certain consequences.

It is difficult, but not impossible, to communicate in a way that directs a hostile, ice-cold or distressing conflict situation along a more constructive path. There are a number of effective ways to guide conflict-related conversations in more positive directions. These conversational skills are not innate. We have to learn them by imitating people who are proficient in them or by understanding the principles and practicing the skills with persistent effort. Our brains are organized in such a way that they contain involuntary "programs" and emotional reaction patterns developed through evolution to deal with threats to our basic needs. These reactions are triggered more or less automatically in charged situations. Unfortunately,

the nature of these reflexes and emotional reactions often aggravates the conflicts we encounter in contemporary society instead of helping to resolve them. Our needs and desires are different from those of crocodiles, bears and apes, but we have largely similar behavioral reflexes and emotional reactions (at least in acute situations). For this reason, to meet our needs and interests, we must often rein in our reflexes and instead actively decide what type of behavior is best in a given situation.

The art of conducting a constructive conversation in difficult situations is something one must wish to learn and practice. A possible motivating factor may be that one is tired of the consequences of having poor skills in this area. One could decide to be content with relying on habitual patterns, but this means accepting that the result may be harming important relationships. The following sections are meant to help people who truly want to deal with difficult situations better than they have done previously.

Generally speaking, there are two goals associated with conducting constructive discussions in conflict situations:

1. Transforming a charged discussion from a battle for the upper hand to a conversation about how a common problem can be solved;
2. Establishing functioning relationships between the involved parties (or even improving these relationships).

In the following sections of this chapter, I present the essential features of the art of constructive conversation.[14] Naturally, reading about and understanding these features is only a minor part of developing skills that can be put to use. The real work takes place when one practices these skills, either in role-play or real situations. The chapter consists of two major sections. The first deals with the foundations of communication skills: listening and advocating. The other section considers in more depth the topics outlined in the first section by examining three types of conversation that are typically part of most conflicts: the "what happened" conversation,

the conversation about feelings and the inner conversation about finding oneself.

The yin and yang of conversation: listening and advocating

Successful conversations involve an interplay of listening and taking in what others say, on the one hand, and advocating one's own interests, on the other. Many people are good at either one or the other, but few have mastered both arts. Having a combination of both skills, however, results in better chances of achieving a satisfactory outcome than does only having one of them.

Within the field of conflict management, one tried and true piece of wisdom is that the most effective way of getting others to come together is to first listen carefully. It is only after one has listened carefully that it is time to develop eloquence in presenting one's own viewpoints and desires. In conflict situations, we are highly engaged both emotionally and mentally. We are filled with feelings of frustration and anger as well as the will to make changes concerning some important issue. As long as the involved parties are completely filled with their own feelings and desires, there will be no room for taking in what the other party has to say. Thus, listening to others provides an opportunity to open channels of communication in both directions. It is only when the other party experiences that you have truly absorbed what he/she wishes to say that there is a good chance he/she will be able and willing to listen to you. This is why a skilled conversation artist begins conflicts by listening. It is fully possible to listen to others without agreeing with everything they say.

Opening channels for constructive communication is, thus, one of the most important aims of listening. Another important aim is to become familiar with other sides of the conflict, which occurs when the other party gives

you information about him-/herself and about various circumstances – information you did not have access to previously. It is very likely that this new information will change your feelings, attitudes and reasoning in a way that creates new opportunities as you continue to deal with the conflict.

Below I first present a number of aspects of the art of listening. I then look at the art of making one's own case.

The art of listening

True listening occurs when you make your own attention available to another person such that the person has unlimited freedom to express him-/herself. Your task is thus to clear the stage so the other party can use it to present what he/she finds most important. This means that, while you are listening, you must temporarily put on hold what you wish to say, which is not always easy. We will return to this problem later on, but first walk through the craft or art of listening, which can be described as consisting of three parts (Bolton, 1987):
1. Giving others your attention
2. Conveying that you are listening carefully
3. Confirming that you have understood

1. Giving others your attention
As concerns giving your attention to another person, there is a close relation between the psychological and the physical. By consciously making use of your body language while you are listening, you can reinforce your ability to keep your inner attention focused on the other person. Even if you at first use body language in a rather mechanical way, you will probably notice that it has a positive effect on both the other person and yourself. If you are already good at making your attention available to others, it is still important to think about body language, because the other person needs to get clear signals that you are truly listening attentively.

One approach is to try to attain and convey an attitude of relaxed alertness. Being relaxed conveys that you feel comfortable with the situation and accept the other person's presence. Alertness shows that you attach great importance to what is happening and that you are concentrating on what the other person wishes to convey. What is involved here are simple things: turning your body toward the person who is talking to you, leaning slightly forward, toward the speaker, maintaining open body language, maintaining an appropriately close distance to the speaker and maintaining good but not pressing eye contact. We reveal with our eyes how receptive we are, how secure we feel in the situation and how much contact we wish to have. You should also attend to your movement patterns. It is good to avoid distracting movements and gestures, and to instead adapt your movement patterns to follow those of the speaker.

2. Conveying that you are listening carefully

If you are the one initiating the conversation, you should convey your readiness to listen to what the other person has to say. It is important that your invitation be clear, but open, thus giving the other party the freedom to speak or not speak. A good opening to conversation consists of four parts:

1. Describe something you see in the other person's body language, e.g., "You look worried" or "You don't look like you're in such great shape today."
2. Invite the other person to talk or continue talking: "Do you want to tell me?" "Continue." "How are you doing?"
3. Be silent. You need to give the other person time to decide whether he/she wishes to continue and, if so, how.
4. Be attentive, i.e., make eye contact and use body language that conveys your interest and concern.

Naturally, you are the best judge of what constitutes an appropriate opening phrase in a given situation with a specific person. It is nonetheless

important to consider what you are conveying at the moment of initiating a conversation. If you do so while skimming through a stack of papers, looking out the window or staring at a computer screen, you are not showing your willingness to listen. The other person often has mixed feelings about speaking. There is a certain willingness to do it, but still doubt about whether one really feels like talking. It is sometimes a good idea to try to put these mixed feelings into words: "Maybe you're not sure you feel like talking right now, but if you do I'm happy to listen." It is also important that you do not feel bothered about others rejecting your invitation to talk. If the idea of such rejection is unpleasant for you, this will probably show in your body language from the very outset. You should try to deal with this in advance. When the conversation has begun, your listening needs to be constantly nourished and conveyed. Most of us use small verbal signals to show we are paying attention and want to hear more. These signals may be small sounds of agreement or encouragement, or single words: "Uh huh," "Oh," "Right," "Yes," "Really," "I see," "No kidding," "And then?" etc. Tone of voice and facial expression are often decisive in conveying continued attention and interest.

Posing questions is an important part of listening, for showing interest and getting more information. If questions are to promote active listening, however, they must be posed in a way that facilitates rather than disrupts the message. For this reason, ask questions sparingly, one at a time and with a feeling of supporting the speaker's narrative. Many people pose too many questions, as well as questions that reflect their own inner agenda. Questions should primarily serve to encourage the speaker to provide a more complete picture of his/her views on the matter under discussion. It may be tempting to pose tendentious questions, which are more like arguments promoting one's own cause than actual questions. Questions of this kind, however, disrupt the constructive functions of listening, which are to create a willingness for open communication in the other person and to ensure that the listener gets a richer picture of the other person's perspective.

Questions should be worded in such a way that the speaker has as much freedom as possible to bring up what he/she finds important in the context. Thus, you should avoid questions with predetermined response alternatives ("yes" or "no," "A" or "B"). There may be alternatives or circumstances that you had not considered relevant at all. Another advantage of posing open questions is that they allow you to signal to the other party that you are truly interested in knowing his/her views, which will reinforce his/her feeling of being heard.

Don't forget to use silence as an active listening tool. Many of us talk too much and feel uncomfortable when there are longer silences in a conversation. However, silence can play an important role in giving the other person a chance to get in touch with what is happening within him-/herself. Silence also allows the other person to narrate at his/her own pace. Sometimes, a moment of silence gives a person time to process his/her own mixed feelings before talking about something he/she feels uncomfortable about. If you find it difficult to let a moment of silence be, you can practice using silence actively. Cultivate your attention. Direct it at the other person, being aware of what your body language is conveying. Use moments of silence to observe and absorb the other person's mood, body language and facial expressions, or to consider what you have heard thus far. You can also use silence to speculate about what is going on inside the other person or to consider different ways you can react to what you have already heard.

3. Confirming that you have understood
If your conversation partner is to move beyond trying to convey what is important to him/her, you must clearly confirm that you have taken in his/her message. If there is no such confirmation, it is likely that he/she will continue talking about the same thing or simply give up and close the door to any further discussion. For this reason, you should be careful to signal that you have taken in and understood what the other person has said. Just saying "I understand" is not always enough. Some people are naturally

skilled at confirming that they have absorbed a message. Those who feel they have not mastered this art can try using the following techniques: *paraphrasing, mirroring feelings* and *summarizing reflections*.

Paraphrasing involves briefly summarizing, in one's own words, what the other person has just said. It is important that the paraphrase be short and concise, otherwise the conversation may lose its natural rhythm. You should try to capture what is truly important to the other person. Paraphrases should focus on the arguments, facts and ideas that have been presented rather than on the feelings that might be revealed indirectly. It is good to start paraphrasing by signaling that you only want to capture what the other person has said, for example: "If I understand you correctly, you said that…," "You say that…," "You seem to think that…." The point of rewording what the other person has just said is that you clearly demonstrate that you are trying to understand him/her or that you really have understood. Paraphrasing is also a good way of checking your understanding: The speaker is given the opportunity to correct or complement your picture of the situation.

Mirroring feelings can be important, particularly if you notice that the other person has strong feelings about the topic under discussion, but cannot clearly put them into words. If feelings – such as disappointment, irritation or sadness – are at the core of the conflict but the conversations only take up concrete issues, there is a risk of ending up in a pseudo-discussion that does not lead anywhere. Direct or indirect expressions of emotion often contain an implicit question, for example, "Don't you care about my feelings?" Mirroring can, thus, highlight these important feelings, making them a topic of conversation and showing that you care about what the other person is feeling. You can care without agreeing that his/her interpretations of the situation are the only relevant ones. In many discussions, it is necessary to begin by confirming that one has understood what the other party is feeling before beginning to talk about what has happened and what should be done. If you decide to try to mirror feelings, it is important to do so openly – that is, to give the other person a chance to

agree with or reject your notion of what feelings are involved – as well as to describe these feelings in as pure a form as possible ("You are angry, disappointed, sad…"). If you are not sure about what the other person is feeling, you can make guesses and ask him/her to correct them ("Are you irritated because I didn't ask you first?"). Making feelings a topic in a conflict-related discussion is such an important part of the art of conversation that we will return to it in a separate section, below.

One can use *summarizing reflections* to identify the key issues in the context of a longer account. If the other person has expounded on what has happened and how he/she views and feels about it, then a summarizing reflection may be a good way for you to check that you have understood and that you are in agreement on the key issues in the account. It can also be used to return the conversation to the key issues and help the other party focus on what is essential. The following is a list of typical introductions to summarizing reflections:

– Let's summarize what we've talked about so far…
– One topic you've returned to several times seems to be …
– I've thought about what you've told me. I think I see some kind of pattern and wanted to check with you to see if it makes sense…
– Based on what I've heard so far, it seems like the most important thing for you is to …

If you are better than the other person at pinpointing what is essential or at putting underlying feelings into words, you can use reflective listening to help the other person more clearly express what is important to him/her in the situation at hand. Here, you should remember that it is in your own long-term interest if your conversational partner can arrive at wording that he or she truly feels is genuine.

I will end this section on listening with some words on the various difficulties one can encounter. As mentioned in the introduction, listening requires that one can set aside one's own feelings and desires for a period of

time. This may be difficult, especially if the other person offers reproaches, accusations and disparaging comments or presents a general picture of the situation that you feel is completely misleading. There are no panaceas for how one can avoid being swept away by one's own impulse to defend oneself and mount a counterattack. What is most important is to try to keep in mind that your task, during the listening phase, is to understand how the other party has experienced and is experiencing the situation. There will come a phase when you get (or take) the stage to present your own views. If your emotional reactions take over, it would be wise to ask for a short or longer break from the conversation so that you have time to get back on your feet again. You can say, quite simply, that you are upset by what you have heard and that you need a moment to think things over before the conversation continues.

The art of advocating one's own interests

Few people are truly skilled at advocating. Those who are not generally belong to one of two large groups. One group consists of people who find it unpleasant to confront others and stand their ground when they encounter resistance. These people tend to be compliant, avoidant and afraid of conflict. The other group consists of people who push their own ideas in an aggressive or dominating way. They are often thought to be contentious, inconsiderate and self-centered. Different cultures have developed their own styles as regards balancing between self-assertion and accommodation to others' interests and desires. Naturally, there is no right or wrong here. It is probably good for all of us, however, to have a picture of a continuum between extreme conflict avoidance, at one end, and extreme assertion of one's own will, at the other – with a sound attitude toward self-assertion found somewhere in the middle (Glasl, 1999).

The first step in developing the art of making one's own case involves being able to discern where one lies on this continuum. Knowing that one is

probably closer to one of the ends than is healthy should lead to introspection concerning what is maintaining such an extreme attitude.

Conflict avoiders often have exaggerated ideas about the negative consequences of confrontation. They think all relationships are fragile and will turn bad if they fight for their own interests and desires. On the other hand, they often underestimate the negative effects of not standing up for one's own needs. Doing what others want while ignoring one's own wishes can easily lead to built-up feelings of underlying disappointment, resentment and bitterness that, in the long run, damage the very relationships one wishes to protect.

People who have an aggressive or dominating style often underestimate the negative consequences of harshly confronting and steamrollering others. These people do not notice when others feel violated and stop caring about cooperating and maintaining good relationships – or they fail to connect these effects to their own behavior, instead believing that others are hypersensitive whiners.

Both the conflict avoiders and the contentious may benefit greatly from looking more closely at what fears and assumptions about reality underlie their attitudes. Gaining insight into these underlying factors may be the first step toward having more freedom to choose an appropriate stance in a given situation, considering what one needs and wants as well as what approach has the best prospects of letting one achieve a desired outcome in that situation. We will return to this topic later.

Before trying to tackle the task of skillfully presenting one's own needs and values in a conflict-related discussion, it is naturally important to have a clear picture of what one thinks, feels, believes and wants. But as my and my colleague's research shows, having this kind of self-knowledge is not a matter of course (Jordan & Lundin, 2002). Many people find it very difficult to clearly express:

– What they have seen, heard or otherwise experienced that has led to the picture they have of the situation;
– What their own assumptions are concerning underlying causes, e.g., others' actual intentions;
– What feelings the events in question have triggered in them;
– What they think about what has happened;
– What values, desires and hopes they have had and still have;
– What their concrete desires are concerning how the other party should behave in the future.

Individuals often carry their own experiences around like a sack of unsorted and entangled puzzle pieces that are put together wrong. Instead of seeing their picture of the situation as an incomplete interpretation, they see it as the truth. Instead of knowing that notions about other people's intentions are merely guesses, they see them as self-evident truths. Instead of being able to express contradictory feelings, they act them out without being able to name them. Instead of perceiving their own negative feelings, they manifest them in the form of accusations, reproaches and negative value judgments. It is frequently the case that thoughts, feelings and desires cannot be expressed at all, or only in vague and sweeping terms. Thus, you can prepare yourself for occasions when you need to present your own case by asking yourself the following questions:

– What it is that has happened, concretely, that is of importance to me?
– What assumptions and interpretations have I made?
– What different kinds of feelings have the events triggered in me?
– What do I think about what has happened?
– What are the values, needs, desires and hopes I have had that have led to my behavior, feelings and standpoints?
– What is it, concretely, that I want other people to do?

After establishing what one wishes to convey in a conflict-related discussion, one faces the task of expressing oneself well. We could say that the art of advocating consists of two important tasks:

1. Expressing oneself so clearly, concretely and intelligibly as to ensure that the other person has the best possible chance of understanding what one believes, feels, thinks and want;
2. Advocating one's case in a way that minimizes the possibility of triggering and strengthening the other person's opposition

Most of us have a great deal to learn about both these tasks. The first may seem simple and obvious, at least until we look more closely at how difficult it often is to clearly and straight-forwardly put into words one's own picture of what has happened, what one feels and what one wants to happen. The importance of the second task, on the other hand, is often minimized. In very many cases, conversations on interpersonal problems aggravate rather than solve the problem, because the involved parties express themselves in a way that provokes anger, puts the other party on the defensive and, importantly, causes the conversation to be more about guilt and who is right/wrong than about resolving mutual problems.

Thus, potentially constructive discussions can be sabotaged when one or both of the parties express themselves in ways that reduce the other's willingness to collaborate around problem resolution. In many situations, one depends on or truly wants the other person to want to listen and to try to understand, thereby enabling joint efforts toward a mutually acceptable solution. What kinds of messages undermine this willingness? There are a number of common "high-risk messages" that convey, for example, the following:

– I'm right and you're wrong;
– You're responsible for the problem;
– I know what's wrong with you;
– I'm willing to use tactical forms of manipulation to gain the moral or logical advantage over you;
– I think you're incompetent, have unethical motives or for other reasons are not worthy of my respect.

Resistance to messages like the above is caused by several factors. Even if the other party realizes that there is some truth in what you have said, he/she will in most cases think the picture you gave of the topic is unfair and needs to be corrected. When the other person is confronted with such messages, the outcome is almost always wounded or threatened self-respect. Accusations and negative value judgments almost without exception lead to some kind of counter-measure to reestablish a positive self-image.

At times you may be completely convinced that you are right and the other party is wrong and has behaved badly. But this does not for a second change the fact that if you convey a message in this way the other party will most likely take a defensive stance, turning the whole conversation into an attempt on his/her part to fend off the threat (you have just made) to his/her self-respect. Therefore, if you wish to have a constructive discussion, you must choose as best you can non-provoking language. I offer guidelines for doing so below.

Many communication trainers use a basic model for conveying a constructive message – a message that consists of four parts:[15]

– What I have observed;
– What I feel;
– Why the question is important to me: what I needed or hoped for;
– What I want, concretely, from the person to whom my message is directed.

Regarding each of these four parts, the goal is to express oneself concretely, clearly and intelligibly as well as in a way that does not trigger defensive reactions in the other party.

What I have observed. The goal of the first part of the message is to keep to the concrete information to the greatest extent possible: things one has

actually seen and heard. Many people express themselves in vague and sweeping terms ("You always forget to tell me when …"), present their own assumptions and interpretations as established facts ("Do you think you can knock me off balance by ignoring me…") and interject negative judgments of others when they describe their own picture of the situation ("Your inconsiderate style makes me sick …"). By being careful to describe the information one has and finds relevant as precisely as possible, one invites others to test whether that information is sound and well chosen. One also avoids sneaking one's own value judgments and assumptions into the message, something that often leads to protest and other forms of resistance. A description of reality that both parties can agree on provides a very good foundation for constructive problem-solving.

Many times one takes for granted that others are aware of what fills one's own field of vision. This is not surprising, because certain events, circumstances and problems seem so obvious and important. Others, however, may be fully occupied with thinking about and dealing with different events and problems. They may not have considered what the situation is like for you. For this reason, you should start from the assumption that others do not know what it is that occupies your thoughts and feelings.

The task in conveying this part of the message can be summarized in three succinct rules:

1. Describe what you have observed in concrete and specific, rather than vague and sweeping, terms.
2. Keep to observable facts and circumstances and separate them from, e.g., your assumptions about other people's underlying intentions.
3. Express yourself in neutral descriptive terms rather than using value judgments when referring to others.

What I feel. During conflicts, feelings are often expressed in the form of accusations, charges and value judgments. You have a great deal to win,

however, by expressing your feelings in as pure and precise a manner as possible. If others do not feel they are under attack, they will usually be willing to do what they can so that you do not have to feel angry, frustrated, disappointed or sad. Here, it is crucial to express your feelings so that they do not sound like accusations and negative value judgments. It is often difficult, for various reasons, to express one's feelings in their pure form. It is not always easy to know what one's real feelings are. For instance, it is very common for anger to function as a protective cover when one actually feels fear (e.g., one has lost something that is important) or disappointment (e.g., one did not receive the warmth and appreciation one had hoped for). Thus, mastering the art of conversation requires that one develop a sensitivity to the various layers and nuances of feeling that exist within oneself. To the extent one is not used to talking about one's own feelings, it may be difficult to find the words to describe them and, especially, to convey the strength of these feelings. Some people use very strong words and expressions when they talk about their feelings, while others are so careful that those who are listening hardly understand that the message is about feelings.

Sometimes there is an inner referee standing in the way of perceiving one's own feelings. One has preconceptions about what kinds of feelings a good and "normal" human being should and should not have in various situations. It can be important to view feelings as facts, even though they are fleeting. The feelings one has do exist, regardless of whether or not one likes them. It is possible to describe what one feels in a straightforward manner, while also talking about one's thoughts about these feelings. This could be expressed as follows: "I'm actually surprised and confused that I got so angry at you just now, but the fact is that I am angry."

Strong feelings are often aroused in conflict situations, and as such they are part of the case history, so to speak. If one tries to suppress them, one is also concealing from the other parties important parts of the course of events.

What I would have needed. When it comes to explaining why one thinks a certain issue is important, it is very easy to end up directly or indirectly accusing others of something. Here, it is crucial to keep to what needs, desires, values or hopes one had or still has, as well as to what consequences the other party's actions have had or are having (if this is relevant in the context). We often make the mistake of expressing our desires and needs in the form of diagnoses of others: "I'm sad because you're not very considerate." This comment immediately triggers the other party's defense system, causing him/her to search for ways to fend off this negative label. By instead saying, "I'm sad because I had hoped for a calm and peaceful afternoon," one has conveyed the prominent issue without passing any negative judgments on anyone else. In this case, there is a greater chance that the other party will want to be obliging. The feelings one has in a conflict are not only the consequence of what the other party has done or not done, but to a great extent also of one's own desires, needs and hopes. By assuming responsibility for one's own contribution to these feelings, one creates a better foundation for moving on.

What I want, concretely, from the other party. It is often important to round off attempts to present one's own case by specifying what one wants to happen in the future in very concrete terms. This approach guides the conversation away from questions of guilt, truth and standpoints and focuses instead on tangible ways to solve problems. If you only speak generally about feelings and values, the listener will not understand what the purpose of the discussion is. He/she may believe you are trying to gain the advantage in the relationship or become insecure and suspicious about what you actually want. For this reason, it is important to be very concrete and express yourself using positive terms. This means describing the kind of concrete, observable actions you wish to see the other party take in the future, rather than using vague terms to talk about what you think is important. If you limit yourself to talking about the things you do not want to happen, the risk is great that the other party will not understand what you want to happen.

In this part of the message, one can avoid triggering opposition by taking pains to choose words/phrases that convey that the other party is free to decide whether he/she will or will not meet one halfway. Try to avoid using manipulation, guilt or other means of pressure that invite resistance by making the other party safeguard his/her freedom to choose how to act. Consider the fact that most people will try to defend their self-respect, which is bruised when they feel they have given in to someone else's pressure tactics.

Three conversations within the conversation

In the next sections, we will take a closer look at three themes that play a prominent role in conflicts.[16] These themes can be seen as different kinds of discussions that are sometimes pursued separately, sometime simultaneously. The three discussions concern, respectively, what has happened, feelings and identities (i.e., what kind of people we are).

What has happened?

One important cause of conflicts becoming difficult to resolve is that the involved parties have completely different pictures of what the situation is all about. They have different stories concerning what has happened, what various events mean, what is important and what should happen next. Because one's own story seems so self-evident and reasonable, it is easy to disregard the fact that the other party's story may also be reasonable, just in another way. Discussions become more difficult when all of the involved parties insist that their own description of what the conflict is about is the only valid description. If you only see your own picture of things, then the only reason you will be able to find for other parties being less than accommodating is that they are malicious, inconsiderate, and dense or possess some other negative trait.

How can we then talk to each other about what has happened and what should happen in the future without throwing pies – filled with guilt, negative judgments, sarcasm and other unpalatable things – at each other?

Experience shows that conversations can be more difficult than they need to be when the involved parties enter them with erroneous assumptions. There are three kinds of erroneous assumptions that are very common:

1. My image of the situation is the true picture.
2. I know what intentions were underlying your actions.
3. Someone is to blame for what happened, and it's not me.

These assumptions have harmful effects on the discussion because they are not conscious. We simply assume that this is how it is, and we do not examine whether or not our assumptions are correct. One important part of the art of conducting a constructive conflict-related discussion is being able to turn the above three assumptions on their heads. If you instead start from the following basic attitudes, the chance that all parties will be able to deal with the issues constructively will increase greatly:

1. I don't know what the other party's picture of the situation looks like, and for this reason we have to start by finding out about the main features of each other's stories.
2. I know what effect the other party's behavior had on me, but not what intentions guide him/her in different situations.
3. Trying to determine who is to blame for the problem is an ineffective way of avoiding similar problems in the future. It is more interesting to try to find out how all involved parties contributed to the emergence of an unfortunate situation so that we can find a way to prevent it from happening again.

In the following three sections, we will briefly take up the role notions of truth, intention and guilt play in conflict-related discussions, as well as

point out creative ways of talking about how each party sees reality.

The truth gains its meaning through the narrative it is part of

Deeply rooted conflicts can seldom be resolved by merely establishing the facts. Conflicts that prove to be difficult to manage do not develop because the involved parties disagree on factual matters, but because they have different experiences of which facts are and are not important in the context. One crucial prerequisite for mastering the art of constructive conversation is being aware that different people's fields of vision are filled with completely different things. Each person has his/her own story about what has happened and is happening. As we saw in the example of Andrew and Cecilia in Chapter 2, it is the narrative as a whole that gives separate facts their significance.

We have spent a long time embroidering our own narrative, and we know it well. It makes sense to us and it contains many things we find important. When others behave in ways that prevent us from living our life in a manner we find fitting and important, our spontaneous conclusion is that it is these people who are the problem. We have very good reasons for doing what we do, thinking what we think and feeling how we feel. What we don't always consider, however, is that others have their own narratives. Their narratives, of course, also contain mostly good reasons for why they do what they do, think what they think and feel what they feel. This is why it is common for others to think we are the problem. As long as the parties only see their own narrative and don't think other valid narratives exist, there is a great risk they will get stuck in attempts to get the other party to admit that he/she is the problem. Lack of awareness that narratives can be completely different also means that one primarily confronts the other party with the conclusions one has drawn: accusations, judgments, reproaches and demands. One simply fails to realize the need to tell the other party about the narrative that underlies these conclusions: what one finds

important, what has happened in one's own life, how one has interpreted certain events and why.

There are many reasons why our narratives are so different. Here are some examples:

– The images we create are based on our different access to and selection of information. There are great differences in what information the various parties to a conflict have access to and what they remember. We like to think that facts are facts and that our own views on the situation are a fair portrayal of reality. But even if the facts we remember are correct, they are only a small fraction of all the available information. This is especially true of information on what is inside people. Everyone has access to considerable information on themselves that others do not have access to. I know what hopes, values, goals, frustrations and plans I have, but I do not have the same access to what is inside others.

– Owing to how we were raised, our culture, education and other factors, we have different conceptions of what is important in life. Everyone has his/her own special needs, preferences, sore spots and visions. We also have many unconscious ideas about how people should behave toward each other in different situations. This is why we interpret information in different ways. If someone says angrily, "Can you be quiet while I'm on the telephone!" this can mean completely different things to different people, depending on the tone of voice one is used to in the company one keeps.

– How we select which information is worth remembering is not an objective process. Because we have different needs, interests and standpoints we find important, we also tend to remember information that supports our own position, whereas we readily ignore information that goes against our interests. Facts that support our own line of thought are experienced as important, and we often interpret them in a way that is advantageous for us.

As we can see, the stories the involved parties tell are unavoidably different, and discussions are seldom constructive if we do not first become familiar with what these stories look like. Instead of doing battle over whose narrative is valid and truthful, one should try to understand how the parties' narratives differ. In this part of the conversation, one should thus avoid counter-argumentation and instead concentrate on listening in order to understand the other party's narrative as well as on conveying the important parts of one's own narrative. This may be difficult, because it is easy to become upset and protest when you think the other party is painting an unfair picture of the course of events. At this point, you need to remember that understanding the other party's version of things is in your own interest. Listening to his/her story does not mean you are giving up on your own.

Differentiate between effects and underlying intentions

When another person behaves in a way that affects one negatively, one often reacts with strong feelings of frustration and irritation. The strength of these feelings causes the course of events to fill much of one's own field of vision. When this occurs, it is easy to forget that what happened (particularly the negative effects one has experienced) may not be in the other party's field of vision at all. Because the effects on oneself are so palpable, one believes the other party must also be aware of them. Here it is easy to take things a step further, assuming that the other party is not only aware of the harm he/she has done, but that he/she inflicted harm intentionally, or at least made no attempts to avoid it. One feels violated and believes that the other party was intent on this outcome. One feels left out and believes the other party wanted this too. This kind of thinking may be so automatic and unconscious that we don't notice we are actively making these interpretations. We take for granted that we know how things were.

Accusing others of acting inconsiderately or even of intentionally inflicting harm almost always triggers strong opposition and a defensive stance in the

accused parties. If one is confronted with such charges, one does not only feel accused of something, but also unjustly accused. Even if there may be a grain of truth in the idea that one did not really consider the consequences of one's actions for the other party, or maybe in the heat of the moment wanted to lean on him/her a bit, this is seldom the complete picture.

Accusations that include claims about others' negative intentions are typically composed of two parts. Learning to recognize these two parts and to keep them separate can facilitate a conflict-related discussion a great deal. When someone says: "Why did you try to hurt me?" what is being conveyed is actually two separate messages:

1. I felt hurt.
2. I believe you wanted to hurt me.

It is the second message that arouses the most opposition, and in his/her eagerness to repudiate charges of having ill intentions, it is easy for the accused to miss the first, most important part of the message.

Skillfully applying the art of conversation means distinguishing between feelings that have been aroused and assumptions about underlying intentions, thus treating the two things separately. One can help others make this distinction by expressing it in words: "So you felt hurt when I said I didn't have time and thought I wanted to hurt you?" As mentioned above, it is wise to first accept and confirm the feelings the other party has expressed. Any accusations that the harm was inflicted intentionally can be discussed later, in a calmer way.

When one is trying to clear up accusations of negative intentions, it can be helpful to keep three aspects of this separate:

1. What was it, concretely, the other party or I said or did?
2. What effects did this have on the other party?

3. What assumptions about underlying intentions were made based on these effects?

If one keeps these aspects separate, the conditions are good for bringing clarity to the course of events and disentangling whether or not the feelings aroused by assumptions about the other party's intentions were well founded. If one tells the other party about what assumptions one has made about his/her motives, this will not be perceived, to the same degree, as an accusation he/she must try to fend off. Instead, the other party is given a chance to present his/her own picture of what happened and of what was going on inside him/her at the time.

From guilt to understanding of causal relations

Most people have experiences of highly frustrating discussions that have turned into a struggle over who is to blame for the problems that have emerged. One party tries to get the other to admit to being guilty, while the other does all he/she can to deny any responsibility. This focus on who is to blame often derives from habitual carelessness of thought. "Sloppy" thinking looks something like this: There is a problem, and thus someone must have caused it. If we can establish who is guilty and get him/her to admit it, then everyone else will be able to relax.

There are of course occasions when one person is solely responsible for a problem. In most conflicts, however, focusing on assigning blame results in a deadlock. There are a number of important reasons for this. One is that even if one party has caused the problem, there are usually several circumstances and factors that have caused this person to behave in a certain way. We are seldom completely free from external and internal bonds that restrict our freedom of action. Moreover, we are seldom fully informed as to the possible consequences of our actions. All of us are trapped, to varying degrees, in circumstances that keep us from behaving perfectly. Accusations of blame seldom take into account the conditions that

limit our individual freedom to choose. Another reason is that the causal relations underlying interpersonal problems are often highly complex. Typically, all of the involved parties have influenced the course of events that led to a problem or conflict. Important causes can also be found in external circumstances that no single individual can control, for instance unclear role distribution in an organization, access to resources or the social culture that is ingrained in a given environment. A third and very practical reason is that focusing on assigning blame reduces our chances of discovering how the problem developed and what measures we can take to solve it.

Settling questions of blame entails judging individuals and groups. When this has been done, one can get a false sense of having resolved a problematic situation. In a typical case, nothing has been done to effectively change the circumstances to ensure that the same problem does not arise again. The alternative to discussing who is to blame is to map out the causal relations that allowed the problem to emerge. In pursuing this path, one should assume that all involved parties have in some way contributed to the current conflict situation. If the focus is on mapping the various roles the parties have played, one can gain a deeper understanding of what happened and, thereby, insight into what needs to be changed to ensure that things will work better in the future.

One should not underestimate the strength of the deep-seated habit of thinking in terms of guilt. A conscious effort is often required to shift the attention from accusations and defensive stances to trying to map out, in an unbiased way, an entire network of contributory causes. What is needed here is a shift in mental models, from one in which individuals' behavior is assumed to be at fault to one in which problems are seen as arising due to complex circumstances.

The fact that one is trying to map various contributory causes of problems instead of assigning blame does not mean one must suppress feelings of anger, disappointment and frustration. Feelings are both causes and

consequences that belong to the entire story. As we have seen, however, there are more constructive ways of expressing feelings than making accusations.

As I have pointed out several times, one main task of the art of constructive conversation is to prevent the emergence of defensive stances. An effective way of reducing opposition and opening up the discussion is to talk about the role one has played in causing the problem to arise. It may be difficult to see one's own contribution to a negative course of events, but there is often something there. It may be subtle things such as avoiding intervening when you perhaps should have, lying low during the early stages when the problem could have been solved or making assumptions about role assignments ("I thought it was your job to make sure that…"). You can ask yourself what the other party or an outside observer might say about your role in causing the problem. These things can help you see how your own actions have contributed to making the situation what it is.

There is always a risk that one's own admission of having helped cause a problem will be taken advantage of by the other party and seen as an admission of guilt. If this occurs, you must use the art of advocating and insist that the conversation be about both parties' roles, not only yours.

Talking about feelings

Feelings are very important. It is largely feelings that animate our lives and give them meaning. If we look at feelings from a larger functional perspective, we can also see that they are nature's way of guiding our behavior: We choose to act in ways that lead to positive feelings, such as satisfaction, joy and pride. We also try to act in ways that do not cause unpleasant feelings, such as fear, shame, disappointment and frustration. Thus, it is often feelings – or the desire to achieve or avoid certain feelings – that drive human behavior. Feelings play a crucial role when we experience that something is important. Serious conflicts derive their

seriousness from the fact that problems trigger strong emotions. Thus, feelings are an important ingredient in conflicts. They may be the cause of what has happened, they affect how the involved parties behave and they may be among the main consequences that those involved have to expect.

The fact that feelings play an important role in conflicts does not mean they should always play the main role in conversations occurring between conflicts. Sometimes, particularly at workplaces where we meet as professionals, it may be appropriate to restrict the discussion to concrete issues and keep private feelings out of it. However, when conflicts run deep, it is often necessary to include feelings as an important topic in a conflict-related conversation. If one is uncertain about whether one's own or others' feelings should be brought into the discussion, one should consider two things: whether this uncertainty is based on one's own discomfort with talking about feelings and what the possible consequences of not talking about feelings might be. If any of the following points seem to apply to the situation, it is probably important to include feelings in the discussion and to do so openly.

– If there are underlying feelings that are in various ways "leaking into" the conversation (e.g., through body language, attitudes and tone of voice), it will be impossible or difficult to discuss things in a constructive manner.
– There is a risk that feelings (anger, despair) that are not expressed at an early stage will build up, taking on greater proportions and then suddenly bursting out in uncontrolled ways that will cause major damage.
– One of the parties is so occupied with his/her own feelings that he/she cannot listen to the content of what is being said.
– There is a risk that you will lose your self-respect if you do not express what you feel, for instance if you are actually angry because you feel you've been treated unfairly.
– It is important to you that you and the other party have a good personal relationship.
– You are convinced that feelings are at the heart of the conflict.

Questions to work with

In order to talk about feelings in a constructive manner, it is often necessary to have done some preliminary work. This involves first sorting out one's own feelings, but also paying attention to what may be going on inside the other party. Preliminary work of this kind consists of different levels, each of which makes an important contribution to preparations for conducting constructive conversations in conflict situations. Here we will consider four basic questions:

– What am I feeling?
– Why do I feel like I do?
– What do I think about my feelings?
– What can I do to influence my feelings?

It is not easy to express feelings in words, not even if one is only talking to oneself. One seldom actively asks questions about what one's feelings are. These unnamed feelings are then expressed directly, in the form of body language, tone of voice and actions, or indirectly in that they permeate everything one says. In the latter case it may sound like this: "I can't understand how you can be so inconsiderate that you let me stand here and wait for 30 minutes!" By asking oneself what feelings are at work, one creates an opportunity to express them directly in words. This often helps a great deal in guiding the discussion in a more constructive direction. Being aware of one's own feelings is also a prerequisite for discovering why one feels a certain way. This, in turn, often allows one to see that these feelings may be based on assumptions, associations and other things that are not particularly well founded. Feelings are never caused solely by what others do. What happens is always interpreted by us, and our interpretations help to create feelings such as anger and disappointment.

When we direct our attention to our feelings, we often discover that they are more complex than we thought. Feelings frequently consist of several

layers; for instance, a feeling of deep disappointment may underlie one of great bitterness. Feelings may also be mixed: one may get irritated with a colleague who often raises objections, while at the same time reluctantly admiring his/her tenacity. If you can see and express in words the feelings the conflict has triggered in you, then you will have access to important information on why there is a conflict.

There are sometimes inner obstacles to examining one's own feelings. Still one can build up the ability to perceive and express feelings by making it into a little hobby: expressing in words, to oneself and others, what one is feeling in various everyday situations. This kind of exercise makes it increasingly easy and natural to attend to what one is feeling and to recognize the nuances. One good approach is to pay attention to body signals, such as muscle tension, stomach reactions and weakness in the knees. Another approach is to focus on the charges, accusations and value judgments one directs at others. These are generally indirect expressions of one's feelings. By starting from an opinion you have about another person (e.g., "He's arrogant"), you can trace back to the feeling that is actually the driving force behind this opinion. The feeling may be disappointment over the fact that the man in question does not take the time to listen to what you have to say about a certain issue.

Other obstacles to understanding what feelings one has are one's preconceptions about how a good, normal person should and should not feel. If one believes only bad people feel envy or want to hit someone hard over the head, then there is a great risk that one will censor similar feelings, even from oneself. Unfortunately, this kind of censorship seldom succeeds, because if the direct routes are closed, the feelings usually find ways to manifest themselves indirectly. For this reason, it is important to view all feelings as natural reactions and as facts about one's own inner state. It is stupid to deny facts, because one makes it more difficult for oneself to change the situation toward the positive. Everyone has negative feelings about others. The important point here is to see that a given feeling is something one has, not the final truth about who one is.

Still another obstacle to increased awareness of one's own feelings is the notion that these feelings and needs are not important. If one has become used to putting other people's needs and feelings first, then one has likely not developed the ability to perceive and express one's own feelings. This can easily become a vicious cycle, because a person who does not show his/her feelings gets others used to relationships built on the premise that their needs and feelings come first.

After one has figured out what one is feeling, it may be worthwhile to think about why these feelings in particular have arisen. This involves examining what one said to oneself when the feelings emerged. If the man in the example above has a habit of trusting his own judgment rather than asking others for advice, this does not automatically make him arrogant. The opinion that he is arrogant, and the irritation this opinion causes, is an interpretation. This interpretation may contain an idea such as the following: "He thinks he knows everything and that we know nothing." There are often a number of circumstances that affect our emotional reactions. Many of these reactions are not directly related to the situation or to the other party's behavior. It may be more a matter of the ideas one has about what constitutes normal. Perhaps one has low self-esteem in certain areas and therefore reacts more strongly that others do in certain situations. It may also be that previous experiences are triggered in the present situation – experiences of being insulted or ignored by someone who in some way resembles the person one is dealing with now.

One important aspect of preparing oneself to talk about feelings is to negotiate one's feelings. It is true that feelings should be viewed as facts, but they are highly negotiable facts. What do I think about the fact that I feel this way? Do I want things to be like this? Are my feelings justified? Are there things I don't know about at this point that could change my feelings? This is a matter of not viewing one's feelings as lasting truth, but as facts about oneself that one can relate to in different ways. As adults, we should assume responsibility for the feelings we have so they cannot

unrestrainedly govern our relationships with others. The final step in working with analyzing one's own feelings involves deciding what one should do with them. Do I want to and can I actively work to change my feelings? If the answer is 'yes,' then what can I do concretely? Chop wood? Take a walk? Get things off my chest by talking to a friend? Remind myself of the positive sides of the person I'm annoyed with?

The four basic questions used above to try to trace one's own feelings also apply, after minor changes in wording, to gaining insight into the other party's feelings. His/her feelings are also important facts relevant to the situation. This is true even if you think the other party's feelings are unfounded. If someone is angry at or disappointed in you, though you don't believe what happened was your fault at all, that person's feelings still exist. If you want to resolve the conflict situation, it would be wise to first try to understand what feelings the other party has and what has caused these feelings to arise. Once this is done, you can continue by considering what you think about him/her feeling this way and what you can do so that his/her feelings can be guided along a constructive path.

A sense of tact

Because discussions about feelings – one's own and others' – can readily trigger new feelings, it is of particular importance to develop a sense of tact. Tact is the ability to choose the right occasion for saying things and to say them in a way that is well adapted to the situation one finds oneself in. Earlier, I mentioned the positive effects of expressing one's feelings in their pure form rather than indirectly in the form of accusations and judgments aimed at others. One important factor in this connection is people's inherent empathic ability. However, others' willingness to react with empathy to your feelings is easily blocked by their defensive reactions if they feel they are under attack. By expressing one's feelings in a pure manner, one can avoid provoking defensive reactions, which makes it easier to take in and be touched by others' feelings. Generally speaking, people want to promote

the well-being of others if they can – if doing so is not experienced as a threat to their own needs and interests. In many situations, it may be wise to consider how one should behave to make it easy for others to be empathic. The general recipe has already been presented above: Show that you care about what is important to the other party and avoid unnecessarily triggering his/her defensive reactions by expressing your own feelings in their pure form.

It is also important to leave room in the conversation for the feelings that exist. Men in particular often tend to quickly steer the discussion toward problem resolution. When strong feelings are involved, however, it is a mistake to immediately offer views and suggestions concerning how these feelings should be pushed aside. To the extent that the conflict is emotionally charged – and particularly if feelings have been building up over a longer period – each party needs to hear that the other party takes his/her feelings seriously. Only after this has occurred can feelings loosen their grip on volition, making it meaningful to move the discussion in the direction of the concrete problems and solving them.

The inner conversation about finding oneself

In this section, we will focus on a factor that is often of great importance in the context of difficult discussions, namely the involved parties' respective conceptions of what kind of person they are and wish to be. During a conflict, the picture we have of ourselves is often challenged, because the other parties are mirroring a negative picture of us. Only a very few people know themselves so well and have such a stable picture of themselves that they are completely secure in their identities even when others criticize them and offer negative judgments. Could it be I'm not competent enough? Am I not as good a person as I wanted to believe? Am I worthy of the appreciation and respect of others? Even if the mirroring one receives doesn't cause one to doubt one's self-image, it can certainly be unpleasant and threatening to be the object of others' negative pictures and opinions.

To the extent that the conflict involves deep-seated ideas about one or both parties' identities, strong forces may be aroused. These forces can be manifested in different ways, for example, as despair in connection with faltering self-confidence or aggressive attempts to reestablished a positive self-image by rejecting accusations and negative judgments.

Self-images

In research conducted by me and my colleague Titti Lundin (Jordan & Lundin 2002), we found that people who do not have a clear, complex and realistic image of themselves are at greater risk than others are of being negatively affected by workplace conflicts. Many people do not have a clear image of themselves: what kind of person they are, what their strong and weak traits are, what they like about themselves, what they are good and less good at, what other people appreciate about them, etc. Those who do not have a clear image of themselves as a person can hardly give themselves credible answers to critical questions concerning their own identity: Am I good enough? Am I a good person? I am worthy of being loved? To the extent that such questions come up, which they often do in conflict situations, those who do not have their own answers are highly vulnerable to what others think.

For the vast majority of people, it is important to be able to maintain an image of themselves as decent individuals who are worthy of self-respect and the respect of others. When one's own self-image is questioned, the whole of one's existence can be rocked to its foundations. This is why conflicts that touch on basic identity issues often give rise to strong defensive reactions that can make constructive conflict management much more difficult. A person who is fully occupied with fending off threats to his/her identity does not have much attention capacity left over for the other party's troubles or for solving practical problems. Naturally, this applies to both one's own handling of identity issues and the complications that may arise when the other party feels his/her identity is under threat. Here, we

will primarily consider what one can do to ground one's own identity, thus providing a solid foundation to stand on when trying to deal with a conflict situation.

For simplicity's sake, let us say that people's self-images can be assigned to one of three types, each of which has different consequences for how people function in conflict situations. The first type includes the very vague, unclear self-images found among those who have never considered what kind of person they are. These people have very little in the way of defenses when others judge them negatively. Their reactions may be directed inwards (feeling worthless or bad, resulting in unhappiness) or directed outwards (mounting a counterattack). The second type of self-image is when one thinks of oneself as a bundle of fixed traits. One is either good or bad, good enough or not good enough, egotistical or generous. These kinds of black-and-white pictures make the individual highly vulnerable to criticism. Efforts are made to maintain the self-image as a bundle of positive traits, and if the individual admits that there may be something to the criticism, then his/her self-image as a whole may flip to become a bundle of negative traits. People with this kind of self-image have two choices: either take in the negative pictures mirrored by others and feel the crushing weight of them or deny that there is anything to them at all. The third type of self-image is found among people who have clear and complex pictures of themselves as a person.

Members of this third group can see different traits in themselves, both strong and weak points, and they realize that many of their attitudes and actions have a number of causes. People who are secure in a well-grounded self-image do not feel as threatened by the negative pictures mirrored by others as do those who have a less clear or more one-sided self-image. The fact that they do not tie their self-image to black-and-white, fixed traits means they can also take in criticism, because it does not jeopardize their entire existence.

For this reason, when preparing for a conflict-related discussion, it is a good idea to try to form a clearer, more complex and realistic picture of yourself. If you know yourself, it is less threatening when others mirror negative things about you: you are less easily knocked off balance, you don't need to put energy into denial and self-defense, and you can devote yourself to moving the conflict in a positive direction.

The benefits of talking to oneself

One important part of the discussion on identities is, thus, the inner conversation you have with yourself about who you are. Here, it helps a great deal if you can conceive of yourself as consisting of different parts that talk to each other. The body has its own way of functioning and reacting: it gets tired, feels pain and tension and gets shaky. Feelings come and go, controlled by their own laws. Even thoughts have their own habitual paths they follow if nothing new happens. In the middle of all of these parts is you. You are not merely the sum of all the things happening in your body, your feelings and your thoughts. You can talk to these various parts of yourself. You can comfort yourself if part of you is sad. You can calm yourself with soothing words if you are feeling stressed. You can scold your thoughts if they start veering off onto worn-out loops of negativity where everything you do leads to failure. You can forgive yourself for making a mistake and pep yourself up if you're facing something difficult.

To have effective dialogues with yourself, you must first notice what is happening inside you, take a stance on it and decide what you want to change. If you feel lost in your inner jumble of voices, it can sometimes be helpful to make use of a role figure. Choose a person you know well and think is wise and experienced. Imagine what this person would say to your body, your feelings and your thought patterns. You can also allow your own voice to find support in affirmations, that is, short phrases of encouragement that you silently repeat many times to yourself. Examples of

such phrases are: "I have the power to deal with the challenges I face" or "I like myself because I'm worth liking."

Identity issues during the course of a conversation

Even after making efforts to ground one's identity and feel secure about one's self-image, it is normal for conflicts to sometimes cause doubt and defensive reactions. For this reason, one should also build up an ability to notice identity issues during the course of a conversation. When you notice that a comment has hit you deeply, try to determine what it pinpointed. Did the comment express doubts about your competence? Are you particularly sensitive to the suggestion that you are selfish? Are there things you feel bad about and don't want to be reminded of? All of us have our sore points. What is it that can knock you off balance? If you recognize your weaknesses, it will be easier for you to realize what is happening and develop better ways of dealing with critical situations.

It is crucial that you allow yourself to have many sides, both strong and weak. The better able you are to admit your own mistakes, weaknesses and mixed motives, the more solid the ground under your feet and the less risk there is of the other party making an apt comment that unexpectedly knocks your feet out from under you.

7. Conflict management

The preceding chapter focused on constructive communication from the point of view of one of the parties to a conflict. In this chapter, the perspective on conflict management at the workplace is broadened considerably. The discussion here concerns management of more protracted conflicts involving several individuals. Moreover, the chapter is aimed not only at the parties involved in a conflict, but also at those responsible for dealing with others' conflicts: managers, HR specialists, union representatives, organizational consultants, etc. The chapter begins with a survey of four principal approaches to conflict management: dialogue, discussion, rule-based procedures, and steamrollering (unilateral power). This is followed by an overview of the tools and strategies that may be appropriate for use in different types of conflict situations.

The four principal approaches to conflict management

According to the definition provided earlier, conflicts are situations involving one or more parties who have desires they are unwilling to give up, feel they are being obstructed by someone else, and act so as to fulfill their desires. In somewhat simplified terms, we can say that, in such situations, there are four main approaches to doing away with the obstruction: dialogue, discussion, rule-based procedures and steamrollering. Depending on the type of conflict (number of involved parties, type of issue and so on), these approaches may take very different concrete shapes. Nevertheless, in a given conflict situation, a choice between these four approaches has to be made. For this reason, it is important to have a thorough understanding of each approach and its advantages and disadvantages (see Figure 7.1 for a summary).

Dialogue	Discussion	Rule-based procedures	Power/ Steamrollering
• Good will – motivation to strive to reach a mutual agreement • Interest in the other person's experience • Openness to be influenced • Openness about what is important to oneself	• Advocating own views using rational and relevant arguments • Listening to rational arguments and assessing their relevance • Negotiating an agreement	• The matter is settled by decision-making by someone who has a mandate; by referring to rules, principles and powers; or through formal procedures. • The involved parties accept the outcome, even though they have different opinions	• One of the parties forces his/her standpoint against the other party's will: exercise of coercive power, refusal, creating faits accomplis • Can be done more or less skillfully …
Trust: the hope that the other party is willing to try to understand what I mean and to find a mutually acceptable solution	*Trust:* the hope that the other party is receptive to objective arguments	*Trust:* the other party is prepared to adhere to the rules of the game	*Lost trust*: no point in trying to reach consensus with the other party

Figure 7.1 Dialogue, discussion, rule-based procedures and steamrollering.

Dialogue

In everyday life, we often use dialogue to solve problems. However, this becomes more difficult as soon as one or more of the parties have a firm position. For this reason, having a clear picture of what a dialogue actual entails is important. Figure 7.1 lists four characteristics of dialogues. The first characteristic is that a dialogue aims at reaching agreement. This is far from self-evident in many situations. To truly create a dialogue, the parties must be motivated to examine whether it is possible to reach an agreement that is acceptable to both of them. In a dialogue, one must care about whether the other party thinks the solution is good and reasonable. Naturally, there are many situations in which the starting point is not so advantageous, i.e., both parties are not at all fully intent on reaching a consensus through open dialogue. One of the most difficult tasks in the craft

of conflict management is how to motivate someone who is fully occupied with advocating their own standpoint to begin looking for mutually acceptable solutions (see Chapter 6 on conversation techniques).

The second characteristic of a dialogue is that the parties are actually interested in properly understanding the other party's point of view, even if it at first seems incomprehensible, unclear or erroneous. It is typical of dialogues that questions are asked to better understand what the other person means and is aiming at, even though one's own views may be quite different. Surprisingly, this seldom occurs in conflict situations, because the parties are fully occupied with arguing for their own standpoints.

The third characteristic of a dialogue is being open to the possibility of hearing things that may cast a new and different light on the issues in question. Thus, provided there are good reasons, one is prepared to be influenced. There can be no dialogue if the conversation is entered into with unwavering views and demands that one argues for forcefully. There is no certainty that the dialogue will change one's views, but it is necessary to be open, and the other party must experience that one is willing to reappraise one's views if new insights are gained.

The fourth characteristic is that the parties are willing to put into words, as best they can, what is at stake for them: their desires and needs, perhaps even the emotions evoked by the issue in question.

All in all, these four characteristics imply that dialogue is the form of problem-solving that has the best prerequisites for being truly creative. If the parties are willing both to listen with the goal of understanding and to be influenced, then they are highly likely to gain new insights. Such insights, in turn, often pave the way for completely new ideas about how to handle the situation. At this point, the disadvantage of dialogues becomes rather obvious: They usually take quite a lot of time. Because time is typically a highly limited resource, there are many potential conflicts for which dialogue is not the most appropriate approach, in that it is too time-

consuming in relation to everything else that has to be done. Dialogue is an appropriate form of problem-solving when important issues are at stake and when there is truly a potential that dialogue will lead to new insights and creative solutions. As illustrated in Figure 7.1, dialogue also presumes a considerable amount of trust between the parties: Both must be willing to try to understand each other and to achieve a mutually acceptable solution. There must be at least some hope that the conversation will eventually lead to a point where this motivation can be mobilized. If this hope is completely lacking, it is likely that no attempt will be made to arrange a dialogue; instead, one of the other approaches will be chosen.

Discussion

Compared to dialogues, discussions are different in character and obey different rules. Most of the time, discussions start from a situation in which the parties already have rather fixed positions regarding what should happen and fully intend to argue for their respective standpoints. In discussions, the rules of the game are usually implicit, yet known to everyone. The most important rule is that of moral obligation: If one of the parties presents a relevant and valid argument supporting his/her view, then the other party is obliged to either present a relevant and valid counterargument or to recognize the validity of the first argument and give in to it. In discussions, each party hopes to convince the other that their own arguments are the strongest and that the other party will therefore accept them. The use of discussion as an approach to problem-solving also presumes a form of trust or hope, namely that the other party is receptive to rational arguments. When there is no more hope that relevant and valid arguments will count, i.e., when one believes the other party will insist on his/her own views irrespective of the arguments presented, then discussion usually transitions into debate. One no longer believes that the outcome will depend on which arguments turn out to be strongest, but instead on who has the upper hand thanks to other power resources (e.g., verbal adeptness, endurance, formal power or the majority).

Rule-based procedures

Rule-based procedures are used to manage conflicts when the situation is urgent, when it is immediately clear that such procedures are appropriate, or when it is clear that dialogue or discussion will not work. In the latter case, the parties' views are usually so fixed that the conflict issues have to be settled without the parties agreeing on the best or most reasonable solution. Frequently, the first sign that this approach will be needed is when discussions transition into debates and polemics: It is more a matter of earning points at the other party's expense than of trying to convince him/her of the merits of one's own arguments.

Debates can be seen as rule-based procedures as well. The same rule applies as in discussions: The party who is unable to present valid counter-arguments should give in. In debates, a reason for giving in may be because one finds oneself in an untenable rhetorical position, but not because, as in discussions, one has realized that the other party has stronger arguments to which one must reasonably submit.

Probably the most common rule-based procedure used in working life is to refer to the current order of delegation. This order identifies both who has the authority to make decisions and who is obliged to comply with these decisions. Clearly, there are many other types of rule-based procedures, e.g., voting (where the rule is that the minority must accept the majority's will), referring to current rules and regulations, previous decisions, plans of action or other existing frameworks, bringing the issue to formal negotiations (e.g., between a labor union and an employer), or pursuing the issue by legal means.

Rule-based procedures also presuppose a certain kind of trust or hope, albeit more limited than in the case of dialogue and discussion. One must believe that the other party is prepared to accept the rules associated with

such procedures, that is, to accept the outcome even though he/she does not approve of it.

Some rule-based procedures have the advantage of being fast, particularly when the order of delegation is invoked or, simply, when a decision is made. These procedures may also entail the advantage of ensuring that decision-making and conflict management are carried out correctly, e.g., by giving the weaker parties a chance to have their rights considered.

Steamrollering

Steamrollering or, in less charged language, unilateral action, is usually resorted to when none of the three previously mentioned approaches has led to a reasonable conclusion to a conflict process. Steamrollering involves one or more parties using their power resources to force through their own desires against the will of others. In this scenario, there is a great risk that the conflict will escalate, if for no other reason than because the party who has been steamrollered experiences the procedure itself as unjust. On the other hand, it may be very important for the parties involved as well as for workplace operations that conflict issues be settled definitely, so that frustration over permanently obstructed desires will not give rise to an even deeper conflict escalation (see Chapter 3). Steamrollering is treated in more depth in a separate section at the end of this chapter.

None of the discussed approaches is the best by definition

At normal workplaces, all of the four steps in Figure 7.1 are used at some point, depending on the circumstances. The above survey has hopefully shown that all four approaches have advantages and disadvantages, thus that they are all important parts of a conflict management repertoire.

Naturally, it is a wise principle to try to be as high up on the ladder as is possible and reasonable, simply because that will result in more sustainable solutions, entailing a diminished risk for long-term negative consequences for workplace cooperation and activities. However, there may very be good reason to terminate attempts to establish a dialogue or to end discussions if they do not seem to be leading anywhere.

The four approaches may look different in practice

Depending on the number and type of parties involved in the conflict, all four of the approaches may look very different. If, for example, the conflict primarily concerns an individual employee, approaches within the framework of a conversation with the employee should be used (for further discussion, see below). If the conflict is between two people, the dialogue approach may take the shape of mediation (in the form of a three-party conversation). The discussion approach will then look more like a negotiation, whereas the rule-based procedure approach may involve the responsible manager making a decision concerning the conflict issues. If the conflict concerns an entire working group or if it is taking place between two groups, then group mediation, negotiations by proxy, investigations or higher-level decisions may be the appropriate course of action.

Thus, the shape conflict management takes depends on the "conflict constellation," i.e., the number of involved parties, whether the parties are individuals, groups or organizations, and the nature of the parties' relative positions. The following are among the most common workplace conflict constellations:

Group – group (relationship conflict)
There are informal groups that are very critical of each other's respective behaviors (but they do not talk openly about it with one another)

Group – group (dispute)

There are strong differences of opinion on concrete issues between different groups (e.g., occupational groups, working teams, units) in relation to division of responsibility, working methods, rules and regulations, etc.

Individual – individual
The core of the conflict consists of problems with collaboration or disputes between individuals. It may be a question of a conflict between two people or several simultaneous problematic collaborative relationships between individuals in a working group.

Group – manager
A group is very discontented with its manager and wants him/her replaced.

Group – individual
The majority of members in a working group are very frustrated about a certain colleague, who may display deviant personality traits or behavioral patterns.

Individual – group
There is an informal leader who constantly criticizes some of his/her colleagues.

Manager – individual
There is a protracted conflict between a manager and an employee about, among other things, performance level, attitudes and rule-breaking that affect others as well.

Given that the constellations are so different in nature, there is no standard model for conflict management. As shown in Chapter 2, the characteristics of conflicts differ in many other ways as well (different themes, disputes/relationship conflicts, hot/cold, asymmetrical/symmetrical). Such differences have consequences for the design of a conflict management process. The rest of this chapter will provide an overview of the most common conflict management strategies.

Dysfunctional working groups

In working groups, the presence of discontent, friction and cooperation difficulties is relatively common. At the same time, it may be difficult to come to grips with what these problems actually concern. In other words, there does not seem to be an obvious concrete issue employees disagree on, nor does there seem to be a clear personal conflict between certain individuals. In such a situation, a manager, HR specialist or someone else not involved in the conflict may find it difficult to determine what can be done. Indefinite discontent such as this is often a symptom of employees having lost focus on their work assignments – which, in turn, often occurs when operational goals, tasks, role distribution, etc., are unclear to the employees. In such situations, the first priority is to work with employees to bring about clarity concerning goals, assignments, division of responsibility and working methods. During such development work, it usually becomes obvious that there is a need to clarify and make decisions concerning certain work organization issues that have previously been unclear.

The conflict intervention matrix

This section introduces a very useful strategy tool for conflict management: The conflict intervention matrix (see Figure 7.2 and 7.3). The matrix provides a rather complete overview of all the tools and strategies that may be put to use in managing a more or less complicated workplace conflict. The intervention matrix is based on two assumptions. One is that, in a conflict, it may be appropriate to act in relation to individuals (the individual level), to deal with existing disagreements and cooperation difficulties (the relationship level), and to attend to deficiencies and development needs in the work organization (the systemic level). This can

be summarized in terms of three simple questions that should be posed in connection with a workplace conflict:

1. What needs to be done on the individual level?
2. What needs to be done on the relationship level?
3. What needs to be done on the systemic level?

	Dialogue	Principles	Power
Individual level			
Relationship level			
Systemic level			

Figure 7.2 The conflict intervention matrix

Experience shows that, in most workplace conflicts, there are good reasons to take measures on all three levels. This may involve, for instance, having a serious conversation with a certain employee or considering transferring him/her to another post; initiating and leading a conflict resolution talk between the disputing parties or making a decision regarding a certain issue; allocating time to jointly working out a contract for cooperation in a working group or clarifying the division of responsibility and routines. The three levels of the intervention matrix help us consider what needs to be done on all levels, even if it is quite clear that some immediate action is required on only one of the levels. Most of the time, circumstances on all three levels have contributed to the emergence of the conflict, and thus there is reason to take stock of the need for measures on all levels.

The second assumption on which the intervention matrix is based is that measures taken on the three levels may be different with regard to their

nature and purpose. The *dialogue-based approach* implies an attempt to mobilize the good will of all involved parties to work constructively and find solutions to the problem. If this attempt succeeds, there are good chances that sustainable, high-quality solutions will be found because the parties themselves have participated actively. Ordering people to summon up their good will is seldom productive. Thus the dialogue approach is generally based on inviting the parties to collaborate and doing so in a way that makes them feel respected and as though they have a real opportunity to influence the process. The dialogue approach is therefore basically voluntary: The parties must be free to agree to or decline active participation.

The *principle-based approach* is used when there are no prerequisites for the dialogue approach to work successfully: When parties do not wish to participate or to modify their fixed standpoints, when, for various reasons, it is not appropriate for them to influence the outcome, or when the situation requires immediate action. The principle-based approach implies that the conflict is settled by referring to the existing order of delegation (the manager decides[17]), other rules and regulations, agreements, rules of law, or some other existing framework. It may also imply that more formal procedures are used to bring matters to a conclusion, e.g., negotiations between a union representative and the employer. In addition, the principle-based approach may entail developing and informing about new, previously unclear principles regarding, e.g., work organization, division of responsibility, routines or support resources.

The *power-based approach* is usually resorted to when neither the dialogue nor the principle-based approach has led to acceptable results. The power approach implies that some party (most commonly, but not always, the employer) forces an end to the conflict by making unilateral decisions and taking other measures, i.e., steamrollering. This may involve giving orders, transferring people, making binding decisions on conflict issues, splitting up a group of employees or making organizational changes. The use of power or authority may be necessary in some conflicts, because the

consequences of failing to arrive at a unilateral resolution of a difficult conflict may be very destructive, both for individuals in the organization and for the people the organization serves. For this reason, a separate section is devoted to *skillful steamrollering* as an important approach to conflict management.

The three approaches may also be expressed as three questions to be posed in a conflict situation:

1. Are there any chances that the conflict can be dealt with in individual or group conversations and that new insights, changed attitudes and creative solutions can be used to arrive at voluntary agreements (the dialogue approach)?
2. Is there any reason to deal with the conflict using the decision-making authority, formal procedures, rules, formal agreements and the like that are available at the workplace? Do any of the parties enjoy rights that have to be considered (the principle-based approach)?
3. Are there arguments that support managing the conflict by taking unilaterally determined measures, e.g., orders, threats of sanctions, transfer, reorganization or other coercive measures (the power approach)?

Figure 7.3 provides examples of more concrete measures, methods and strategies that may be appropriate; these examples are found in the nine fields of the intervention matrix, where the columns are the three approaches and the rows the three levels. For some of these strategies, such as group mediation, the assistance of specialists from outside the organization may be appropriate, e.g., a behavioral scientist from the occupational health services, a mediator or an organizational consultant.

	Dialogue	Principles/Rights	Power
Individual level	• Conversation with employee • Feedback • Career planning conversation • Counseling • Conflict guidance conversation • Supervision by the manager • Work on self-awareness • Further education/skills training for employee or manager	• Clarify frameworks, rules and limits for individual employees • Develop a job description • Change work assignments and/or transfer • Corrective conversation • Salary negotiation	• Give orders • Threat of sanctions • Disciplinary reminder/warning • Transfer • Notice/discharge
Relationship level	• Mediation (three-party conversation) with or without individual preparatory conversations • Group mediation • A planning day to develop measures for unresolved issues • Joint evaluation of outcomes of the change process	• Decision on disputed issues made by the responsible manager • Mapping including recommendations for measures • Investigation of conflict issues • Negotiation between union and employer • Labor law process • Settlement based on formal rules and regulations	• Judgment of conflict issues by a higher authority • Transfer of parties to the conflict • Dissolution of dysfunctional group
Systemic level	• A planning day to sort out roles, routines and mutual expectations • Group dialogue on norms, goals, identity, strategies, role distribution • Work on the basic value system • Conversation on an operations plan or the like • Common continuing education for staff on psychosocial issues, feedback, group dynamics, conflict studies, etc.	• Develop job descriptions • Develop routines and guidelines • Education/information on applicable rules and regulations • Routine for psychosocial inspection of the working environment/review of activities • Introduce working environment questionnaires • Guidelines for meeting arrangement • Establish problem-solving procedures • Staff handbook or the like • Management training program • Policies and action plans • Establishing support resources	• Introducing rules and regulations against the will of the staff • Reorganization • Shut-down

Figure 7.3 Examples of tools and strategies for conflict management

Difficult conversations

In Chapter 6, communication in relation to conflicts was considered from a personal perspective, i.e., when one is a party to the conflict and needs to handle a conversation competently. The principles discussed there are also relevant for a manager or HR specialist involved in a difficult conversation with an employee. This is often a question of the employer's desires concerning what the employee should and should not do. The three main approaches discussed above point out the three different types of conversations one can engage in. The *dialogue approach* focuses on creating an encounter in which you – e.g., the manager – and the employee, through dialogue, arrive at a mutually acceptable agreement. In the dialogue, you refrain from using power, instead hoping to engage the employee in a common quest for solutions. This means that you must be genuinely prepared to ask open questions and to listen in order to try to understand the employee's point of view, desires and needs. Naturally, you will also request that the employee listen to how you see the situation and to what is important from your perspective. If the employee truly feels listened to and has understood your point of view, then there is a good chance that the dialogue will result in a sustainable solution.

If you use the *principle-based approach* instead, the conversation will be about the employer's expectations vis-à-vis the employee, the commitments and rights associated with the post as well as questions concerning the employee's work duties, placement and instructions. In such a situation, one can refer to the applicable rules and regulations, agreements, salary criteria and the like. The purpose of the conversation is more to clarify the framework and, possibly, to negotiate with the employee on what will apply in the future. In this type of conversation, the employee will probably invoke his/her rights and argue for his/her desires by referring to principles. At best, such a conversation will result in a workable solution, even if differences will remain regarding outlooks on the situation and on what the appropriate course of action should have been.

If a conversation guided by the *power approach* is pursued, the communication usually becomes rather one-sided: You – e.g., the manager

– indicate which decisions have been made and, if necessary, explain what the consequences will be if the employee fails to comply with these decisions. If the power approach is used, one can count on the employee trying to mobilize all conceivable power resources. The final outcome will therefore often depend on who actually has the greatest power resources and can force the other person to back down. Most of the time, the employer has the upper hand – but not always.

Because dialogue, if it is successful, results in both parties agreeing on a solution, there is a great chance that the solution will be sustainable and strengthen the parties' mutual respect and relationships. For this reason, trying to create dialogues at the outset is a wise strategy. If this is not possible, problem-solving negotiations may be attempted, the ambition being limited to arriving at a workable agreement on the concrete issue rather than agreeing in every respect. Only in situations where dialogue and negotiation turn out to be impracticable should one resort to steamrollering. This three-stage strategy implies that one – e.g., a person in a management role – should be careful to keep all three alternatives open, thus making sure one maintains the possibility to completely, but considerately, steamroller the employee (for further discussion, see below) even if one's initial approach was to find a solution through dialogue. This can be clarified from the outset. It should be made clear that the primary ambition is to find a solution based on dialogue or negotiation, but also that a unilateral decision will be made if the conversation fails to result in an acceptable solution. If one is careful about how one puts this, the threatening ring easily conveyed by such a statement can be avoided.

Because the previous chapter dealt with communication in connection with conflicts in some detail, the present treatment of the difficult conversation will be limited to a brief overview of some rules of thumb (see Figure 7.4). The guidelines have been designed primarily to apply to situations in which an employer (a manager or an HR specialist) wants an employee to modify his/her behavior, or in which an employer and an employee have irreconcilable desires.

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Difficult conversations with employees

Preparations for the conversation:

– Be prepared to describe the pertinent information as concretely as possible. Vague and general statements will leave your employee in the lurch: He/she will not have a sporting chance of understanding the problem.

– If you plan to express criticism, examine whether your motives for doing this are constructive.

– Consider what you want the results of the conversation to be with regard to, e.g., the following questions:

- What attitude do I want him/her (the employee) to have toward me as a leader?

- How will I experience myself in the leader role?

- What attitude will he/she have toward the company/organization?

- What kinds of feelings does my way of dealing with the situation arouse in him/her?

- How does the conversation affect the working group's prerequisites for functioning well?

Carrying out the conversation

1. Establish the framework

Come straight to the point and state immediately what the conversation will be about. Your employee will notice that something is going on, so beginning with small talk will only make him/her nervous.

2. Describe the problem

Explain the information on which your picture of the situation is based. Be as specific as possible. This creates the prerequisites for mutual understanding.

Explain why you think this information is important, and why there is reason for you to act: What is at stake for you? What are your concerns? If

you are angry, say so. Or, if you are worried, say that, too.

Assume your responsibility as a leader by speaking in the first person.

3. Involve your employee

Ask open questions about what the situation and the problems are like from your employee's perspective.

Invite your employee to participate in problem-solving: Ask whether he/she has any ideas about how the problem can be resolved.

4. Specify matters

Be specific about what you want to happen in the future. If this is a matter of behavioral or attitudinal change, ask yourself: According to which criteria should fulfillment of my desires or demands be tested?

Using plain language, discuss the positive consequences you expect to result from the problem-solving approach you recommend.

During the conversation, remember to
– listen actively

If, after the conversation, your employee does not feel that you have taken in his/her views on the issue, he/she will feel brushed aside or unfairly treated. This will have consequences for your employee's motivation and attitude toward you as a leader.

Ask questions that help you understand the employee's desires and needs. Test your own understanding by summarizing what you have heard, and ask whether it is correct.

Being silent and letting the employee talk on and on is not sufficient; you must ensure that he/she feels that you have listened. Consider whether what you have heard (i.e., the employee's perspective) gives you reason to reappraise your views on what needs to be done. If new information comes

up that casts the matter in a new light, you may have to terminate the conversation to give yourself time to reflect on the situation again.

– focus

Keep your focus on solutions. State your desires for the future as concretely as possible, and ask the employee what he/she wants the future to look like. Do not let yourself be led into debates about guilt or irrelevant issues.

– deal with emotions

Show respect and a reasonable amount of understanding for your employee's emotions, but let him/her have these emotions. Attempts on your part to comfort, divert or dismiss will feel like manipulation and will not have any positive consequences. If the employee's emotions manifest themselves in accusations, reproaches or negative judgments, avoid defending or justifying yourself. Instead, listen to the facts and assess whether they in any way change your own evaluation. It is wise to be very tolerant of things said under emotional stress.
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Solution-focused mediation in connection with collaboration problems between employees

When the conflict takes the form of long-lasting collaboration problems between employees, trying to improve the work relationship through mediation may be worthwhile. There are many different ways to carry out mediation, some of which require professional training in mediation methods.[18] However, leaders, HR specialists, safety representatives and others can play a very important role in the mediation between conflicting parties without any particular mediation training. One way of mediating that is recommended in such a situation is the solution-focused methodology described by the Norwegian organizational consultant Gro Johnsrud Langslet (2011). Gro Johnsrud Langslet states that, in her experience, about

80 percent of all conflicts can be resolved after an average of three solution-oriented meetings, whereas in the remaining 20 percent of cases, one must establish that no progress is being made. In such cases, some kind of separation of the parties has to be considered.

The present description of solution-oriented mediation is intended for conflicts between two persons who have long-lasting collaboration problems. With some adaptation, the approach can also be used for conflicts involving more than two parties. At its most basic, Gro Johnsrud Langslet's methodology is designed for conducting three meetings with the involved parties.

The first meeting

Begin the first conversation by clarifying why you have asked for a meeting: Explain that the situation has become untenable. Something must be done; either the parties will arrive at a solution, or one or both must be transferred or quit. The aims of the first meeting are to discover how great the two parties' expectations are that the conflict can be resolved, to clarify their desired changes and to understand how realistic they believe it is that these changes can be achieved in the present situation.

Explain the frame of the meeting to the parties: The focus should be on what they desire for the future and on possible solutions, rather than on why they find the present situation problematic. Tell the parties that one necessary condition for resolving the conflict is that they are able to listen and to try to understand how the other party views the desired changes. One need not agree with what the other party is saying, but one does need to understand the other party's views and desires. Make it clear that aggressive acts, personal attacks and interrupting when the other party is speaking will obstruct any solutions, and that you will therefore intervene if such behaviors occur.

Following your introduction, in which you have clarified the purpose of the meeting, you should ask the parties to present their respective positions, e.g., by asking each of them what they think about the purpose of the meeting. If the parties are reluctant or dismissive, or if they show their disbelief in any possibility for improvement, you can ask what would need to occur in the conversation for them to find it at all beneficial.

Asking questions that require responding on a scale may be useful, e.g., "Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you are quite certain this conflict cannot be resolved, and where 10 means that you are convinced it can be resolved?" If the parties respond with a figure greater than 0, your follow-up question should be why they chose this figure rather than 0. In this way, you can bring out what are, after all, possible positive factors. If both or one of them responds 0, you can ask what could get them to raise that figure. Then, in the next step, you ask them how high up on the scale they wish they were. This is a matter of estimating what is good enough to be acceptable, which is frequently a bit lower than 10 on the scale. Understanding that the goal need not be total perfection, but rather a more realistic state of things, may be a relief. At this point, you can ask what the first concrete signs would be that the figure they were aiming for, say 7, had been reached. You may also ask a number of follow-up questions concerning this, e.g.: "How do you think X (the other party) would notice that you are at 7 rather than 2?" If one of the parties finds it difficult to believe that it is possible to go beyond 5, you can ask a question such as: "How would you notice it if you, contrary to expectations, were to begin moving up the scale?"

The purpose of these questions is to put the focus on the desired concrete changes rather than allowing the parties to dwell on what is wrong, and why. The questions, and the follow-up questions, draw their attention to the possibility of making small concrete improvements that may not be so difficult to achieve. This may raise some hope that it is possible to begin a positive development. The initial phase is largely a matter of mobilizing the parties' desire for improvement. If it is not possible for the parties to

express desires for improvements that they feel are meaningful to strive for, then the prerequisites for resolving the conflict are very poor. Because the purpose of this particular phase is to test and strengthen the parties' own motivation, it is important that you not talk about what you yourself wish to achieve, even though you clearly have important desires of your own.

Another type of question that may be very useful is one that targets "exceptions," i.e., that encourages the parties to reflect on occasions or periods of time during which things have after all worked or at least functioned better. The cooperation between them probably functioned better at the beginning. Thus, a number of more detailed questions can be asked about how things were then, why things worked better, and what the consequences of this were. This will create images of what it is like when things work well (or at least better than they do now). The more concrete examples the parties can provide of what it is like when things are functioning better, the more one can reinforce their belief that reasonably well-functioning cooperation is possible. In many cases, it is effective to summarize in writing what the parties did when things worked better, in order to consolidate their awareness of functional strategies.

During the first conversation, it is seldom possible for the parties to develop a strong belief that the collaboration problems can be solved. This must be respected. They must be given time to accumulate experiences that demonstrate to them that improvements are possible. It is therefore wise to refrain from trying to bring about established agreements between the parties early in the process. You may wish to end the first conversation by asking the parties to take notice, between now and the next meeting, of events that give them hope that the conflicts may be resolvable. Schedule the next meeting, which should be held 3 to 4 weeks later.

The second meeting

You should begin the second meeting by asking the parties what has improved since the last meeting. If the parties can give examples of things that have worked, you should ask follow-up questions about exactly what happened and what made this improvement possible. You can also ask in what way others may have been able to notice a difference, thus focusing even more on what was concretely observable. Also, in order to clarify the consequences of positive behavior, you can ask additional questions on the effects of possible improvements on each of the parties. If you yourself have noticed improvements, you may relate those observations as well.

At best, the second conversation will be all about examining, from various angles, what has been working, what has improved, and why. This meeting should be concluded by asking the parties to continue observing things that have improved and that work.

In contrast, if the parties are unable to report any improvements, even stating that the situation has worsened, you will need to once again work with questions that target previous "exceptions" to the current situation. If things have gotten worse, then they must have been better before. This allows you to ask what it was like when things were better, posing the same kinds of questions about the difference as those described above. You can also explicitly ask the parties to identify single exceptions, i.e., cases in which things did work reasonably well after all. Then you can focus on what it was that made those exceptions possible.

Another strategy is to use the questions with rating scales again, e.g., asking the parties to evaluate, using a figure from 0 to 10, how well collaboration has worked for each day since the latest meeting. If these evaluations show some variability, as they normally do, you can ask follow-up questions about what made things work a bit better on some of the days. When attention is paid to what the parties did that made things work better, these constructive patterns are strengthened.

A third strategy may be to ask a colleague of the parties to participate in the conversation. While the parties are present, you can interview the colleague, asking whether he/she has experienced any occasions on which collaboration has worked better than usual and, if so, what happened on those occasions.

The third meeting

The third meeting should continue along the same lines as the second one, meaning one should talk about what the parties have done to deal with various situations in as positive a manner as possible. If the relationship seems to be well on the path toward improvement, it may be appropriate to talk with the parties about what routines, rituals and agreements may be needed to maintain a well-functioning collaborative atmosphere.

By the third conversation, it should be clear whether it has been possible to initiate a process toward improvement that has some stability and gives hope for further development. If it has not been possible, bring up the question of whether there are grounds for assuming that the conflict can be resolved, or whether the conversation should be directed at trying to find other ways out of the situation. If the parties are unable to report any improvements at all, if they have completely lost confidence in each other, if they are unable to express any positive desires, and if they, in response to a direct question, are not willing to try to make improvements, then you should consider concluding that the conflict does not seem to be resolvable. The outcome of the conversation will either be that one or both parties decide to quit or request a transfer, or the decision of whether to somehow separate the parties will be left to the employer.

Group mediation

In group mediation, a mediator leads the group involved in the conflict through a conflict-resolution process, and all involved parties are present in the same room at the same time.[19] In conflicts that have escalated to such a degree that trust in the other party's good will has been greatly damaged, a qualified mediator should be engaged to lead the process. However, in the early phases of a conflict, or when everyone involved is willing to work on the conflict jointly, the responsible manager or an HR specialist can act as the mediator. A detailed review of the methodology for group mediation is beyond the scope of this book. What is presented here is a brief overview of the five phases often included in group mediation.[20]

Phase 1: Establish the framework

The first phase of group mediation involves creating conditions that enable the group and the mediator to work constructively with the conflict. The participants often have fears, reservations, doubts and insecurities that may make them more inclined to defend themselves against the risk of ending up in unpleasant situations than to consider how they can help improve the situation. The objectives of the first phase are to create contacts and the beginnings of trust in the mediator, to calm any fears, and to create clarity and agreement as to the framework of the process, i.e., to establish the roles, rules and procedures.

The desired result of the first phase is for
– the participants to accept the mediator (or the mediators) and authorize him/her (them) to lead the process;
– the participants to understand and accept the proposed course of action;
– the participants to trust that their needs will be respected;
– the participants and the mediator to agree on a contract for the process, including those concerning communication.

Phase 2: Exploration

When work with the actual conflict begins, the first task is to create clarity and understanding in relation to its contents. The participants need an overview of the conflict and need to understand what ingredients and conditions have made – and are still making – it what it is. What technique is chosen to achieve this understanding depends on the nature of the conflict, e.g., whether it is a matter of disagreements over delimited issues or whether it concerns collaboration problems between certain individuals.

The important factor in Phase 2 is that the essential elements of the conflict be made clear to the parties, so that they understand how their conflict functions and get an overview of the prerequisites that have to be taken into account in a resolution process. At this point, focusing on seeing and understanding is more important than expressing opinions or offering proposals for solutions. The role of the mediator is therefore to provide clarity and specification as well as to point out the differences and frustrations that exist. At the same time, he/she should discourage the parties from defending themselves, expressing opinions or proposing solutions.

A psychologically important factor in this phase is that the parties are often highly frustrated about not having been able to reach the other party with their message. As long as they feel they have not been heard and understood, it will be difficult for them to access their capacity to search for solutions. In this phase, then, it is often important to work actively to ensure that the listening party truly understands, and that the speaking party gets clear confirmation that the listener has received and understood his/her message.

The desired results of the work in Phase 2 are for
– the parties to understand each other's concrete issues and stories;
– the parties to get confirmation that others have understood them, i.e., that their message has been received;

– the parties to be able to free up the energy that has hitherto been inaccessible in their attempts to convey their messages, so that they can concentrate on working with the important issues;
– the efforts to result in clarity concerning the themes that need to be worked on.

Phase 3: Conflict transformation

In the third phase, the work is a matter of softening up and deconstructing the obstacles that have prevented the parties from pursuing creative problem-solving. In simpler terms, it is about mobilizing the parties' good will. In outright disputes, this work primarily involves dealing with cognitive patterns. In other words, the parties need to better understand their respective underlying interests, to develop an understanding of which paths forward are impassable, and to create an understanding of their common interests. They also need to shift their view of the situation from seeing it as a tug of war to seeing it as a common mission to find solutions. Relationship conflicts are more likely to involve working with emotional reactions, interpretations, images and attitudes toward one another. They are also a matter of mobilizing the parties' good will.

Depending on the nature of the obstacle, different techniques are used. This may be a question of creating a deeper understanding of causes and effects, such as explanations for how the conflict emerged, its course and the other party's actions, as well as insights into the possible consequences of various alternative actions. It may also be a matter of encouraging greater mutual understanding of emotions and needs, thus working through attitudes, relationships and pent-up emotions. In some cases, it may be essential to sort out what is truly important to the parties in a more long-term perspective.

The desired results of the work in Phase 3 are for

– the parties to develop an understanding and acceptance of the situation's prerequisites;
– the parties' mutual distrust of one another to de-escalate and be replaced by increased trust in each other's ability and willingness to be constructive;
– the parties' mutual understanding and respect to increase;
– the efforts to mobilize the parties' good will with regard to searching for solutions.

Phase 4: Develop proposals for solutions

If all has gone well, then by the start of the fourth phase the parties will have freed up their inner resources, allowing them to use these resources to creatively search for possibilities to act.

This phase concerns developing ideas for solutions, measures and strategies as well as selecting and developing promising proposals. Thanks to the work done in the preceding phases, the parties should now have good insights into both their own and others' interests and desires as well as a good understanding of the relevant prerequisites. In this phase, techniques that promote creativity are commonly used, e.g., the classic brainstorming principle, which entails focusing first on generating ideas and then, given a large number of ideas, scrutinizing them to determine which are attractive and practicable.

The desired result of the work in phase 4 is a number of concrete, feasible proposals for measures that correspond well with the interests and needs of all parties.

Phase 5: Reach agreements

The objective of Phase 5 is to negotiate concrete agreements between the parties by specifying and critically examining the proposals for measures.

An additional objective is to plan how these agreements will be implemented and followed up. In this phase, the mediator's task is to help the parties be very concrete, so that it is clear what will be done, who will assume responsibility for doing it, when it will be done, and how one can ensure that it will be done as agreed upon. It is often wise to incorporate into an agreement a meeting sometime in the future to review how well the agreement has worked and to check whether any issues that may have emerged recently need to be addressed.

The desired results of the work done in Phase 5 are
– practicable agreements that provide for the parties' interests;
– a high degree of acceptance, on the part of all parties, of the results of the mediation;
– restored trust between the parties in the possibility that cooperation will function satisfactorily in the future;
– a credible plan for implementation of the agreement, including clarity regarding who will assume responsibility for what and when the implementation will be carried through;
– an agreement on how the follow-up will be carried out.

Diagnosis

In some countries, including Sweden, it is common to conduct a conflict and/or organizational diagnosis in cases of difficult workplace conflicts. This means that an outsider, normally a management consultant from an occupational health service or an independent consultancy firm (or sometimes an HR specialist from the organization' own HR department), carries out individual interviews with the parties to the conflict and compiles a diagnosis of the situation based on these interviews. The diagnosis sometimes results in a number of proposals for measures. These recommendations are handed over to the principal, who then has to make decisions about which measures to undertake. Sometimes the mapping is used as a basis for group mediation. Thus, the consultant presents the

mapping at a meeting with all involved parties, using it as a point of departure for joint efforts to develop an action plan for resolving the conflict.

As a conflict management method, diagnoses have advantages and disadvantages. One of the characteristics of the method that many find attractive is that it feels safer to have a qualified outsider conduct individual interviews with all involved rather than to have joint meeting where the parties are expected to speak up. If the diagnosis consists of delivering proposals for measures directly to the principal, an employer may maintain complete control over the conflict management process, thus avoiding a situation in which the whole personnel group offers massive criticism of management. Naturally, there is no guarantee that this "safer" and more controlled method will provide the best solutions. There is a considerable risk that a diagnosis will raise employees' hopes that the situation will improve, but that, in the end, the principal will choose not to implement the measures the consultant recommends. If a diagnosis is opted for, a meeting with the whole group should be scheduled, from the beginning, to go through the results, allocating ample time to a dialogue on what should be done to improve the situation.

Apart from the possible benefits mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are a number of additional advantages to the diagnosis method. The individual conversations provide a safe forum that may promote reflection among the involved parties. Also, the diagnosis gives the consultant a good opportunity to pedagogically demonstrate to the parties that difficulties that emerge are often based on inadequacies on the organizational (system) level, such as unclear goals and assignments, role distribution, guidelines as well as weak leadership (often due to managers' excessive workload). The review of the diagnosis may then lead to a shift in focus, from putting the blame on individuals to carrying through organizational developments intended to improve the prerequisites for cooperation and focus on the tasks at hand.

Skillful steamrollering

In many situations, it is not possible to reach a consensus on how an issue should be handled. For example, one of the involved parties may not be willing to engage in a search for a mutually acceptable solution, but instead keeps pushing a fixed standpoint. Time may be running out, while at the same time a third party's needs must to be protected. In such situations, making further progress may necessitate steamrollering someone, i.e. using unilateral power. There are two forms of steamrollering. One is when one acts from a position of power, simply making a decision that the party is forced to accept. The other way is when one has no formal power over the party, but chooses to act without his/her consent. One does what one feels is right, despite the other party's protests, thereby presenting him/her with a fait accompli.

When the choice is made to steamroller someone, there is a great risk of loss of trust. The party that has been steamrollered often feels that an injustice has been done. There is a risk that he/she will see the other party as ruthless, brutal, dictatorial and generally as morally dubious. Thus, there are good reasons for being careful in such situations.

Constructive conflict management is not a matter of agreeing at all costs, but of making well-informed decisions about how to act in a conflict situation. Even in situations where joint conflict resolution is not achievable, there are still opportunities to act more or less skillfully. The phrase "skillful steamrollering" suggests that there are both unskillful and skillful ways of steamrollering someone. The difference between them does not concern the eventual outcome regarding the concrete issues, but how the steamrollering is carried out. In terms of the ABC model, skillful acts of steamrollering are not a matter of what one should do in the C corner, but of how one should act in the B corner to prevent negative consequences in the A corner. Unskillful steamrollering often results in the affected party feeling wronged and unfairly treated. This, in turn, may affect relationships for a

long time to come, in that the steamrollered party may well have a negative attitude toward the person who did the steamrollering.

Many people, managers in particular, sometimes find themselves in situations where they feel that it is necessary to use unilateral power, i.e. to steamroller a person or a group. Agreement or acceptance of decisions may be unachievable, and the situation may be judged as unsustainable. In such cases, it may be necessary to make a decision or act unilaterally in a way that other involved parties experience as an act of steamrollering.

Steamrollering is seldom agreeable, but there are more or less skillful ways of doing it. A skillfully performed instance of steamrollering may allow avoidance of many negative consequences, particularly concerning the steamrollered person's bitterness over the way in which it was done.

In the following, six guidelines for skillful steamrollering are presented. These principles are not remarkable; rather, they offer guidelines that should be self-evident (although they may sometimes be difficult to follow given the present circumstances).[21] The guidelines are relevant on the individual, relationship and systemic levels as well as in informal interactions and formal decision-making processes. All of the guidelines are not relevant in each case, but they deserve to be included as points on a checklist to be used before steamrollering someone.

1. Acquire sufficient information on which to base well-founded decisions.
– Ask yourself what you know too little about and obtain the relevant information;
– Give the involved parties the opportunity to put forward their views, and listen to what they have to say.

Why?
If you are unfamiliar with the important and relevant circumstances, you run the risk of making an ill-founded decision, which will lead to bitterness

in the parties affected and to doubts about your competence as a leader.

2. Review all possible consequences of an act of steamrollering.
For example, consider the consequences as regards
– what the other person will feel and think, as well as his/her motivation to behave constructively in the future;
– the relationship between you and the other person;
– other relationships at the workplace;
– the atmosphere at the workplace;
– the conclusions others will draw concerning what norms apply;
– the long-term prerequisites for the involved parties to do a good job in the future;
– others' perception of you as a leader.

Why?
The decision to steamroller someone is frequently made without weighing in the broader consequences. The way in which the act of steamrollering is carried out may have to be changed to avoid undesired consequences.

3. Be transparent in relation to the parties involved
– Describe how you understand the situation;
– Explain the principles and values that underlie your priorities and chosen path;
– Explain what you fear will happen if you do not steamroller a certain party (parties);
– Explain what you hope to achieve through your action.

Why?
Transparency reduces the scope others have for developing negative fantasies about your underlying motives and driving forces. Moreover, clarity increases the chances that your actions will be respected as being based on a reasonable rationale.

4. Seek legitimacy
– Test for yourself whether you are authorized to carry out your intentions;
– Explain to others what alternatives you have dismissed, and why;
– Clarify for others how you view your authority to steamroller the party (parties);
– Consult an external expert about your action;
– Give the involved parties an opportunity to present their views on what you intend to do. Listen and respond;
– Ensure that there is neither reason nor scope for considering your action to be arbitrary, i.e., guided by your subjective attitudes;
– If it is possible in the situation, invite the other party to offer suggestions as to how the decision-making process could be improved;

Why?
Trusting that power is being exercised in a responsible and legitimate manner is crucial to the atmosphere at the workplace. Doubts about this may develop and become a source of profound distrust and conflicts.

5. Professionalism in communication
– Be specific and clear;
– Listen and ensure that the other party feels you have received his/her message;
– Show respect for others' emotions and personal integrity;
– Even if the positions have been deadlocked thus far, keep the door to consensual solutions open.

Why?
Good communication often results in all involved parties gaining new insights; in addition, by showing respect and taking in the other person's message, you may avoid a considerable part of the negative consequences often associated with insensitive steamrollering.

6. Ask the involved parties what they need in order to accept the decision[22]
– Given that the decision stands, can anything be added or modified to make it easier for the involved parties to live with it?
– Do the involved parties have objections or fears that can be relieved or eliminated?

Why?
If the steamrollered parties' objections and suggestions are taken into consideration, the final decisions may be better, easier to implement and more sustainable because the involved parties will be less likely to oppose them.

8. Creating a robust collaboration culture

Much of this book has dealt with trying to understand and deal with conflicts. Actually, one might think it started at the wrong end. The most important task must be to ensure that the workplace has characteristics that make it easy for all involved parties to resolve issues that emerge at the workplace, making it more likely that conflicts will not occur or at least will not follow a destructive path. But how can one build up a robust collaboration culture? There is potential for conflict in every context where people must cooperate for an operation to function. Different views exist on what should be done and how. Whether or not we want to, all of us now and then react to the behavior and attitudes of others, and sometimes our reactions are marked by great frustration. An organization should be able to manage the fact that it is made up of living, breathing human beings. The concept "robust collaboration culture" refers to a workplace that can cope with occasional differences of opinion and friction between people and do so without losing its ability to function with efficiency and quality. Here, "robust" means showing resilience, being so healthy that "infections" do not gain a foothold. "Culture" implies that important components of robustness are related to the attitudes, values, norms and perspectives that permeate the workplace culture. It is not enough to have well-designed action plans and regulations. Instead, conflict prevention requires that employees and managers be guided in their practice by a fundamental attitude that is focused on problem resolution. But how does such a culture emerge?

This chapter will provide an overview of measures and strategies that may facilitate the emergence of a robust collaboration culture. This is often a matter of long-term strategies rather than of quick solutions.

Problem-solving cultures

In one of my research projects, I studied how differences of opinion and feelings of irritation were dealt with in everyday working life, that is, what cultures existed for coping with situations that had a potential for conflict. In the project, I chose to study hospitals because the hospital world involves clearly delimited professional groups that must cooperate and because it has a tradition of hierarchical organization that is currently in transformation. The interviews conducted for the project provided a rich variety of types of workplace cultures. Among the workplaces represented in the data were several that showed evidence of having a collaboration culture that functioned well. The people at these workplaces had succeeded in creating a climate and communication culture that made it easy for employees to resolve any problems that emerged by engaging in constructive and solution-focused conversations. Naturally, there were also workplaces where problem-solving functioned less well, sometimes resulting in lasting tensions, frustration and bad feelings. In both cases, it is interesting to look more closely at what happens at a workplace when differences of opinion or feelings of irritation emerge. After the features of the collaboration cultures at these workplaces have been described, the next task is to look for factors that lead to a successful versus a poorly functioning problem-solving culture. Workplaces that actually have a good collaboration culture are particularly interesting, because they may be able to teach us something about how we can create such a culture. What conditions are favorable versus unfavorable? Has the good collaboration culture emerged spontaneously, or is it the result of purposeful efforts? What active measure and strategies can one choose from?

The problem-solving collaboration culture

There is good reason to believe that a basic problem-solving attitude among employees and managers is the most important ingredient in a robust collaboration culture. It is important to have a good understanding of what this entails in everyday working life. My analysis of the interviews conducted for my research project resulted in eight identified components

(see Figure 8.1, where the components are presented as descriptive statements). All eight components concern expectations, that is, what an employee who has a particular desire or who is frustrated about something expects will happen if he/she brings up the issue with his/her colleagues or manager. If this person has previous positive experiences, and therefore expects to be treated with respect and to encounter a willingness to find solutions, then the threshold to resolving the problem early will be low. On the other hand, if the person expects others will dismiss his/her desires or show lack of interest or even negative reactions, then the threshold will be high. As a consequence, the risk will increase of this person experiencing obstructed desires and accumulating feelings of frustration, which together may form a breeding ground for conflicts.

The eight components in Figure 8.1 provide an overall picture of what kinds of attitudes promote a problem-solving collaboration culture. In Appendix 2, the descriptive statements for these components are provided on a worksheet that can be used in work groups for making self-ratings. Self-ratings constitute a good starting point for dialogues about how group members want their interpersonal communication and treatment to work.

> **1. Problem-solving**
> When collaboration problems or feelings of irritation emerge, I can be quite certain that we will arrive at a good solution through constructive dialogue.
>
> **2. Respect**
> At my workplace, we can trust that our views and wishes will be treated with respect and interest.
>
> **3. Learning**
> At my workplace there is a desire to perform high-quality work. Disagreements and critical viewpoints are positively regarded, as they can provide ideas for improvement and learning.
>
> **4. Accommodating environment**
> One can be sure that colleagues and managers will be as accommodating as possible when one has special needs and desires based on individual differences in living conditions and personality.
>
> **5. Treating each other as equals**
> At my workplace, we deal with one another as equals independent of which professional group we belong to or which position we occupy.
>
> **6. Ask first**
> At my workplace, we do not judge each other hastily. If someone says something that seems odd or inappropriate, we ask first to find out what is underlying the statement.
>
> **7. Tolerance**
> There is a high degree of tolerance for people's occasional mistakes and errors. Thus, you can admit errors and talk about mistakes without running the risk of being branded as incompetent.
>
> **8. Willingness to change**
> At my workplace, we want our work to be of good quality and to take into account the needs of the surrounding world. For this reason, we have positive attitudes toward reevaluation of and changes in working methods and priorities.

Figure 8.1 Eight components of a problem-solving culture

How does a problem-solving collaboration culture emerge?

It is very difficult to scientifically study and draw evidence-based conclusions about why some workplaces have a problem-solving collaboration culture, while others are characterized by long-standing dissatisfaction and communication difficulties. However, the experiences gained during the past 10 years from more than two hundred workplace

case studies (carried out by my course participants as examination tasks) do provide a good basis for identifying possible explanations related to five areas: problem-solving forums, employeeship, leadership, culture and organization. A workplace may have either favorable or unfavorable fundamental conditions within these five areas, either handed down over time or based on circumstances in the surrounding world, and it is primarily within these areas one should work in the long term to create favorable conditions. Experience shows that workplaces marked by a problem-solving collaboration culture often have established, well-functioning forums for early problem resolution. They also have long-standing strategies for reinforcing employeeship and leadership, work systematically with norms and values as well as have a number of routines and structures that support the organization. These five areas will be discussed in more detail below.

The organization's potential for conflict

If one is serious about wanting to build a robust collaboration culture, one should review the potential there is for conflict at one's workplace. What are the more or less predictable topics around which differences of opinion and collaboration difficulties can develop? One simple way of reviewing this is by starting from the five themes discussed in Chapter 2: issues of distribution, of position, of structure, of behavior and of conviction. Depending on what type of work is being done at the workplace, and largely independent of what particular individuals happen to be playing the various roles there, some potential for conflict will emerge in relation to these themes. If one has a good overview of which themes usually serve as breeding grounds for lasting obstruction of desires, one can also think one step ahead, in this case about how these issues can best be dealt with at the workplace. Some potential conflicts can be prevented completely by establishing clear decisions and principles that everyone is familiar with. Other conflicts cannot be prevented in this way, but one can ensure that there are good ways of dealing with them: well-structured forums for

problem-solving, representatives people can turn to and well-know procedures for problem resolution.

At most workplaces, there are organizational circumstances that help to create potential for conflict: lack of clarity, imbalance between work tasks and resources, inadequate routines and so on. For this reason, making a simple organizational diagnosis – preferably by involving everyone at the workplace – may be a very good investment. A good tool for making such diagnoses can be found in Appendix 3.

Three strategic tasks

One clear point of departure for this book is the notion that workplaces have a natural potential for conflict, which consists of both predictable and unpredictable types of conflict. The conflict escalation model presented in Chapter 3 implies that conflicts often begin as simple obstructed desires regarding specific issues or behaviors and that they begin to escalate when the obstructions (and desires) prove to be stubborn. From such a perspective, the most important task is to ensure that it is easy to solve problems during the early stages, that is, at one of the first three steps on the escalation ladder (dialogue, discussion and rule-governed procedures). If the conditions for early problem solving are good, then the number of difficult conflicts will be reduced. However, regardless of how good the conditions are, it is not possible to completely prevent that sometimes situations arise where the parties are unable to to agree on acceptable solutions through dialogue, discussions or rule-governed procedures. In such cases, it is important that good prerequisites exist for concluding the entire matter through use of power, that is, steamrollering. On occasion, however, not even this will suffice, such as in cases of conflicts farther down on the escalation ladder – Step 4, 5 or perhaps even worse. Thus, the workplace should also have in place plans for managing more difficult conflicts as well.

If one wishes to create a workplace that has a robust collaboration culture, there are three strategic tasks to attend to:

1. *Early problem-solving*: This involves building up the capacity to resolve problems early on, that is, to create a workplace that has low thresholds to dialogue and good approaches to problem-solving, and that is marked by its problem-solving collaboration culture and its clarity regarding delegation and role distribution.

2. *Conclusion by unilateral measures*: This is a matter of creating the prerequisites for concluding the entire matter when the parties are not able to reach an agreement. Being able to use power in a constructive way is often the right approach in such cases.

3. *Preparedness for conflict management*: This refers to having a high level of readiness to turn escalated conflicts around and guide the parties toward more constructive paths. This is primarily accomplished by helping the parties assume responsibility for managing their conflict in a constructive manner.

Building up the capacity for early problem-solving

The simple model shown in Figure 8.2 provides an overview of five areas the organization can work with to develop a high capacity for resolving problems early on. Figure 8.3 provides a more detailed overview of measures and strategies that might be useful within the five areas. In the middle of Figure 8.2, we see *Forums for dialogue and problem-solving*, which is perhaps the most obvious issue to work with. If one makes sure there are forums that are dedicated to bringing up various issues and to solving them, then many conflicts can be prevented early on. As shown in Figure 8.3, there may be a need for different kinds of forums depending on which parties are involved.
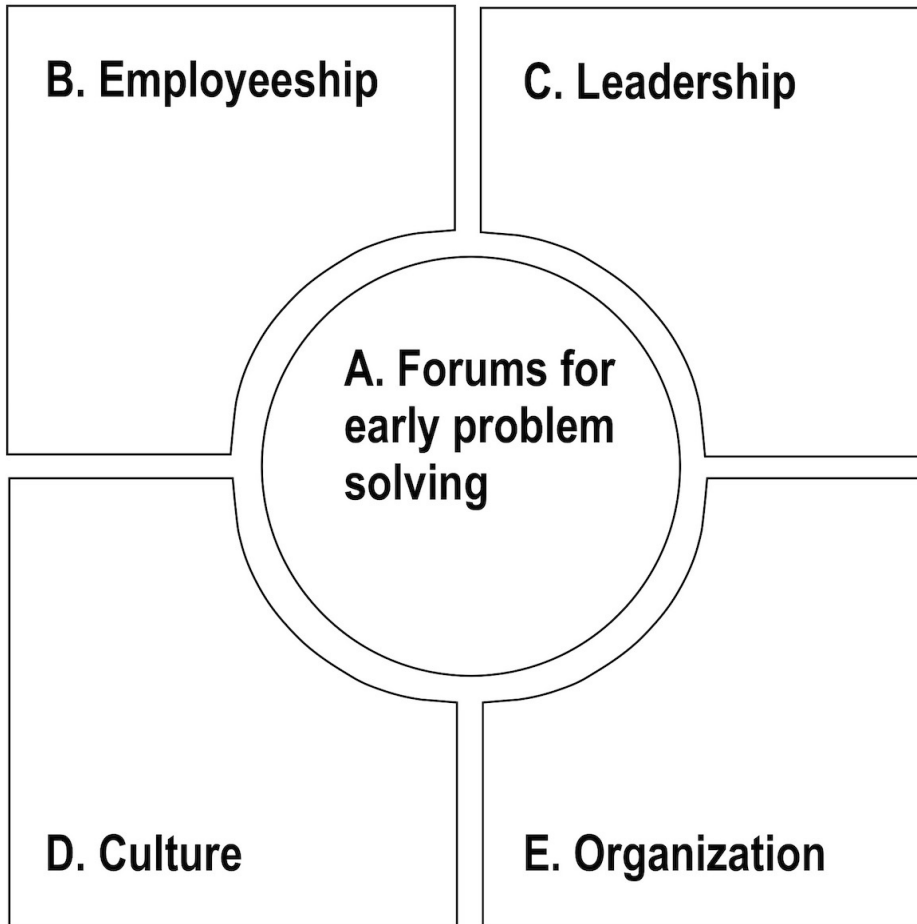
Figure 8.2 Five fields for building up the capacity for early problem-solving

Employeeship refers to working so that each individual employee wants and is able to assume his/her part of the responsibility for resolving any issues that come up. Strategies for promoting good employeeship involve measures that are both supportive and encouraging. Supportive measures concern, among other things, ensuring that each employee has a reasonable work situation, feels respected and receives the training required for achieving good employeeship. The measures meant to provide encouragement concern, among other things, ensuring that each employee receives clear feedback and understands the obligations associated with being part of the organization.

In the present context, *leadership* refers to how the employer works to promote skilled leadership. Leadership development activities are an important strategy here. There are also strong arguments supporting the notion that coaching is a highly cost-efficient method of strengthening leadership. Through coaching – that is, by engaging in reflection with a competent person outside the organization – leaders are given the opportunity to develop in areas they find personally relevant. Leaders must also ensure that they have a reasonable balance between their responsibilities and the resources available to them. Thus, one strategically important measure is to establish a routine for regularly reviewing leaders' work situation. The organization should also look at how they recruit leaders as well as at the signals being given concerning the leadership styles the employer wishes to see.

Culture can be seen has a heading under which is subsumed all the measures and strategies intended to give shape to a problem-solving and constructive collaboration culture at the workplace. It also refers to the existing situation, in the sense of the deeply rooted, perhaps unconscious ways of being that have been established there. Attitudes, norms and values related to collaboration, communication, treatment, responsibility, priorities, etc., emerge and are formed in groups and in the overall organizational culture. They are only influenced to a small degree by what is communicated in written documents or official management rhetoric, but to a great degree by how things actually take place in everyday work practice. Thus, working with a workplace's culture requires getting employees and leaders involved in truly reflective dialogues about behavior, norms and values, and it also requires carefully dealing with problems of translation. Abstract terms or expressions concerning norms and values must be translated into concrete behaviors, situations and courses of events encountered in normal working life. To shape the culture and get it moving in a favorable direction, it may be necessary to create a common language for and common experiences of handling challenging situations. At many workplaces it has been very beneficial to jointly develop cooperation or communication contracts. Such contracts consist of a number of points that

remind everyone of the kinds of attitudes and approaches that facilitate constructive problem-solving.

In the present context, *organization* refers to the routines, guidelines, regulations and procedures that can support early problem solving. Of particular importance here is having established routines for conducting regular reviews of how well operations are functioning. This can be tied to the systematic work environment measures that every workplace should be taking. Clarity regarding where one should turn with questions, how decisions are made, what rules apply, allocation of responsibilities, etc., helps in preventing doubt, misunderstanding and friction. Having definite plans of action for experienced abusive behavior, sexual harassment or discrimination can help greatly in dealing at an early stage with situations that have considerable potential to escalate.

The collection of examples of strategies and measures found in Figure 8.3 (Examples of tools for promoting a robust collaboration culture) can be used as a "menu" – that is, as a rough list from which one can select a few strategic measures one feels could be of great benefit in increasing the robustness of the workplace's collaboration culture. It is well suited for use as inspirational material in the final phases of a conflict intervention, when sights can be set beyond the pressing conflict issues and on determining how one can create favorable conditions for the future.

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nination, etc.

1) Forums for dialogue and early problem-solving
- Coffee breaks and other informal opportunities to meet, talk and resolve problems
- "Open-door" policy: Managers have the responsibility to listen to employees when problems arise
- Workplace meetings set up so that differences of opinion and feelings of irritation can be brought up and solutions sought in a constructive manner.
- Morning or weekly meetings taking a retrospective look at what has happened (e.g., discussion of the week's plusses and minuses) and planning for the next period.
- Focus meetings: Short weekly problem-solving meetings
- Development talks/employee talks
- Group supervision
- Coordination meetings for managers from different fields of activity
- "Management on foot": The manager walks around and talks with everyone once a week
- Train managers in running creative meetings
- Let employees play the role of meeting observers and provide feedback
- Routines for evaluating meetings

2) Employeeship
- Methods for receiving regular individual feedback from one's manager and colleagues
- Well-functioning employee talks for identifying and rectifying unsatisfactory situations and areas that need development (possibly including a competence development plan)
- Clear statements concerning what obligations and expectations accompany employment
- Regular continuing education in conflict management, communication, personality psychology, leadership, employeeship, etc.

3) Leadership
- Access to supervision
- Continuing education prog... constructive communicatio... insight
- Autonomous discussion gr...
- Routines for reviewing ma...
- Leadership policies descri... leadership role in collabora... (e.g., an "open-door" polic)

4) Culture
- Yearly action plan for deve... environment
- Group supervision (e.g., p... methods) and team-buildin...
- Joint continuing employee studies, communication fo...
- Recurring work group disc... at the workplace
- Activities to promote good

5) Organization: principles
- Routines for recurring ope...
- Regulation of roles, respor...
- Guidelines and procedures
- Written policy on basic val... management of disputes a...
- Routines for framing and fi... identities and strategies, e... business and operational p...
- Actions plans for dealing w... sexual harassment, discrin...

Figure 8.3 Examples of measures to promote a good capacity for early problem-solving

Conclusion of conflicts through unilateral decisions

There are many examples of conflicts that have become unnecessarily protracted and destructive, both for the involved parties and for the

organization. At times such conflicts cannot be resolved through mutual understanding. In such cases, it is better for everyone involved if management intervenes and exercises its power to end the conflict.

This method, here called steamrollering, entails that at least one party will be dissatisfied with how the situation was handled, which is not a pleasant situation. On the whole, however, it is often good to make sure that a conflict has a clear conclusion. Yet the prerequisites for using power in a constructive manner are not always good. It may be unclear who actually has the authority to force an end to the conflict, how the decision-making process should proceed, what sanctions can be placed on individuals who refuse to accept the decision, etc. Thus, it is important that leaders establish clear rules for delegation and decision-making, that company officials are well aware of what rules apply, and that there is support available, for example from HR specialists, if difficult situations arise. The psychological aspect is also important: Leaders may need to reflect on their views on use of power, and they may need to practice carrying out skillful steamrollering (see Chapter 7).

Experience reveals the reciprocal relation that exists between the prerequisites for being able to pursue a dialogue and the prerequisites for being able to use power to put an end to the issues underlying a conflict. If the power relations are clear, then the parties know there is nothing to be gained by protracting an issue, refusing to talk to others or hoping that the other party will tire of the situation. The risk of losing the opportunities they have to influence how the issues are dealt with is too great. Thus, having clear power relations may be beneficial in making dialogues and constructive negotiations happen.

Preparedness for conflict management

Regardless of how hard one has tried to create favorable conditions for early problem-solving and for ending conflicts in a orderly fashion,

conflicts will occasionally occur that are so difficult to resolve they become protracted and have consequences that harm both the parties involved and the organization. For this reason, it is also important to ensure that there is good preparedness for detecting such conflicts and guiding them along paths that are as constructive as possible. Organizations should consider what they could do to help employees and leaders who have been drawn into a conflict deal with the situation in a constructive manner. In this connection, there are three strategic tasks to be done: Review the workplace's signal systems, offer the parties to the conflict various sources of support they can use in conflict situations and provide easily accessible information on what kinds of assistance they can receive in difficult situations (see the examples in Figure 8.4)

Signal systems	Support functions	Information
• Designated contacts who will require attention be paid to collaboration difficulties • Routines ensuring that recurring frictions are identified early, that solutions are developed and that lessons are learned • Regular work environment investigations • Regular "health check-ups" for the organization, e.g., through diagnosis of the organization's potential for conflict • Use of development talks as an instrument in conflict prevention • Exit interviews or surveys (when an employee quits) • Ongoing follow-up, reporting and evaluation of conflict-related incidents	• Employees and managers are offered easily accessible internal or external conflict coaching carried out by a competent person who can offer advice, coaching and process management • Procedures employees can use when more difficult problems arise: informal probes into the problem, mediation, peer review panel/hearing • Cooperation in problem resolution between union representatives/safety officers and the employer, e.g., the work environment group • Contracts with external organizational consultants/occupational health service professionals who are qualified to work with highly escalated conflicts.	• A regularly updated employee manual • Internal website with information on what support the organization can offer in cases of collaboration problems and conflicts • Routines for introducing new employees to the organization • Clarity concerning responsibility for information

Figure 8.4 Examples of measures to promote preparedness for conflict management

Signal systems

It may be important to look at how conflicts can easily be made visible at the workplace. Employees must know how they can send signals indicating that a difficult conflict is emerging to someone who will take these signals seriously and take the initiative to changing the course of the conflict in a more constructive direction. For example, there could be clear instructions telling employees to turn to their safety officer or ombudsperson, who will then bring the issue to the attention of the work environment committee or the personnel manager. One ought also to consider whether a signal system should be in place that helps management and personnel specialists see budding conflicts very early on. This could involve having carefully prepared formats for employee surveys, following up on unusually high sickness absence rates, complaints and high employee turnover as well as systematically using exit interviews to capture any signals of collaboration problems or serious conflicts.

Support functions

One natural and central measure is to ensure that employees and leaders who find themselves in difficult conflicts can seek support from different sources: their union representative, safety officer, personnel specialist, occupational health services, etc. In such cases, it is also important to ensure that employees and leaders have a good understanding of what kinds of support are available and of what happens when one takes advantage of them. This applies in particular to sources of support that one seldom has contact with, e.g., behaviorists at one's occupational health services, work environment representatives, external personnel support (hotlines) and anti-discrimination representatives.

During recent decades, it has become increasingly common in the US, Canada and Germany for large companies and public administrations to

offer conflict coaching and mediation in the event of a conflict (see, e.g., Costantino 2009; Costantino & Merchant 1996; Faller 2014; Lipsky et al. 2003; Stipanovic & Lamare 2013). This means involving either internal, trained resource people (ombudspersons) who can mediate or contracted external mediators. One advantage of such an approach it that is it easy to explain and understand what mediation entails: It is a clearly demarcated method.

Information

Most employees do not prepare themselves for possible future conflicts by finding out what support resources their employer offers. It is only after the situation is acute that this kind of information becomes relevant. Because many conflicts cause considerable stress, there is a great risk that parties to the conflict will become very occupied with the immediate, acute events and thereby have limited ability to think strategically. In such cases, it essential that the relevant information needed in a conflict situation – e.g., to whom one can turn for support – be very easy to find. Larger workplaces typically have an internal website, which is a natural place to search for information. If this channel of information does not work well, it is important that the information exist in a place one would expect it to, for example in an employee manual, in a folder on the unit's bulletin board, available from a safety officer or from the personnel department (if one exists).

The RoCo model

Figure 8.5 provides an overview – in the form of the RoCo model – of ten areas for measures and strategies that can, in various ways, help in building up a robust collaboration culture. In addition to the nine areas described in the previous sections, it should also be pointed out that it may be important

to ensure that responsibility for the organization's strategy for creating and maintaining a robust collaboration culture has been clearly delegated. Appendix 5 contains a form that can be used as a worksheet during organizational development work on a unit or in the organization as a whole.
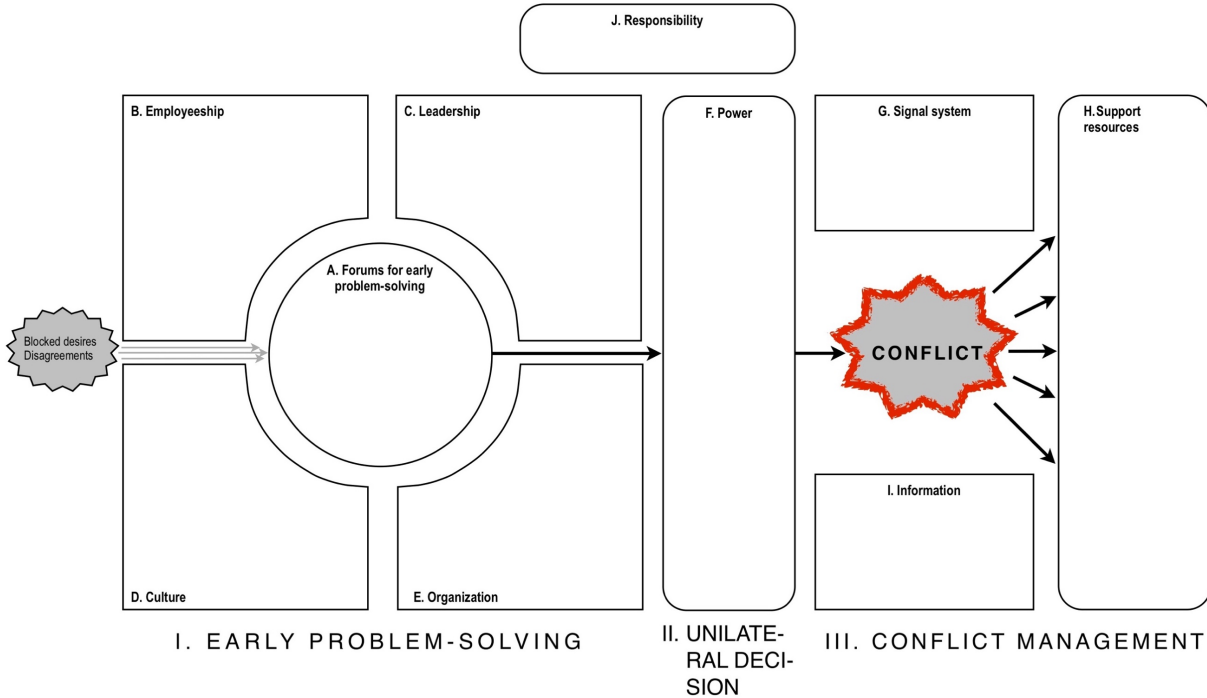

Figure 8.5 Strategies for a robust collaboration culture (the RoCo model)

Appendices

The worksheets in appendices 1-5 are available for download here:

thomasjordan.se/worksheets

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https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Thomas_Jordan2

The original Swedish edition of the present book was selected *HR book of the Year* in 2015 by the Swedish Association of HRM.

[1] It may also be meaningful to discuss conflicts that are suppressed or latent, in the sense that the last component – taking action – is absent because the other party has such a strong advantage that attempting to act could be harmful.

[2] Also see the section on the intervention matrix in Chapter 7.

[3] The present text is partly based on the work of Friberg (1990), among others.

[4] As far as I understand it, the ABC model was first published in Galtung (1969), which had limited circulation.

[5] Structure, behavioral norms and conviction conflicts are three different types of *order conflicts*; they all concern what order of things should prevail between people and within an organization.

[6] See the worksheet in Appendix 1.

[7] I gratefully acknowledge the detailed comments made by Friedrich Glasl on this chapter.

[8] In Glasl's model there is no Step 0, which has been added to show the entire spectrum of problemsolving approaches.

[9] This theme is developed in more depth in Chapter 7, in the section covering the four principal approaches to conflict management.

[10] The German communications scholar Friedemann Schulz von Thun's four-ears model offers a pedagogically ingenious way of elucidating how we listen and what we take note of.

[11] See Jordan & Lundin, 2002 for a research study on differences in how adults perceive, interpret and handle workplace conflict.

[12] The perspective presented in this chapter builds partly on modern treatments of Eastern and Western wisdom traditions as well as psychodynamic psychology (see, e.g., Assagioli, 1975; Chagdud, 1993; Cook-Greuter, 1994; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Rogers, 1967; Wilber, 1979, 1980, 1997; Rosenberg, 1999), and partly on my own research, as reported in Jordan & Lundin 2002.

[13] The self-awareness mandala is a simplified version of the conflict mandala presented in Jordan & Lundin (2002).

[14] The text is based on material from the following books: Bolton (1987), Mennonite Conciliation Service (1995), Glasl (1999), Rosenberg (1999), Stone, Patton & Heen (1999) and Frey (2000).

[15] See, e.g., Bolton (1987), Gordon (1970), LeCompte (2000), Rivers (2000), Rosenberg (1999). Gordon and Bolton use three parts, Rosenberg and Le Compte four, and Rivers five.

[16] This section closely follows the presentation found in Stone, Patton & Heen (1999) – a book I recommend highly. It also contains many well-chosen real-life examples.

[17] As long as the involved parties choose to accept the decisions made – even if they do not like them – the measure is counted as a principle-based approach. The power-based approach is in use when one or more parties are forced to submit to a certain outcome against their will. The difference is not always quite clear.

[18] See, e.g. Bush & Folger, 1994; Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008; Ford, 2014.

[19] Naturally, it is also possible (if necessary) to work with "virtual rooms," i.e., a video conference or the like.

[20] This overview of the five phases of group mediation is based on German literature on conflict management techniques. See for example Ballreich & Glasl, 2011; Glasl, 2013; Huber, 2014; Knapp, 2012, 2013; Oboth & Seils, 2008; Redlich, 2009; Thomann, 2002; Thomann & Prior, 2007; Vopel, 2002; and Weckert et al., 2011.

[21] Most of these guidelines are based on research on procedural justice, e.g. Gleason & Roberts, 1977.

[22] Adapted from Myrna Lewis's version of Deep Democracy; see her book *Inside the No* (Lewis, 2008).

Conflict management in the workplace

Understand, navigate, prevent

Thomas Jordan, Ph.D.

Perspectus Kommunikation