

In conflict, people are in one of two modes: moving away from something or moving toward something. Conflict leads to stress, a freeze, flight, or fight reaction, or a very strong tendency to jump in and solve a problem.

We take our first very important step toward resolution when we stop reacting, talking, and solving, and start understanding, because solving a surface problem is not necessarily the right approach to resolving conflict.

A far better approach, depending on circumstances, is to find out what is motivating others or causing them to have a different perspective from your own. Communicating (asking, listening, talking) plays a significant role in moving toward understanding. Dealing with conflict requires curiosity, effective communication skills, and vision (the ability to see things as they could be) and can lead to positive results.

Communicating to Really Listen

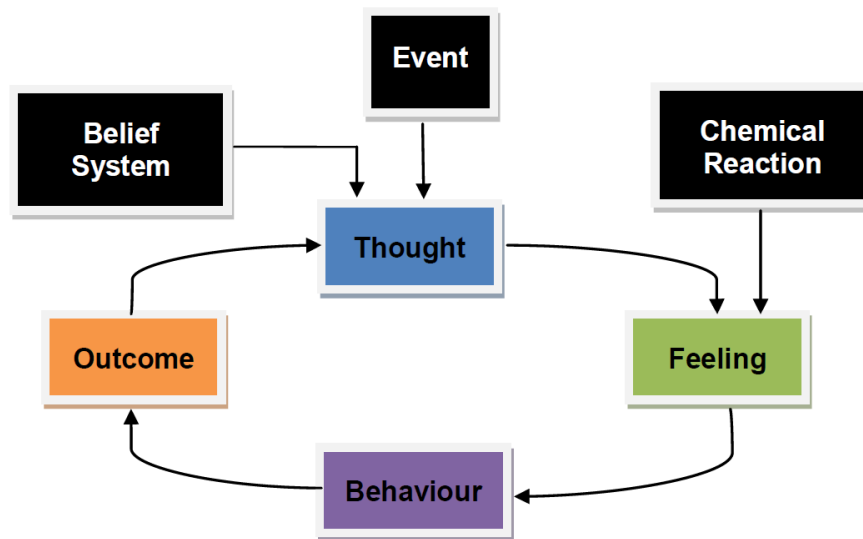
Take the first step toward curiosity, effective communication, and the ability to see things as they could be through another perspective. It is not uncommon that, in order to make decisions, we find ourselves filling in the gaps by making assumptions about individuals or situations. Particularly in situations where there are time constraints or it is not practical or possible to access more complete information, we proceed with what we believe to be true.

What we believe to be true is too often based on assumptions. Sometimes assuming or filling in the gaps proves successful and our perceptions, assumptions, and hunches are confirmed as correct and, therefore, helpful. Other times, however, we discover that we have assumed incorrectly, and we then risk acting upon the wrong information and making inappropriate decisions. Depending on the level of negative impact of the resulting circumstances, we may find ourselves immersed in a conflict or supporting decisions that will not, in the long run, be of benefit.



Cognitive Behaviour Model

Shad Helmstetter, Ph.D.¹ posits that it is our programming from the time of our birth that sets our beliefs. In logical progression, what we believe determines our attitudes, our attitude affects our feelings, our feelings direct our behaviour, and our behaviour (reaction or response) determines our success or failure (consequences or outcome) and all is indicative of how we process conflict.



The Ladder of Inference

Have you ever been accused of *putting 2 and 2 together and getting 5*, meaning that the other person thinks you have jumped to the wrong conclusion? In the Ladder of Inference², the process of paying attention to certain data and experiences because we are familiar with them, then attributing meaning to those data and experiences, developing assumptions, and coming to conclusions are steps in what is known as the Ladder of Inference.

Starting at the bottom of the ladder, there is a person's reality and facts. From there a person

- Experiences these selectively based on beliefs and prior experience.
- Interpret what they mean.
- Apply existing assumptions, sometimes without considering them.
- Draw conclusions based on the interpreted facts and assumptions.
- Develop beliefs based on these conclusions.
- Take action(s) that seems "right" because they are based on what is believed.

¹ Helmstetter, PhD. Shad. (1982) *What to Say When you Talk to Yourself*. Simon & Shuster Inc. New York.

² Senge, P.M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R.B., Smith, B.J., (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. Doubleday. New York.

This can create a vicious circle as a person's beliefs have a big effect on how a person selects from reality, and can lead one to ignore the true facts altogether. Soon a person is literally jumping to conclusions – by missing facts and skipping steps in the reasoning process.

Asking the following may prove a useful aid:

- Is this the "right" conclusion?
- Why am I making these assumptions?
- Why do I think this is the "right" thing to do?
- Is this really based on all the facts?
- Why does he/she believe that?



COMPONENTS OF GOOD LISTENING

Improving the ability to listen, can be managed by following the following:

- ✓ Give full attention to the speaker: be open-eared and open-minded.
- ✓ Put other thoughts temporarily aside in order to focus on what is being said.
- ✓ Resist distractions by periodically summarizing, in your head, what has been said.
- ✓ Listen to more than just the words: tune in to the feelings behind them.
- ✓ Observe and give non-verbal signals which indicate attention and interest.



ATTENDING SKILLS

As an active listener, it is important to let the speaker know you are paying attention and interested in what is being said. This information is conveyed through your body language and your behaviour within the physical setting



Posture

- facing the speaker squarely
- inclining one's body toward the speaker
- maintaining an open posture
- positioning yourself at an appropriate distance, respecting personal space

Body Motion

- moving slightly
- blinking regularly to indicate alertness

Eye Contact

- looking at the speaker to indicate interest and a genuine desire to listen
- shifting gaze away occasionally so as to not be perceived as staring
- being aware of cultural differences which may limit or alter type of eye contact

Environment

- giving the speaker your undivided attention
- avoiding distractions (phones, visitors)
- eliminating physical barriers when possible



QUESTIONING SKILLS

Questioning may be used to encourage conversation, gather or expand information, eliminate confusion, and clarify or deepen understanding. There are two types of questions, closed-ended and open-ended, each of which is appropriate in certain circumstances.



Closed-ended Questions

Close-ended questions limit responses to “yes,” “no,” or “maybe”; they most often begin with words such as “can”, “do”, “was”, and “are”. While closed questions can be used to clarify a point when no further information is required or desired, they are restrictive and provide little information. In fact, closed questions are often leading or entrapping, taking the discussion in a particular direction determined by the questioner, as opposed to allowing the responder to explore his or her feelings.

For instance:

Are you clear about the direction I gave you?

Did you hear me?

Can you give me that report?

Don't you agree that we have a problem?

Closed-ended questions are most useful in situations where very specific information is required, when simple clarification is needed, or where there can be no discussion such as in emergencies.

Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions cannot be answered with “yes,” “no,” or “maybe”; they begin with words such as “how”, “what”, “where”, “when”, [“why”] which enables the individual to answer however he or she chooses and to provide much more information than if limited to a yes, no, or maybe response. Open questions can be used to gather information because they are broad in nature and tend to reduce defensiveness by being non-judgemental or not blaming. Therefore, open questions encourage the speaker to elaborate: to provide more information based on his or her own needs. Open questions are an also effective means of getting all the information needed for understanding.

For instance:

What is it about this policy that's a problem for you?

When you say 'it's obvious', what you mean by that?

What concerns you about the new plan?

If it was up to you, how would you handle this?

Where do you think would be the best place to begin?

Why are you thinking this will be challenging?

Open-ended questions may be used to elicit new or expand existing information, or to probe deeper to uncover concerns and interests.

Clarifying Questions

Clarifying questions can be open and closed, but because their purpose is to confirm information and meanings, or understand perceptions, it makes most sense for them to be open-ended.

For Instance:

When you say . . . what do you mean?

How can that cause difficulty for the staff?

What led you to make that assumption?

What led you to believe that?

Probing Questions

A probe is usually an open-ended question or request for more information that follows a statement made by another person, often in response to an earlier question or paraphrase you have voiced. To be relevant and continue the progression, a probe is typically hinged on a word or phrase mentioned in the person's statement. A probe is intended to encourage the speaker to reflect on the statement just made and to expand, clarify, re-examine, or explain further. As mentioned previously, probing is an effective tool for uncovering a deeper level of motivating interests than what has appeared initially in earlier discussion. Probing helps assure that both of you are as clear as possible about what information is being disclosed and what the speaker intended to convey in his or her statement.

Probing questions invite further comment, encourage more detail, and seek information at a deeper level, thereby increasing understanding.

To expand

What more can you tell me about that? What else? Say more about that
Tell me more about
What else about would you like me to know?
What more would you care to say about?

To clarify

What might be an example of that?
What does "safe" mean to you? or Please tell me what safe means to you.
In what way? You were You mentioned
How does that relate to this topic? Or Share how relates to this topic.

To re-examine

How does this (example given) apply in this situation?
What is it about that idea that you like?
Why do you think that the team responded so negatively to that proposal?
You said it was a negative response. Please share more about the message you received.
How could you make what you just said easier for me to hear?

To explain

In what way does that apply here?
What do those have in common?
What impact are you experiencing?
How does that affect what is happening?

To hinge: The following are some examples of probing for more information hinging on words or phrases previously expressed

You've said respect a few times. What does that mean/look like to you?
Respect. Tell me what that means/looks like.
You mentioned fairness. Share what fairness means to you.
A walk in the park. Please give me more information about what that entails.



REFLECTING SKILLS

A critical part of listening actively involves reflecting back to the speaker what the listener has heard or seen in terms of body language and behaviour related to content, feelings, or both. The purpose of reflecting is to confirm understanding between the individuals. There are four kinds of reflecting skills: paraphrasing to reflect content, reflecting feelings to acknowledge emotion, empathizing to connect content and feeling, and summarizing to confirm and cement the understanding.



Paraphrase Content

To paraphrase, the listener restates, in his or her own words, the content of the speaker's message. The paraphrase should be concise but still contain the essence of the message. A paraphrase enables the listener to confirm what he or she has understood the sender or speaker to say. This provides the speaker with confirmation of being heard and an opportunity to correct any miscommunication. When paraphrasing, it is important for the listener to be as accurate as possible and resist any temptation to

- augment by adding information,
- diminish by eliminating essential content, or
- editorialize by adding personal opinion.

To introduce a paraphrase, try using statements like these:

Tell me if I have it straight so far . . .

So what you're saying is . . .

If I understand correctly, this is what you're telling me . . .

Do I understand you to say . . .

What I hear you saying is . . .

While you want to be accurate when you paraphrase, it isn't disastrous when you don't get the message exactly right, because you have shown your genuine attempt to understand and this gives the sender of the message the opportunity to clarify. In many instances the sender will correct you if you get it wrong.

Empathizing Skills

When applying empathizing skills, listeners use their own words to reflect both the content and the feeling they understand from the speaker's message. An empathic statement is the tool that links the feeling and the content to clarify the connection for both the listener and the speaker.

The common formula for an empathic response is ...

"You feel (emotion), because (the experience or behaviour that give rise to the feelings)."

For Example:

You feel hurt because she left without calling you (experience)

You feel annoyed with yourself because you didn't do anything about it (behaviour)

You feel guilty because she put her pride aside and asked you directly for help and you didn't even answer her (experience and behaviour)

Expressing empathy does not mean that the listener agrees with the speaker, or has shared a similar experience and knows what it feels like, but rather that he or she understands the situation from the speaker's perspective. It is often described as walking in someone's shoes or seeing through someone else's eyes.

Reflecting Feelings

When reflecting feelings, the listener mirrors back to the speaker the emotions being perceived, both verbally and non-verbally. To be most effective, the emotions should be described with feeling words that match the intensity of the emotion being demonstrated. If well done, reflecting feelings can have a calming effect on the speaker.

Feelings and emotions can be identified in a variety of ways.

i. By single words:

I feel good; depressed; abandoned; humiliated; trapped; angry.

ii. By descriptive phrases:

I'm sitting on top of the world; I feel down in the dumps; I feel left in the lurch; My back's up against the wall; I'm really steaming.

iii. By what is implied in a behavioural statement; for instance, what action I feel like taking.

I feel like giving up (implied emotion: despair); I feel like hugging you (implied emotion: joy); I feel like smashing him in the face (implied emotion: intense anger); Now that it's over, I feel like dancing in the streets (implied emotion: relief)

iv. By what is implied in experiences that are revealed:

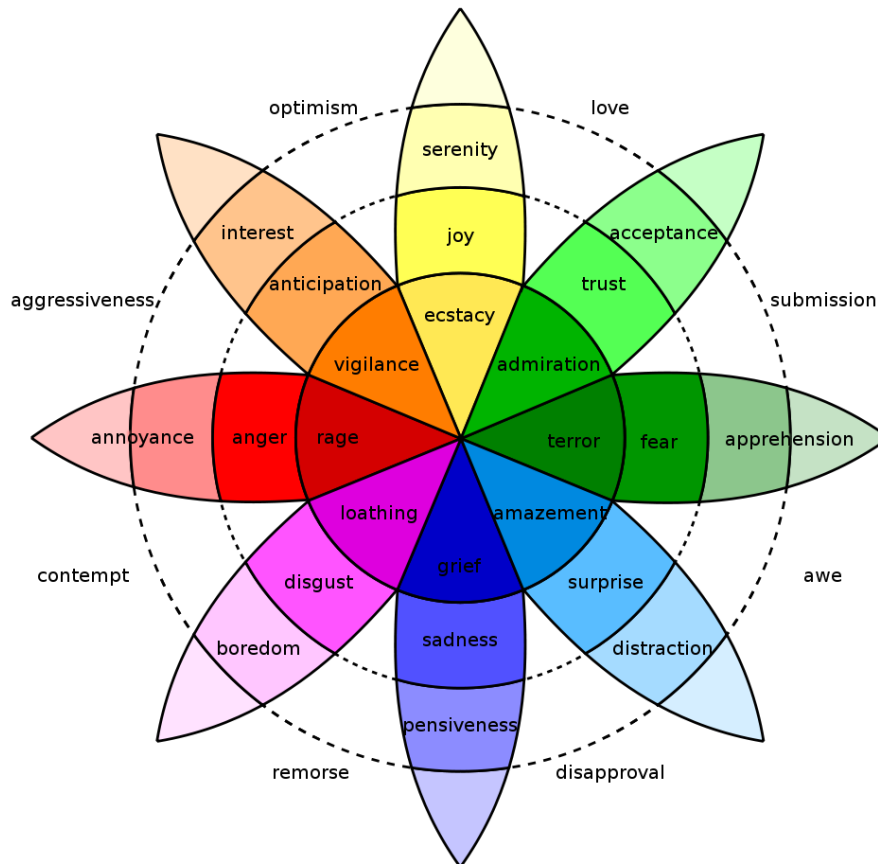
I feel I'm being dumped on (implied emotion: anger); I feel I'm being stereotyped (implied emotion: resentment); I feel I'm first on her list (implied emotion: joy)

v. By what is felt as a consequence of something:

I feel angry because I'm being dumped on; I resent the fact that I'm being stereotyped; I feel great because I believe I'm first on her list; I feel apprehensive because I think I'm going to get it this time.

Because in the pressure of the moment such as when we are reflecting back to a speaker in the middle of a heated negotiation or mediation, it's easy to forget the simplest things, you might find the following Wheel of Emotions developed by Robert Plutchik³ in 1980 which depicts the eight basic/primary emotions together with their secondary and tertiary emotion.

WHEEL OF EMOTIONS



Summarizing Skills

To summarize, the listener provides a brief restatement of the main themes and feelings the speaker has expressed over a longer period of conversation. This provides an opportunity for both the speaker and the listener to confirm accuracy, to make sure nothing important has been overlooked, and to create a sense of forward movement in the discussion.

For Example:

So let's recap. These seem to be the key ideas you've expressed to this point

Reframing Skills

People often indicate what they want by stating what they don't want. As a result they tend to use negative, attributive, and oppositional language to describe their experiences or thoughts. These language patterns and positioning strategies keep them focused on the problem, often in a blaming or judgemental frame of mind, and unable to move forward. By contrast, reframing is a skill that focuses on positive outcomes, the desired results of a person's interests defined in terms of what they would like to see happen, the way they want to feel and what they would want to be doing. By focusing on outcomes instead of problems, you create a positive direction towards which to work.

Reframing is an Active Listening skill that involves restating someone's words in a way that refocuses the statement from negative to positive. It identifies what is not wanted (underlying concern or fear - feeling) and replaces it with what is wanted (unmet need). For instance, it takes a fear or worry (negative) and turns it into a need or hope (positive).

It is best expressed using interest language: changing concerns and fears into hopes, values, beliefs, and needs. For instance, a reframe may begin with the following phrases:

- *So you value*
- *Your priority then is*
- *What you hope for is*
- *What matters to you is*

Reframing also has the effect of moving the focus from the past to the future: what was a negative thought, feeling, or experience in the past becomes something positive to look forward to or strive for in the future. Reframing may be done as a stand-alone comment or may immediately follow a paraphrase or empathic statement.

So, if the person with whom you are interacting is exhibiting a high level of emotion, you may first need to empathize to reassure them that you understand what they are saying and feeling. Similarly, if the individual seems worried that he or she is not being understood correctly, or you are unsure of whether you understand correctly, you may need to paraphrase first to clarify what you understand as his or her perspective.

Once this reassurance or clarification has happened, he or she will then be able to listen to what you are saying in your reframe.

For Example:

Statement

I hate it when you drive so fast! I think you're being totally irresponsible! I'm sure we're going to have an accident!

(underlying concern/fear – dangerous driving)

Reframe

Sounds like you really need to feel safe when we're driving together.

(unmet need – personal safety)

Statement

I think it's terrible the way the cars roar down this street all the time! Those drivers just don't stop to think about how dangerous it is for everyone who lives here, especially the kids.

(underlying concern/fear – traffic danger)

Reframe

You're very concerned about all the traffic going by *(empathic statement)*. The safety of your neighbourhood, especially the neighbourhood children, is a high priority for you! *(reframe)*

(unmet need – safe neighbourhood)



ENCOURAGING SKILLS

Encouraging skills are those which invite the other person to engage in a dialogue. They are often verbal, though minimal, and let the speaker know that you are prepared to listen to his or her comments.



The experience of being understood versus interpreted is so compelling you can charge admission

Joseph Pine