

Beyond Conflict to Consensus: An Introductory Learning Manual

by Bob Chadwick

If you have the desire or the intent to confront and resolve conflict, this manual can help teach you the skills. Every technique or question in here has purpose. In trying to understand the purpose, you will better understand conflict in human nature.

The talking circle is the centerpiece of the consensus process because it encourages respectful listening. If you can only adopt one thing from this manual, adopt the talking circle.

Bob Chadwick is nationally recognized for his special abilities in bringing differing groups together to communicate and develop common solutions. He has pioneered the development of consensus-building that fosters creative solutions to old conflicts.

With 29 years experience as a manager, executive, and internal organizational development consultant with the Forest Service, and 8 years as a private consultant, Bob has a proven ability to help groups in mission development, organizational change, team building, and labor negotiations.

Bob has recently been working with the community of Rochester, Minnesota, where he has brought the community together to address the issue of civility.

He has developed skills and techniques that are easily learned and are directly applicable to any management decision or conflict situation. The consensus format outlined in his learning manuals creates the opportunity for the stakeholders to learn how to seek consensus while resolving conflict.

Bob creates an environment of listening with respect, in which the participants develop a belief that consensus is possible. They are willing to take the risks to make it happen.

Jeff Goebel

Copyright information

It is a matter of personal belief that information, in any form, should be freely shared. Much of what I know I learned from my personal experiences, and from others. Each group I have worked with has taught me something that has made me more effective in creating consensus.

I often refer to myself as a storyteller, one of those individuals who traveled between villages, carrying the tales learned along the way. I see much in this book that represents the story I am learning along the way.

I learn from my family, my education, my religion, from books written by insightful people. These form a basis, and add a richness to the meaning of my life experiences.

It is my hope this written information will become part of your life experience. I hope you can personalize it. Where this information is needed for your use with others, I encourage you to copy it, to make it available to them. If you can express it better, in your way, do so. Re-write it to say what you want.

If you do copy this information, do it with purpose. The unconscious mass copying just so someone has the paper information does little good. That is my only request of you. Whatever you do with this material, do it with purpose.

A Gathering of People

They enter the room cautiously, singly, in pairs, or small groups. Some exclaim, in a loud whisper, "Oh, no!" Each appears startled by the sight of a circle of chairs, with no tables. They see four easels placed around the outer edge of the circle.

They check the door anxiously to assure they are in the right location. Some go back outside the room, and I wonder if they will return. They do, cautiously, like some wild deer entering a clearing from the forest.

Those that enter will cluster together, seeking out people they know, even if recently. If in conflict, they avoid those in conflict with them, dividing the room into two or more groups of protagonists. The severity of the conflict determines the distance between them. They look around nervously, seeking out the instructor/facilitator.



I am busily hanging visual charts, simple statements written on easel paper for the session. In some ways I am just as nervous as they are, wondering: How will this go? Why am I doing this?, I could fail, Will I be adequate? I sense and react to the nervousness, uncertainty, and apprehension that fills the room.

At the same time I observe those who enter. I normally seek out one, preferably a woman (for balance), to help facilitate the group with the first activity. If it is a conflict group and I have interviewed the participants, then I have some idea who I want. If it is a training group, then I choose someone who looks likely.

They head straight for the coffee bar, wanting something to do with their hands, occupying themselves. They make chance acquaintances as they do, greeting each other, inquiring as to name, location, position.

One or two brave souls will enter the circle, choosing a chair that gives them a view out the window, or that is near the door. They place their jackets on the back of the chair, their briefcase or purse under the chair. If they move to the coffee bar, they place other ownership artifacts on their chair, signaling that this is their territory. Others roam around the circle, close but not too close.

In the minds of many are fears of a "touchy-feely session." Fears of a "spill your guts," or "tell it all session." The circle of chairs reminds them of previous involvement in "encounter groups," a recollection from the '60s and '70s.

When I signal a time to start, there is no rush. All appear to be waiting to see if anyone will move to the circle. When some do, others move in a herd fashion, following the leaders. There are some who wait until the last moment. They get another refill on coffee, letting the group decide which chair will be open for them.

The consensus community

There are two kinds of groups that I work with. Most groups are in a conflict common to them all, seeking some resolution. They bring a diversity of viewpoints with them. The participants generally know each other, at least by hearsay, or reputation. They have deep and strong emotional feelings about each other and the conflict event. They have grouped-up and know who their enemies and friends are.

Other groups attend workshops to learn the skills for seeking consensus. The participants can be from around the country, strangers to all but a few in the room. They have little emotional attachment to each other, and are not aware of their common conflicts. They are strangers, wondering who their friends or enemies are. My challenge is to create some emotional attachment to common issues so they can learn in a significant way.

The conflict and training groups vary from 8 to 50 participants, averaging around 30. The process is also successful with groups of 300 to 400 participants interested in creating, or accepting, a common mission.

While the emotional intensity may differ in these different circumstances, the beliefs, the behaviors, process and the art for building consensus remains essentially the same. The techniques for working with the larger groups will be addressed in each section of the book.

I refer to each of these groups as a "community of interest." They may not live in the same physical area, but they are brought together by a common issue, or need, or conflict. It is this conflict that creates their need to act as a community. They meet in a common location to confront and resolve their issues. This will be their communal "sense of place."

Each person in the community of interest will be affected by the resolution of the conflict. When the conflict is confronted and resolved, the lessons learned, they leave, often to different locations, but knowing their individual concerns have been met.

Meeting styles

Auditorium meeting:

The auditorium style has rows of chairs facing a head table, a podium, or a dais. It is an arrangement for identifying and separating those in control (power) from those who are controlled (powerless). Once seated, each person has a space, a place, a territory that remains fixed until the session is over. Each person has a chair, facing to the front, with a view of peoples' heads in front, and the profiles of those sitting next to her.

There are normally more chairs in the audience than there is audience. The room fills from the back to the front. The front rows of chairs are sparsely filled, though people may be standing in the back. From the front, the podium, it looks like the crowd is not all there yet. There is a sense of being unfinished, or avoidance. One has the feeling that the audience is uncomfortable with proximity to, or contact with, the power person.

The arrangement encourages this relationship, providing the option of using distance to reduce the impact of the speaker. Those in front get the full impact of the speaker. Those in the back can be more hidden, more impersonal, less engaged with the speaker.

The audience is rarely expected to say anything. They are there to listen to the exhortations of those in the front of the room. The communication is one-way, from the speaker to the audience. The assumption is that all are listening intently, with a willingness to be influenced by the speaker. It is assumed that all hear the same message, and are equally moved, changed, affected by it.

Interaction between people can occur in hushed whispers with those seated next to them. Deeper contact and communication occurs in quick and ritualistic sound bites at the coffee bar during the breaks, or in the rest rooms.

Often, each person has a name tag glued to their lapel, designating who they are, their position and their organizational place. As they meet one another, they peer downward quickly, furtively, to try to recognize the name. They may promptly forget the name when they end the contact.

The name tag is for recognition, a reminder of who they are. It is a reminder they are from the same group. It is a link that binds them together. When they remove the name tags, their identity often leaves with it. It is ephemeral.

This is the pattern we learned in school, in places of worship, in community meetings, political rallies. It is a "teacher tell--student listens" arrangement. The person in the front of the room speaks, providing the message and direction. The audience listens and to bring the message back to others in their environment.

The participants sit together in like groups (birds of a feather flock together). They are seeking the security of the known. The "good old boys" sit near the rear, the opponents sit on opposite sides, the elders sit together. The administrators sit in the rear, trying to be inconspicuous, and being conspicuous as a result.

The angry ones are in the front, their arms folded, their faces set and grim. The loungers lean against the wall in the rear of the room, speaking in hushed whispers.

Each group receives and digests the information in ways that meet the group's needs. Each group receives a different message. Each group sends a different message.

This style of meeting is appropriate when there are many people to be involved in the transfer of information. It is most effective when the relationships are good, and those attending feel like a community with common purpose. It is most effective when transferring information that is needed by the whole group.

It is not appropriate when there are deep conflicts between, or within groups, when problems must be resolved by the whole group. It is not effective when making major changes that will cause emotional impacts on the people in the audience. Even with the chance to respond, the environment is too controlled and limiting to create open dialogue.

Organizational meetings:

Another arrangement is the typical organizational meeting, with tables set up in rectangular fashion. There is a head table, with two longer tables at right angles to it, and another table at the foot.

Sometimes there is no table at the foot, so the arrangement is open. The pattern may be abbreviated into a cross, with a head table and another longer table at right angles from its center.

In this arrangement the front table is evident. The location of those in power, those who will exhort, or make the decision is obvious. Sometimes, to avoid misunderstanding, nameplates designate the territory of a particular person.

Each person can see most of the people at the head table, and those opposite them. They can see the profiles of the person on either side.

At a typical organizational meeting everyone chooses their normal and expected place, an order that has been determined with time and tradition. Each person goes to his or her seat and places a briefcase on the table, or a purse over the chair. A jacket hangs on the back of the chair, while notebooks, and other materials, are in front of the person, on the table.

This establishes their territory. This is the location of this person, this body, for the duration of the meeting. This is the expected location, one established over time to represent the sense of place for this person. It is stationary, and enduring. This need for territory, a sense of place, represents the way things are in this organization.

The head table expects to be listened to. People at the head table make the decisions. They expect participation of the others, in a sequence established through past conflicts. The participation is predictable. Each person is as unchanging as their positions at the table. They appear as stable, at times stagnant, entities. They are an expected, consistent, unchanging entity.

This style restricts the location and movement of people, so it is less flexible than the auditorium style. People tend to become more fixed, immovable.

It is appropriate when meeting with the management team, or some functional group for problem solving that involves information only. Making update reports, transferring information are some other purposes that are appropriate.

It is not appropriate when there is conflict between the members of the team, because the sequence of speaking, and the contrived "pecking order" are more concerned with status than with solutions. It is not appropriate for emotional issues, and tends to stifle the expression of feelings.

The circle:

A circle of chairs. That is all there is. The circle is purposeful. There are no tables for a reason.

In the circle all people are equal. There is no head table to set the power figure apart, no behavioral message that says anyone is more important than another. A person entering the room cannot tell who the leaders or the followers are. Anyone not fully acquainted with the organization cannot tell the manager from the employees. We all appear important. "We are all number one among equals" is the way one participant described it. This is an observable behavior that influences how we relate.

The circle changes the cultural arrangements of the past. There is no table. The participants are forced to use their laps, and the floor under the chair for their territorial relics. Eventually, after moving to other small groups, they learn to place these objects out of the way.

Everyone can see everyone else. This exposes the full person, not just the upper part of the body hidden behind the table and a briefcase. It is a more vulnerable and self-conscious position.

Because there is no sense of a "head" of the circle, people select their seats as they like. Old patterns and relationships are disturbed. The process will soon move them, because the circle is extremely flexible. They will not be allowed to establish a new order of power.

That does not mean that the circle will be seen as the best way to organize seating. In fact, for many participants, the sight of the circle sends unpleasant memories of past encounter groups they attended in the '60s. For others, it represents the therapy circles of Bob Newhart, a place to get shrunk, a "touchy-feely" experience.

The size of a group may be too large to develop a circle to begin with. The largest circle I manage is 55. The normal size is 24 to 30. I begin all these groups in a circle.

Groups larger than this normally set up in the auditorium style to begin with. This is the accepted and traditional practice. Once the preliminary activities are out of the way, however, the large group separates into small groups of 8 to 12, each with a facilitator and an easel. There are several ways to do this. They are described later in the book.

The circle is most appropriate in situations of emotional conflict with diverse needs. It is most effective when communication is emotional, and the need to listen is high.

It is not appropriate if the purpose is to transfer non-emotional information, either to a small or large group.

The circle represents symbolically and behaviorally the move toward equity, toward acknowledgment of diversity, toward the need for community, toward the need for consensus. It is the centerpiece of the consensus approach.

The introduction

I wait quietly while the participants settle down into their chosen places in the circle. They speak softly, laugh loudly, casting quick and covert glances around the group, making their initial assessments about importance, dress, make-up of the group, distancing, and relationship. They appear self-conscious, seeking some camaraderie, some anonymity with the group they are sitting in. Many try to make themselves comfortable balancing briefcases and other meeting props on their laps. Others proceed to move their chair far back to the edge of the circle, and still be in. I wait until that last person is in the group.

In almost every occasion people do not arrive on time. In different parts of the country, and in different cultures, there are different accepted behaviors in this regard. Starting before this cultural pause is regarded as disrespectful. Those who are yet to come are not provided an adequate pause. Those present are then distracted. I normally wait until I can sense the group itself is ready to go. They begin to move nervously, often paying more attention to my movements for some cue. They signal that the pause is respectful enough. Then I begin.

For some people, the sound of the voice speaking seems to be their cue for joining the circle. They will rush in from wherever they were to join the group. Rarely, after starting the introduction is anyone missing.

I have learned, both from my own experience and from observing and talking with others, that meetings, or workshops, are very apprehensive affairs. People often do not want to be there. They consider meetings a waste of time. Perhaps they have been sent, or they came reluctantly because of the topic. This is especially true if the issue is one of deep conflict.

While most people arrive apprehensive, they become more so when seeing the circle of chairs. They are often seen to recoil in their apprehension. The arrangement, the circle, is different, they are not certain what will happen. These feelings are magnified even more when the session is about to begin.

I recognize that the participants will often not really hear, or remember what I am saying in the introduction. They are not yet ready to listen. They are concerned about their own sense of safety and personal protection. My intent with the introduction is to help them get grounded, getting the sound of a voice in the room that they can focus on.

When I speak slowly and clearly, and they appear to be listening, I can sense they are not. It is not unusual for participants to ask me where I live, at the coffee break, although I state this information loudly and clearly in the introduction. Their minds are too full of fear and apprehension to listen and recall.

I speak slowly, looking at each person, beginning to see who they are, measuring their responses to what I am saying, wondering myself what I am going to say next.

I normally introduce myself, state that I live in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and make some self-effacing joke about Idaho. There is some polite, hesitant laughter. I then express the reason I am in the group.

Sharing power--empowerment

As the group enters the room, I search for a person that can help me facilitate the grounding. I normally seek a person who is not as likely to be given this position of prominence. This may be a minority female, a minority male, an outspoken person who is looked down upon, a custodian. The intent is to immediately and behaviorally send the message that we are all important in the circle, that we can all facilitate the process, that people are willing to risk the experience.

After selecting an individual, I ask her if she is willing to help with the beginning of the session. I hand her a 3 x 5 cue card to read. On the card are written these questions:

INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE ISSUE

WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF THIS MEETING?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BEING HERE?

The first question can be fitted to the situation.

Introduce yourself and your relationship to the District.

Introduce yourself and your reason for seeking consensus.

Introduce yourself and your interest in conflict resolution.

Her task will be to explain that everyone is to do a grounding. This consists of answering three questions. She is then to read all three questions, and answer them herself. Then, read them through again so the participants are reminded what they are to do.

I know that the participants, in their apprehension, rarely hear the questions, even after being repeated twice. By answering the questions first the facilitator establishes a pattern that others can choose to follow. This is one of the few times that a facilitator answers the questions first.

I caution the facilitator about passing the card around, or continuing to repeat the three questions, since the participants are here to listen, to learn. If they appear to forget the questions, ask them to answer what they remember. I caution her about demanding that they answer all the questions. Her role after stating the questions is to listen.

I tell her, that after stating the questions and answering them, her role changes to a facilitator and listener. She is to foster each person speaking in turn, while listening intently to what they say. The importance is to establish a

model for listening, by assuring the speaker that at least one person in the group is listening to him. When the circle is complete, she may choose to summarize the expectations and feelings she heard in the group.

Only rarely does the person selected turn down this opportunity, even though their apprehension and anxiety is sometimes painfully obvious. They are offered this opportunity 5-10 minutes before the session starts, the time they are given instructions is less than 3 minutes. They experience immediate self consciousness.

And, they usually perform in an exemplary manner. Their voice may be a little shaky, and they may express some embarrassment at being the leader. They may poke fun at themselves, so as not to appear too powerful. Or they may just lead right into the task professionally. All behaviors are acceptable to me, because they are natural human behaviors.

The environment, the opportunity, the choice

I am always aware of the opportunity I have to allow others to choose to empower themselves, to behave in ways that they had not previously contemplated. I can do this by fostering an environment of listening with respect, an environment where it "feels" safe to take a risk. I can then provide the opportunity to the individual(s) to facilitate, to be on a panel, to develop collective statements, to play a role. But, "they" must make the choice.

This is one of the basic tenets to the consensus approach. I, as facilitator, can provide the opportunity, but you must make the choice to take the opportunity. It is not my place to prompt, to force. I may encourage, I may foster your willingness by listening to and acknowledging your fears, and, you must make the decision.

In one session between a support staff council (support staff includes custodians, secretaries, food staff, maintenance workers, transportation staff) and the administration of a school district, I was establishing a panel to speak of the administrators about the situation from their viewpoint.

I had a member on the panel for each of the groups that the council represented. I selected a young man, a new member of the council to represent the custodians. He appeared to accept the assignment, but later returned and asked if he could decline. He expressed discomfort, a fear of being inadequate to represent the custodians, a fear of speaking to large groups.

I asked if there was someone else in the room who could represent the custodians. He felt not. I suggested some options. He could recommend someone to represent him on the panel, he could remain on the panel, and speak only if he felt like it when it became his turn, or I could leave out the custodian point of view.

He chose to remain on the panel with the option to speak.

When his turn came (I placed him near the end of the panel in order of speaking) he surprised me, and himself, by very eloquently expressing the views of his group. He was somewhat nervous, and stated this as he started. But, he then clearly and succinctly expressed his views.

What was interesting, is the increase in the amount and quality of his conversation from that point on in the small groups.

Some decide not to take the opportunity. I always honor that. Most are delighted/scared and accept the opportunity. Some become jittery, wanting to avoid, yet wanting to do it. In any event, it is their choice.

The same holds true for asking questions of the group. The facilitator asks the question. It is up to the individual to decide whether to answer or not. Some people will describe the situation and not describe how they feel. Others will describe only how they feel. This is their choice.

If I ask you how you feel, you will feel. Whether you disclose that or not is your choice. I have no right to force you.

If I ask you to describe the situation and your feelings about it, and you only answer with feelings, that is your choice. I have no right to insist that you describe the situation.

If you feel deep emotional reactions to the situation, and I can sense this in your physical response, but choose to express little emotion, that is your choice. You may feel all your emotions, but write down only a portion of those you want to disclose to yourself. You then may express only a portion of what you wrote. That is all you are willing to disclose to me at this time.

I respect your right to make these choices. If I try to force you to disclose more than you want to, you will become more closed, more restrained.

The Grounding

The session begins, as it will each day, with a grounding. This activity establishes relationships, and gains initial information for the facilitator. It is a necessary activity for any meeting, whether the length is for a few hours, a few days, or a week.

After stating the questions, answering the questions herself, and repeating them, the facilitator turns to the person on the right (normally) or to the left, and invites him to answer the questions. There is some self consciousness again, normally, but the individual answers the questions, taking time to express his identity, his expectations, his feelings.

The process continues around the circle, each person answering the questions, in turn, their confidence gaining as the process continues. They are aware now that they will have their opportunity to speak unencumbered with the fear of interruption.

There is tension in some of the voices, and I often sense a person overcoming deep fears to speak out clearly for the first time in a group of strangers. Some actually preface their remarks with a statement like this:

"I don't normally speak in groups of people, I am basically shy (introverted), and prefer to speak one-on-one."

They then answer the questions to the whole group.

I listen to the tone of voice as people speak. In a group of people fearful of conflict, the tone is soft, barely discernible, while in a group used to conflict (normally white males) the tone is loud and demanding or challenging. This helps me understand the needs of the group.

When the circle is finished, I encourage the facilitator to summarize the expectations and the feelings expressed by the group. Most decline the opportunity, not yet ready to take on that role, while others will summarize in unexpected and complete fashion, often surprising even themselves.

Where did all the shy, non-communicative people go?

I am often asked by those who want to use this process in their environment how I deal with the shy person, the non-communicative person who just won't speak. In my nearly 15 years of working with this process, with over 500 groups, 15,000+ participants, I can recall only two people who felt constrained by their shyness or fear to participate in the sessions. Both occurred during conflict sessions.

One person, an elderly logger, feeling out of place and embarrassed by the surroundings and intent of the group, asked me to be excused. He felt too uncomfortable to stay. I honored him for taking care of himself and affirmed his right to make that choice. I also invited him to return at any time if he chose to. He did not return.

The other was a black female secretary meeting with a group of white male bosses. She apparently felt too nervous and intimidated to speak in the circle. She remained throughout the two-day meeting, however, and spoke her views to those she felt comfortable with during the breaks.

All the other 14,998+ seized the opportunity to express themselves, to establish their right to speak and be acknowledged and listened to. Am I right to assume that none of these was shy? Or, is it possible that shy people are created by the environment?

In my experience, there are few really non-communicative people. There are a lot of people who will not compete for verbal territory. Rather than injecting themselves into a heated discussion where the issue is really who controls the verbal territory, they will just sit back, listen, and then ignore whatever decision is reached.

If my experience is a true one, then that says a lot for the normal meeting, or problem solving format. What is it that causes most of the participants in a meeting to be non-communicative, judged as shy, inadequate, apathetic? Is it possible that the environment that exists results in this behavior?

I suspect so. I know that in my younger days I learned quickly that the person who spoke first and loudest got the floor, got the attention, the support (the squeaking wheel gets the grease). I knew that if I spoke quickly and put my voice in the room first, that this was a powerful move, one that allowed me to establish an arena of thought and discussion that others would focus on. Even if someone disagreed with me, they were still focused on my issue and my arena of discussion. This is a powerful feeling.

I listened to others, of course, not to seek agreement, but to determine how I was going to answer them, debate them, so my point of view would carry the day. My belief in my marvelous intelligence allowed me to discount any other point of view.

Once others feel discounted, the action moves from the intellectual arena to the emotional arena. Now their (and my) interest is in ego protection, in winning, rather than in being right, or seeking the right solution. The focus becomes personalized, questioning my intent, my tactics, my veracity.

If there is a disagreement, and we are not listening to each other, it is not long before the debate results in raised voice tones, tones that alert us to the challenge, the possibility of conflict. Most of the listeners/observers now shrink into their chairs, mentally taking flight from the room. Bladders are immediately of concern, so that attentions are directed to other thoughts and needs.

The participants in the meeting are now waiting for the discussion, the debate, the argument to reach some conclusion, any conclusion, so they can move on. They seek a common ground with statements like . . . "Well, they are really saying the same thing" . . . when it is obvious they are not.

It is this enactment of the power struggle that possibly prevents most people from participating in the meeting. These are some possible reasons why people do not speak:

THEY ALREADY KNOW IT ALL: Why speak, when they already appear to know it all? I know their information is incomplete, but if I add my two bits they will just challenge me. It is not worth it.

THEY WILL SHOUT ME DOWN: I know, as soon as I speak, and before I finish my point, they will interrupt, and try to discount what I am saying. Then I am trapped into trying to answer them, and they won't let me.

THEY WON'T LET ME IN: What's the use? They won't let me talk anyway.

I AM AFRAID OF THE CONFLICT: Look, I have enough conflict in my life without adding more. I am afraid of conflict, always have been, I don't want the feelings and emotions that are attached to it. If they want a deliberative discussion, I will participate, but that is not what they want.

I AM DISGUSTED BY THEIR BEHAVIOR: I mean, look at them acting like kids, or animals even. I just don't want to be a part of it.

I WILL BE EMBARRASSED: If I say something, I will be embarrassed by them in front of the boss and my friends. The risk is just too great. My boss likes me, let's leave it that way.

NOTHING WILL COME OF IT ANYWAY: This will go on until they make a decision that no one is committed to anyway. We will all just go on and do our own thing.

The net result of all people not participating is a loss of communication, a loss of information from those disenfranchised from the process. There is no commitment on the part of the listeners/observers to carry out any decision made.

The first two activities, the grounding and the greeting, are intended to deal with these feelings.

Grounding, a here and now experience

Grounding is one of the few descriptive words that I use to describe a process. It is intended to refer to creating an awareness of being grounded in the present, the here and now. The activity begins with each person answering three questions:

"Introduce yourself and your relationship to the organization (or . . . the issue)"

"What are your expectations for this meeting (workshop)?"

"How do you feel about being here?"

This task does the following:

Introduces the circle and the notion of listening with respect to each other. Establishing an environment of **LISTENING WITH RESPECT** provides an experience in which the possibility of being heard is encouraged, fostered. There is a knowing that each person will be heard.

It is important that the facilitator listen fully to each person so they may have that experience. Once listening with respect has been established in the room, it becomes a model thereafter. (See **Listening with Respect.**)

Establishes a verbal territory for each participant. I have learned that each of us needs to occupy the room with the sound of our voice, establishing a verbal territory, similar to a spatial territory, in order to participate in a

meeting. Each person needs the opportunity to speak at the beginning of meeting to establish this verbal territory, this right to speak and be represented. Once a person's voice is in a room, it becomes easier to speak, especially if listened to. The sound of an unchallenged voice is a rare event for people, and this helps to allay the fears of those who are apprehensive.

If I am never given an opportunity to speak in a meeting, then I have no verbal territory in that room. If others speak and I can't, or if they attack me verbally when I speak, then I feel denied the opportunity to be represented. I can respond in either of two ways.

If I am an aggressive person, a "fighter," then I will begin to obstruct the communication flow by interrupting, trying to insert my voice in the room over the others. Or, I will slam my fist on the table, shouting others down.

If I am a shy person, a "flighter," then I will probably remain silent, allowing my mind to wander to other arenas of thought, doodling on the paper in front of me, idling away the time, hoping for the coffee breaks, waiting for the meeting to end so I can leave and ignore whatever agreement was reached. While this person is not aggressive openly, there is a passive aggression in withholding information important to the decision, in talking down, or ignoring any decision that is made.

By verbal territory, I refer to the opportunity, the right to express myself at the start of the meeting, expressing my needs, my wants to the group. I need to speak long enough on issues of substance that are relevant and important to the meeting, so that my voice is heard and established in the room.

The three questions are designed to provide sufficient opportunity for each person to establish that verbal territory, while providing needed information for the group and the facilitator to work with.

I have found that people do not need much verbal territory to establish themselves. A group of 8 people will take as long to go through a grounding as a group of 24, about an hour. This allows each person 3-8 minutes to make this first important venture into being represented.

Puts the WHOLE BRAIN into action because it requires access to both the left and the right brain.

When you introduced yourself, you accessed the left brain, the file cabinet for your knowledge. You took information from the past and used it for the present or the future.

As an example, think of the last time your boss asked you into the office. You probably wondered, "What did I do?" and began to think in the *past* about what you could possibly have done to cause this request. Or, you may know what she wants and you begin to create a *future* scenario in your mind about how you are going to deal with this situation.

On the other hand, when you talked about how you felt, you accessed your right brain, the intuitive sensor, which reports on the here and now. This moment of here and now is important to consensus because it allows you to tap your creativity, and your wisdom.

The awareness of separate functions of right and left brain is fairly recent. There is a tendency to attribute left and right brain functions to different sexes. The man is more left brained, or a thinking person. The female is more right brained, or a feeling person. Men are viewed as unemotional, women as emotional.

Each sex appearing to be more emotions or thinking may be more a function of role than of potential. In the Industrial era, the man was expected to work at the thinking tasks, while the woman was at home with the more emotional tasks.

Yet, what male does not get emotional when a project is not finished on time? Which female does not have to use her intellect when confronted with the needs of teenagers?

We are all whole brained. There is a part of the brain, the corpus callosum, which connects the right and the left brains. The questions are intended to engage and tap the whole brain in the beginning of the meeting.

Thinking tends to bring us out of the present, into the past or the future. Thinking is based on our experienced perceptions, and may represent a limited truth.

Feeling brings us an awareness of how we are now, internally, with our emotions. This information is both emotion and fact. Only we can express how we feel. This is our truth.

Sensing is another way of being in the present. Sensing makes us aware of what is going on externally, taking a pulse of what is going on around us in the room. Unlike thinking, however, sensing is more sensation than fact. I can sense if the group is tired. I can express that sense, but they must validate it to be truth.

Both feeling and sensing brings us into the here and now. Each "grounds" the person.

Thinking = Past or future. A limited truth.

Feeling = Present, here and now, internally. Emotion and fact.

Sensing = Present, here and now, externally. Sensation.

THINKING/FEELING/SENSING ARE ATTRIBUTES THAT YOU WILL USE IN SEEKING CONSENSUS.

The grounding allows APPREHENSIONS AND HOPES for the meeting to be expressed. Everyone comes to meetings with some sense of apprehension or hope. These are normally hidden, not discussed openly, yet they affect the actions and behaviors of the members, and their ability to participate, or to listen. They are often referred to as hidden agendas. Their "sensed" presence creates a concern about the intents of other members that hinders communication.

The grounding allows participants to express hidden agendas that can affect their participation. Perhaps they are ill, have a hearing disability, need to leave early, have a flat tire, or there is some family crisis that needs to be tended to.

We also come to meetings with recent events (like a flat tire) or time concerns (like another meeting that will occur later) on our minds. If stated, these can be responded to, or may just become less important in the telling.

The grounding provides initial information to the facilitator. By listening closely, I can sense the major issues in the group. I can detect the tensions between people. This helps me create panels.

I can learn the words they use to describe their situation. I use these words in framing the questions. I can sense who is nervous, who feels responsible, who feels disenfranchised. This helps me decide who to empower.

Communicating is not the problem, listening is!

The most common reason given as the cause of conflicts is a "lack of communication," or "communication problems." The most common solution is to "improve communications." Rarely is this term described beyond the abstract term "communication."

It is possible that this is just an easy way to avoid what the real issues are. We avoid the necessary deliberative and difficult exploring to truly resolve the issue. It probably comes from feeling inadequate to resolve the problem.

The fact is, we are communicating all the time, verbally and nonverbally. Even those with a speech impediment, or a hearing impairment, have the ability to speak with sign language. People in the group will speak if given the opportunity (see **Where did all the shy, noncommunicative people go?**). The issue may not be a lack of speaking ability, but the lack of an attitude of listening to others.

"But I just can't listen very well!" is the descriptive statement we use to avoid this important natural ability. Even the hearing impaired can sign, read lips, etc. Almost everyone has the ability to listen to the spoken word. This ability has evolved over the millennia and is evident by the fact that we have ears.

My Daddy's advice when leaving for the big world was "Remember, Bob, the Good Lord gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason." Like all other young idealists, filled with a belief in my destiny of greatness, I promptly forgot the admonition.

I learned very quickly, in school, and as a young professional, that the "squeaking wheel gets the grease." In school I was always the first to raise my hand to answer the teacher's questions. It mattered not if I always had the right answers. I still caught the teacher's attention. I was recognizable by name and face to her.

In my professional life, I learned that to get my voice into the room first was to establish my presence. If I could get the group to focus on my issue, then I was the person controlling the group. Even if there was disagreement, they were still focused on my issue.

If some other person wanted to disagree and debate me, all the better. I could demonstrate my ample skills and intelligence to those in power. It mattered not if others were denied the chance to speak. I felt they were probably awed by my articulation, my voice, and my intelligence.

And, I liked to hear the sound of my voice. I felt powerful. I resented someone taking the focus away from me.

When I learned to listen, I was amazed at what I missed all those years. I found that others have points of view just as valid as mine. I found I enjoyed listening to the sounds of other's voices. I was impressed with the intelligence, skills, and abilities of others in the room. I realized I was denying myself access to the immeasurable knowledge of others, of the group.

The issue is rarely being able to talk, or communicate. The real issue is listening. LISTENING WITH RESPECT is the changed attitude and behavior that is the answer.

Listening with respect

There was a young owl,
Who sat in an oak.
The more he saw
The less he spoke.
The less he spoke
The more he heard,
And he grew up to be
A wise old bird. (*thanks to Mother Goose*)

LISTENING WITH RESPECT means more than an apparent interest in what I am saying. It means focusing on my words, my tonal quality, my body language, all at the same time. It means being aware of your physical and mental responses, so they do not get in the way of listening. It means being present with me, most of the time.

It means listening to what I am saying that you disagree with and dislike, as well as what I am saying that you agree with or like. It means stretching your listening during those times that you disagree with me, without beginning to answer or debate with me in your mind.

There will be times when what I say will cause you to wander in your mind. I understand that need. In a way it is an honor to me, because it indicates that I have influenced or affected you in some way. I know that you are affected by your needs as well as mine. But you will return soon to re-connect with me, listening to most of what I have to say.

LISTENING WITH RESPECT means you will bend your ears around the sound of my speech to interpret what I say. This is especially important if I am a person with an accent. It is easy to become impatient with my accents, and avoid the energy it takes to listen to me.

LISTENING WITH RESPECT means you are trying to UNDERSTAND ME, and my point of view, as well as my needs and feelings. You don't have to agree with my point of view . . . just try to understand it. Agreement is not necessary in the beginning. That can happen later. UNDERSTANDING me means you can express my point of view to others. You are able to make decisions that take my interests into account.

If you UNDERSTAND me, or try to, then I will TRUST you. I do not trust people who do not try to understand me. They are only trying to meet their needs, I am afraid, at my expense. Therefore, I will mistrust them.

But, if I sense that you are trying to understand me, then I will trust you, I will be more focused, more clear in my message.

If you try to understand my point of view, then I will try to understand yours. I may not agree with it, but I will understand as best I can.

And, if we TRUST each other, then we will LEARN from each other. We will not learn from each other if we have no trust. In fact, if I do not trust you, then it matters not how important you are, how educated you are, or how intelligent you are, I will not trust your information. I will use my intelligence, my education, my knowledge to dispute your information, to trivialize it, to prove you wrong.

I have seen this happen many times. It is one reason that conflicts become prolonged. While people have the information and the ability to solve the issue, they can't because of their inability to trust each other. Their information is not valid to each other. They have no credibility with each other. So their information is discounted, or trivialized.

This is especially detrimental to professionals who are asked to help educate those affected by the decisions being made. If trust is not established first, all knowledge or advice is discounted. The investment in time, money, and intelligence is wasted.

This often means that professionals will listen to their audience first, to understand their needs, their concerns. This will establish sufficient trust so that the professional's information is accepted. This also allows the professional to be more focused, to meet the needs of the audience.

If we LEARN from each other, then we will develop a NEW PERSPECTIVE, a NEW TRUTH. This new perspective may not be the whole truth, but it will be closer to the truth than our individual views.

If I ask George, sitting at the North side of the circle, to describe his view of the room, he will report on the large windows facing the parking lot, and the cars in the lot. Gil, on the West side of the circle, expresses his surprise, because he sees a window looking out on the putting green. Marie, on the South side of the circle, sees a solid oak wall, with a large painting of a golf course on it, while Ken exclaims that the wall is a movable one, covered with a soft fabric, with no picture on it.

Each in turn repeats their view of the room, turning to the person beside them to corroborate their view. They may then begin to question the validity of the view that the others see.

I use an example of this with my groups who are seated in a circle in a hotel meeting room. If I want to hang a picture in the room, George, at the head of the circle, says, "you can't hang it on the wall because there are picture windows there." Gil has a picture window also, but there is an oak paneled wall to the left that is suitable for the picture. Marie has a solid oak wall, but it already has a picture on it. Ken observes that the folding wall cannot hold a picture.

"A movable wall?" says Marie. "Why, there is no movable wall, and there is a window. There is an oak wall with a picture on it. You could hang the picture to the left of the double doors."

"Double doors?" exclaims George. "There are no double doors, and no oak wall. There are two large picture windows which would prevent you from hanging anything."

"Well," says Ken, "I can see the movable wall quite clearly, can't you Ann?" he asks the woman beside him.

"Yes, Ken. I wonder what the others have been eating or drinking to believe the wall has a window or double doors in it."

"Well," says Andy, sitting next to Gil, "I can see the wall has a picture window with my 20/20 vision. That is more than you can say with your apparent bad vision since you both wear eyeglasses."

Ann is angry at the remark. "You better clean off your eyeballs because I can see clearly. Maybe you are on something that is giving you hallucinations."

"I can see the cars in the parking lot outside. You must have good night-time vision and poor daytime vision," says Doug, sitting next to George.

"And I can see the double doors," says Ellen. "I believe," she says in an aside to Marie, "these people are not telling the truth. They are just angry because you can see the truth and they can't."

Well, I better stop this before it breaks out into an argument. It is obvious that each person has a different perception of the room. It is obvious that they each have the correct perception from their view. It is also obvious they feel they have the ONE RIGHT PERCEPTION, to the exclusion of all others.

And that is how conflict starts. Each of us has a different perception of the event or issue. Each of us has a correct impression of the issue from our viewpoint. This viewpoint is affected by our view of the situation, by our beliefs and values, our education, our ethnic background, our ages, our relationships with the others. All these factors affect our view, and make it different from others.

We do have the correct view. But, we don't always have the *one correct view to the exclusion of all others*.

In my attempt to convince you that I have the one right view I stop listening to your point of view. In this moment, I will try to change your vision of the truth to match mine. Now, the information becomes less important than the need to convince you of my rightness.

In time, if we disagree long enough, I will feel the need to convince you with power, with my need for control. I will raise my voice, I will trivialize or denigrate your information, I will do anything to convince you to submit to my greater intelligence, my position of authority, or my rightness. I may refer to the BOOK, the BOSS, the LAW, or any other authority figure that will validate my claims.

At this point we move from discussing the issue to seeing who is more powerful. If my adversary (because that is now what the other becomes) is a FIGHTER, then her voice will also rise to match mine, and we will try to out-power each other.

If the person is a FLIGHT person, he will become quiet, cry, withdraw, ignore me, or find some other way to disengage from the conflict, while retaining the disagreement.

Often, someone in the group will try to convince both parties that we are both saying the same thing in different ways, in an attempt to create harmony, even a false harmony.

The acceptance of others' perceptions is critical to resolving conflict. It is the recognition that we all see the room, or the situation, from our different perspectives. We each have a single dimensional view that is right, but not necessarily the only right view. By listening with respect to what others describe as their view, we have the possibility of adding to the dimensions and the richness of our collective perception of the room/situation.

It is the acceptance of the *possibility* of the truth of the others' perceptions that allows us to develop the needed information base to resolve the issue.

Listen to me with respect, and you will understand me. If you understand me, then I will try to understand you. This will allow us to trust each other and learn from each other, to develop a new and richer perspective of the situation, and ultimately a new and shared truth.

This NEW PERCEPTION allows us to GROW in our knowledge and in our being. We become different my understanding this richer perception. We can see other parts of our environment in a different way, recognizing we still have a limited vision of the truth. It is the older, limited perception that prevented us from resolving the issue. The new, larger information base provides what is needed to solve the issue.

And this GROWTH is what allows us to RE-SOLVE the issue that we confront, together. In the past, we tried to solve the issue with only our self-interests in mind, assuming that they were paramount. To our surprise, we found that others are affected by the decisions we make, often adversely. We recognize that we must make a decision that is inclusive of others' views and needs.



We can now solve the issue in a way that meets all our needs, rather than the selfish needs of one, or based only on the perception of the one.

RE-SOLVING issues does not mean that we will run out of conflicts or problems. On the contrary, there will be new problems and conflicts that will be fostered by our new knowledge, our new actions, our new behaviors. These new conflicts allow us to continue to learn and to grow and see reality better.

The issue we confront, is whether we want to spend all our time resolving the same conflict over and over, or whether we will resolve this conflict and then move on to new ones. It is a question of stagnant or stunted growth versus continual growth.

This ability to resolve issues allows us to see the world more clearly, to ADAPT to the new situation that is evident with the new perception, the new information. We are now different as a result of the experience. It is this adaptive behavior that will allow us to continue to respond to the new problems that will arise in the future.

The greeting circle: An old ritual with new purpose

After finishing the insight on grounding, I introduce people to the experience of the greeting circle. In this activity, all the participants stand in front of their chairs. I am amazed that they do this without too much hesitation, although there is a look of uncertainty in their movements.

I explain to them that it is normal for people to sit with those they know, or are similar to, seeking a comfort zone. (See **The herd instinct**.) I describe how this limits their information sphere, how they alienate themselves from those who are not like them, whom they don't know.

I describe the greeting circle procedure.

"I am going to start greeting people by moving inside the circle and to my left. The people I greet will, in turn, follow me around inside the circle, continuing to greet people as the circle turns in on itself."

"Eventually I will return to my original place. Those behind me in the inside circle will move by me. I have previously greeted them, now they can greet me. This allows us to meet each other twice, being the greeter, then the greeted."

"When we have completed the circle, I will be asking you to answer two questions. The first is: how do you feel about doing the greeting circle? The second is: what did you learn that will help you resolve the conflict we are here to confront?" (The second question can be modified to fit the situation.)

I then turn to my left and begin greeting people. This is an uncomfortable, self-conscious, uncertain moment. I am the only person with his voice in the room to begin with. It feels uncommonly loud, and I have to stifle the urge to whisper. I am also cautious about hugging the first few people, knowing it could establish an inappropriate, and disrespectful model for others. Even though I may know the person to my left well enough to hug.

As I go around the circle, I am aware of people's movements, the sounds they are making, the time the circle takes to move all the way around. I listen to the tone of the voices, including mine, trying to sense the mood of the individuals and the group.

If there is loud laughter, the slapping of backs (common to male gatherings), I can sense the apprehension, the tension that exists. They will need time to vent emotions. If the group is quiet, their sound barely rippling the energy of the room, the group may be passive, needing encouragement to confront conflict.

Some groups pass through the circle quickly, hardly long enough to get to meet each other. I know I must slow them down to get them to speak openly and listen to each other.

Others will take a longer time to know each other, questioning, or speaking beyond the ritual of greeting. I know they can openly converse, they will approach the discussions needed for resolution. At times, this behavior suggests an avoidance of meeting people further on in the group that they don't like.

I normally begin the greeting circle so I can set a reasonable and respectful pace. I find myself, as others do, uncomfortable with meeting new people. I try to dredge up meaningful conversation in a brief period. I try to make an appropriate personal contact. Somehow I get through it all, learning enough to help me with the initial design of the session.

If I have a small group of people, 8 or less, I may let the circle finish completely. If the group is larger, I wait until at least 2/3 of the group is inside the circle, so that 1/3 have been through the greeting twice. Then I ask the group to return to their chairs. While all may have been reluctant and uncomfortable about starting the circle, they are now more reluctant to stop. They are feeling the loss of not meeting the rest of the group.

I do this to allow different parts of the group to have a different learning experience. Some have greeted and been greeted, others have greeted, others have just been greeted. Each is a different encounter.

Normally I give the group a break at this time, because of the impact of the greeting circle on the kidneys. I repeat the two questions before the break: How did you feel and what did you learn? This allows those who want to an opportunity to greet those they haven't yet met, and a break to think about what they felt and learned.

The greeting

No ritual is older, and none more anxiety-ridden, than that of greeting each other. We have greeted each other with some personal contact since we were tribes or clans making chance encounters in our travels.

We recognize the greeting as a symbolic gesture of peace, of peaceful intent. It can be a hand clasp, the touching of the faces, kissing on the cheek, a hug, a gripping of the wrists, and any other gesture in which contact is made.

The intent is to convey that we are human, with peaceful intents. The contact acclaims that while we appear different on the surface, we are one people, connected, blood to blood. Many cultures, like the American Indian, refer to themselves as the "People." For some of the Spanish-speaking cultures, they are "La Raza." There is a universal recognition, and acknowledgment that we are ONE.

For some cultures, other meaning have been assigned to the handshake. In the Western culture the handshake has evolved into a test of strength, a demonstration of trust. A contract can be sealed with a handshake. For others, a secret handshake established the oneness of the group, known only to those who belong. Or, it may symbolize success, joy, as evidenced by the "high fives" in sports.

These assignments are additions too, and often eclipse, the real purpose of the greeting: an acknowledgment of the peaceful presence of each other, affirming that we are one people. We want our contact to be safe. Even if we disagree, we intend to maintain security for the parties.

The greeting circle establishes the opportunity for all participants to meet each other. We meet friends and strangers. It allows the individuals to make the contact so needed before confronting the conflict.

The anxiety and apprehension of the individuals is confronted, encountered, and released. Energy, suppressed by the fear and anxiety of the unknown, releases into the room, in the sound of high voices, laughter, slaps on the back, hugs.

The greeting circle allows people to meet the person, rather than the role, or stereotype. It is normal for people in conflict to never have met each other in person. They operate out of stereotyped perceptions gained from distant experiences, or from others. Meeting the individual in person will dramatically alter the perceptions.

This reduces the intimidation that people tend to perceive with each other. You may be surprised that people are intimidated by you. Yet that is likely in conflict situations. (See **Intimidation**.)

We open up communication, allowing each person to seek a common interest or topic. The greeting circle provides a basis for knowing people. It establishes a sense of community.

By being both a "greeter" and a "greeted person," the idea of balance is introduced. This causes the individuals to go beyond the ritualistic first greeting, to finding a more real and common interest in the second contact.

It is uncomfortable, apprehensive, uncertain and sometimes feels "fake." Yet, it is a necessary activity if the group is to open communications.

The activity is given new meaning when the two questions are asked and answered after the greeting. I would never do the greeting circle without the questions. The questions allow the individuals to be grounded again, and to learn from the experience. (See **Lifelong learning--an adaptive process**.)

The herd instinct: birds of a feather flock together

Have you noticed how people arriving at a meeting, social gathering, or workshop tend to immediately seek out those who are like them? We seek out those who work with us, who are from our neighborhood, or church, people who are related to us, or in the same profession.

The natural tendency of individuals in groups, is to seek out those who they are comfortable with, those who are like them. This creates a comfort zone, a sense of belonging.

We express this natural tendency with the statement "birds of a feather flock together." We are comfortable because we are recognized, we know the language of the group, we know what the conversation will be, we have an established ritual.

If you go to a meeting in your organization, the same people meet at the coffee bar, go to lunch together, sit together. We even have names for these groups: the good old boys, the young turks, the nay-sayers, the rumor-monger, the professionals, the technicians, blue collar workers, white collar people.

These groups have created an environment that is comfortable for their members. They have a language of their own, they talk about specific issues. They serve a networking function, transmitting information that is valuable to the members of the group.

They gripe about the same things, they carry rumors to the group about members of other groups. The tendency is to compare themselves favorably and to the disadvantage of other groups.

Unfortunately, there is a cost to this. "Group-think" often limits the information that a member receives, or can give. Information is slanted purposely to meet the group's needs or intents. Information that appears to disagree with the "group-think" is wrong, disloyal. The group demands loyalty, if you want to belong. "We have our minds made up."

In "group-think" the members convince each other of the validity of the group's beliefs. The group agrees on the stereotypes of others who are outside the group. They learn key phrases that they all repeat in conversations. They sound like "clones," tape recorders for the group. The group will not allow questioning.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with group-think, it can have disastrous effects on decision making and conflict resolution. It limits flexibility and impedes learning.

Diversity--a recipe for vegetable stew

We live in a world of diversity. We have truly become the global village. We are surrounded by people of different ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, generational, and professional backgrounds.

These people are not only in our communities, or at work and school. They are brought into our living room by TV and the VCR. The events that happen in Iraq impact us in our own community.

Some communities in the past were more homogenous. They lived in a community that was similar. People were farmers, or earned their living with some relationship to farming. They were all white, Christian, with three generations, at most, represented. They were often of the same ethnic and religious affiliation.

As a result, they knew what to expect. They were a "community think." Their community and their neighborhood was the extent of their world. They knew each other well. They spoke to the same issues, like the weather, or what was happening in the neighborhood. There was little change, so what they learned in school lasted their lifetime. In a way, it appears idyllic.

But times have changed. People from the cities are moving to the rural areas. These people are different. They speak differently, with different words, different inflections. They have different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. They are the "newcomers." They solidified the community-think against them, because they are "strange."

The community is polarized around issues like "growth and status quo," "tradition and change," "educated and non-educated," "pro-life and pro-choice," and lifestyles.

As people become more educated they created a demand for others who were less skilled to do the unskilled tasks. This brought in the migrant workers, who had different languages and customs.

These new workers eventually stayed in the community, and their children entered the school. They were separated by language, their religion, their culture, and perhaps the color of their skin. As they became more educated, they demanded more from the community.

Each of these solidifies the community-think. Rather than integrating, or becoming a melting pot, the groups became separate group-thinks. Each sought the security of the known. Each group perceived the others as potential adversaries. Conflict was resolved through the use of control and power.

Consensus seeking has the purpose of changing this. While the group-think is not inherently wrong, it can be divisive, alienating parts of the community from each other.

The consensus process seeks to create diverse groups with diverse viewpoints with the purpose of creating common decisions. This is done by assuring that all groups are represented in an equitable way at the problem-solving session.

The groups will have a natural tendency to sit together. They want certainty and comfort. In this process they are redistributed into new relationships that are uncomfortable and uncertain.

I refer to the group-think as "potato soup." This may be nourishing on occasion, but it can be a boring fare day after day. There is only one way to make potato soup. It is one color, one taste. It does not contain all the nutrition, the vitamins or the energy needed for healthy growth.

I want to create vegetable stew. I want different tastes, different colors. I want vegetables and meat. I want a broader nutrition, more vitamins, more energy. This can be more exciting and diverse because I have more options to make the stew with.

I create this diversity in many ways:

The individuals count off to a number that establishes groups of 5-10. Since they sit together, this redistributes the members of the group.

I request that small groups be formed with a representative from each viewpoint, assuring that the males and females will be equally distributed. I may set a limit to the group size, and the representation I expect.

I ask the group to establish small groups with diverse viewpoints, and trust them to do it. This places the responsibility and power in the individuals and groups.

I have two members, of the polarized groups, a man and woman, old and young, to assist me with the facilitating. The community observes them working together for the good of the whole.

The diverse groups are encouraged to eat lunch together.

Each of these creates the opportunity for new relationships, new information, new solutions.

Intimidation

It is normal for persons to act surprised when I discuss the idea of intimidation, and point out that we all intimidate people. "Who? Me?" they seem to imply with their expressions and their words. Yes. You!

We must understand that we each intimidate someone. The boss intimidates the employees, the employee intimidates the boss through their union, the Board Chairman intimidates the boss, the boss intimidates the Board Chairman, the male intimidates the female, the woman intimidates the man, the parent intimidates the child, the child intimidates the parent.

"Who? Me?" you may claim, not understanding. It is not you who decides whether you intimidate me. *I* am the one who makes that decision. *I* decide who intimidates me. You are the last one to know because I don't tell you.

We are intimidated by position, authority, elected officials, older people, younger people, people who are different from us, people who are taller, people who are smaller. And those who intimidate us often don't know this.

More personally, I am intimidated by my wife, at times. She is intimidated by me, at times. I am intimidated by my older brother. He is intimidated by me. We know this by disclosing our feelings to each other. We know this by watching each others' behaviors.

You can tell if I am intimidated by you by my behaviors:

Do I stand a long distance from you when we speak? Do I put an object, a chair, a desk, between you and me?

Do I always bring others with me when meeting with you?

Do I use a louder voice, or timid voice, when speaking to you?

Do I agree with you on anything you say?

Do I write a letter when it is easier to talk with you in person?

Do I initiate rumors about you?

These are just some of the behaviors that people use when feeling intimidated. They are barriers to the communication process. This will be discussed in more detail under [Managing Power](#).

This is important to acknowledge, because intimidation dramatically impacts the communication process. If I am intimidated by you, I will keep away from you and deny you access to information I have that you may need. Or, I may tell you what I believe you WANT to hear, rather than the truth which may dismay you.

Either way your information is incomplete. You cannot make the best decisions with incomplete information. I can tell when people have incomplete information. The parties in conflict assure me the great mass of people support them. When I interview the great mass of people, I find that they are telling the parties what they want to hear, because they fear disagreeing with them.

The result is that the parties are operating with information that is limited and incorrect.

Reducing the "intimidation factor" is necessary in seeking consensus decisions. Open and honest communication occurs in an environment where people feel secure, where intimidating feelings are minimal. The greeting circle is one of the ways for doing this.

In the greeting circle you are limited by the distance you can be from the person. I must confront my fear, my stereotypes, my emotions to greet you. This is the beginning of conflict resolution, of consensus. We will make contact, struggle through the uncomfortableness of the moment and see the humanity in each of us. I will see you in a different way.

The shy and self-conscious person will meet his boss, and learn that she is approachable, not to be feared. This alters the information that will be transferred between them.

It is not unusual for this to be discussed during the life-long learning task. The boss finds out for the first time that the shy person was intimidated by her. This creates a truer reality for both individuals.

Life-long learning-an adaptive process

When I graduated from high school, it was assumed that I was "learned." I had the necessary skills to meet the needs of the Industrial era. I went on to higher education, and became even more learned.

The sense of this belief, this word, is that I can stop learning. I have all the knowledge I need. In a society that was stable, slow to change, this is all that was needed.

If everything remains the same, then why get more education? "People never change." "The more things change, the more they stay the same." "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" These three cliches support and express the belief system of the time.

Today, however, change is so rapid that the half-life of information is two years or less. This is best demonstrated by the rapidity with which computer software and hardware becomes obsolete.

In order to keep up with the change, we are continually educating and re-educating ourselves. We are becoming life-long learners. This is the new goal of education and educators. They want them to be flexible, adaptive for the rapidly changing global environment.

This requires a new belief and new attitudes. "People are always changing." "Things will never be the same." "If it ain't broke, break it!" These are the new cliches that support the move to continuous learning.

There is one traditional saying that is appropriate in this time of rapid change. "We learn through experience." If it is true that we learn through experience, then every experience has meaning. It is up to each of us to find that meaning.

HOW WE LEARN

WE LEARN THROUGH EXPERIENCE
SO . . .
EVERYTHING WE DO HAS MEANING

This is the major belief and concept for the consensus process. It is expressed through asking three questions of each person:

WHAT IS THE SITUATION OR EXPERIENCE?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT IT?

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM IT THAT WILL MAKE YOU SUCCESSFUL?

These questions allow individuals to process any experience, to make sense out of any experience, to integrate the experience into their being. They are life-long learning questions. They turn us into constantly learning and adaptive individuals and groups.

Most of what we are taught, we learn by rote. We read it, or it is stated in a pedagogical manner. We are taught to memorize the information we need. But, this memory is external to us, information that we know, but have not experienced.

Since most of what we learn comes through experience, the consensus process focuses on fostering experiences that create internal information. This knowing is linked to the emotion of the experience, providing deep meaning to the person. This promotes the possibility of memory recall.

Begin by exploring the situation you just experienced. What is the experience, the situation? Or, describe the experience you are about to participate in. Or, describe a problem, a conflict that confronts you. Describe the situation to yourself, or to another in as much detail as you need to. Write it down if you want.

Then ask, "How does this make me feel?" The question allows the person to react out of the situation with their emotional content. It allows expressions of anger, apprehension, doubt, also acceptance, excitement, support. This engages the right brain and keeps the experience in the "here and now."

This is the reactive, the emotional material. Expressing it first allows learning to take place later. If the emotions are suppressed, the learning is impersonal, and kept external to the being. Learning is superficial, or doesn't happen at all. The experience is unfinished.

Answering the "feeling" question grounds the person in the moment, allowing people to feel real. It is OK to be angry, *or* excited.

The next question, "What did you learn?" allows the person to be proactive, to use the intellect to create meanings from the experience. The question can be linked to the situation:

What did you learn that will help you solve the problem?

What did you learn that will help you successfully complete the mission?

What did you learn that will create a sense of community?

What did you learn that will make you a better person?

Asking the question allows the person to relate the experience to the here and now. It integrates the experience into the knowledge base, internal to the person.

In asking the people "how they feel" about the experience, the facilitator must be prepared to accept their answers. Often, the greeting circle, or any other exercise, doesn't feel good to those who have experienced it. Don't feel apologetic, or responsible if there are negative feelings expressed. Don't feel smug if there are positive emotions expressed.

For some, the experience was frightening, embarrassing, apprehensive. They would prefer not to repeat the experience. For others it was exciting, affirming to them, and they want more.

Any feeling is acceptable. Each feeling is real to the individual. Only she/he knows and can describe the feeling. Being able to express it in a non-judging environment will often allow the feeling to dissipate, so that learning is possible.

Any feeling is acceptable. You are not looking for support for the activity. You are looking for people to express themselves. This encourages openness and honesty. It helps people get to know each other. It humanizes everyone.

Sometimes participants will not express their feeling. For whatever reason they do not feel they can disclose this information. This is their choice to make.

They cannot make the choice, however, without feeling the emotion at some level. This may be enough to allow the learning to take place. At a later time, the individual may feel safe enough to disclose feelings. This activity is a step in that direction.

In expressing your feelings, you may express my feeling. I vicariously experience the feeling and the release. If it is safe for you, then it will be safe for me when I express my feelings later.

Asking the learning question sets into motion what I call the "Vanna White Effect."

The Vanna White effect

There is a popular daytime TV show called "The Wheel of Fortune." In it the contestants are given a set of blank spaces, and a clue as to what the blank spaces refer to. This may be one word, or a phrase.

The contestants spin the wheel, in turn to find the value of their guesses. They are allowed to pick a letter that fits in the blank spaces until enough evidence is available to infer what the word or phrase is. Vanna White is the letter turner.

It does not take long for the contestants to guess the words. It is unusual for the entire word, or phrase, to be completely spelled before a correct guess is made.

The game works because of how our brain functions. The brain (me) cannot stand to have an unfinished space. I must bring "closure" to the unanswered, the unresolved. I will go to great lengths to do so.

The second question "what did you learn from the experience that will . . . ?" taps the same brain function as the Wheel of Fortune does. We learn from the experience because we establish learning as our goal.

There are some experiences so painful that we learn from them immediately. A young child touching the hot stove does not have to repeat the experience.

There are other experiences we are slower to learn from. We find ourselves reliving an event, even though the result may be painful, or not what we intended. A person who continues to get speeding tickets is an example. For these events we are doomed to repeat them until the lesson is learned.

It is not unusual for someone to fool a person with disastrous results. The person exclaims "never again!" Then they are fooled again, because they are too trusting, or too greedy. Until the lesson is learned they will continue to be taken advantage of.

Learning happens when we consciously set out to make it happen. The consensus process purposefully creates learning experiences for people that cause them to feel and think. As an example, if I were to create the following incomplete task:

B _ D

What would you do with it?

It is normal to try to bring closure to the unfinished space. Some possibilities are:

D
BUD BAD BID BCD ABCDE BED
B

There is no right answer in this instance. There are many possibilities. The last two solutions are creative in that they go beyond the bounds of the normal response. They add more possibilities.

Bringing closure to the unfinished space, the unanswered question, requires that the mind do the "leap of imagination" that taps the whole brain. This is the Vanna White Effect I refer to.

Asking the right question creates the possibility, the spring-board, for that leap of imagination. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to sense the question that will foster closure in the diverse group. The purpose is to create possibilities, not just the one right answer.

Each time a person answers the feeling and learning questions, they introduce information that creates new possibilities. They are able to educate each other about possible feelings and learning. They help each other make leaps of imagination. This increased knowledge base creates the solutions for consensus.

Take a break-a recap

This is always a good time for the group to take a break, right after the Life Long Learning task. Sometimes, the greeting circle is so anxiety ridden, that the third part of the brain-the kidneys-begins to interfere with the continuation of the process. People's demeanor helps to sense this. I can usually sense this. So, I may take a break before the Life-Long Learning task.

After the break, I continue with the Life Long Learning task, sometimes dividing the larger community into small groups so they can have more intimate discussions. When they complete this task, I explain the rationale for the task and then move into a recap of where we have been.

Let's do that now. Before moving ahead to the next activity, let's take a look at what has occurred so far, normally in one to two hours of time.

There are 24-30 participants sitting in a circle, without a table between them, open and vulnerable to each other. These people have participated in a grounding, where each has introduced him/herself, expressed their expectations and feelings about being here. The group has participated in a greeting circle, meeting each other, friends and strangers, making personal contact. They are reducing their fears about each other, opening communication with each other. This is followed by a talking circle, where each person has the opportunity to describe the greeting circle experience in terms of how it makes them feel, and what they have learned from the experience.

Each person has spoken at least three times. Each person has been listened to with respect at least three times. The questions are not directly about the conflict that brought the group together, but the answers are fostering an improved information base about each other. And, people are experiencing and learning some basic consensus seeking tasks.

By this time the group expresses a different feeling about being here, an increased sense of security and belonging, a sense of hope that something good might come of this.

It is now time to explore what the expectations are for the meeting, the session, the workshop. This is done with the Worst/Best activity.

Empowering others

Before the break I have selected a person to help me with the Worst/Best task. If a woman helped me with the grounding, then I chose a male, for balance. Again, I try to select someone who would not normally be in the power role of facilitator.

I have also selected two of three people to help with recording this task on the flip charts. Normally I include myself and some other person who has experience with recording. Sometimes I just select whomever is available to me.

I get the helper and the recorders together and review the task with them. I allow each person time to review the task in advance. I give the helper a 3 x 5 card with questions on it and explain how to carry out the task. Then I allow the person to decide if he wants to do this.

Less than one in a hundred will refuse the task. They have a cue card, and it is an opportunity to be the facilitator. The person who did the grounding didn't fail, so this appears safe.

I hand out "cue cards" for the beginning tasks to the potential helpers. The questions and the process are written out on the card. Some may think this is an insult to their intelligence, but I point out that the President and Bob Hope use cue cards all the time. The card allows the person to be less apprehensive about the task, and more focused on the group. Later in the session, the tasks are provided verbally, and the person is expected to recall them.

I point out that the important part of his role is to listen, to manage the process in a quiet, low-key guiding manner. He has the opportunity at the end of the talking circle to summarize what he heard and learned from the group. He becomes the group memory. This fosters listening with respect in the group.

This is what the cue card says for this task:

Side 1:

Pass out 3 x 5 cards to all participants to write on. Then ask the question:

What is the worst possible outcome of this workshop (session, retreat, activity)?

(After asking the question, wait, in silence, until all are done writing. Then have them turn the card over.)

Side 2:

What are the best possible outcomes of this workshop?

(After asking the question, wait, in silence, until all are done writing. Then, record all the worst outcomes, beginning with yourself. Reverse the direction to record all the best outcomes.)

I point out the need for silence to the facilitator. This will provide a balance to the individuals, to the group. They have been experiencing each other while talking. They feel the need to be "on." This approach allows the individuals to go internal to obtain information, to rest their being while doing so. They are not "on." This allows time to consider what is to be said.

I caution the facilitator to wait until the last person is done writing. This sends a strong behavioral message, that each person is important. We will wait for everyone to participate.

I remind the recorders that their role is to write everything that is said, even if it means repeating the information. The facilitator will see that each person reads in sequence, and that the information is recorded before moving on.

Creating the group memory, a time of acceptance

I can sense the difference in the room. People are feeling more comfortable and relaxed. They are aware that this is a different approach. They are waiting for what comes next.

When all have returned and are seated in the large talking circle, I turn the group over to the facilitator. I repeat the need to share power in this process, to demonstrate that we can all facilitate.

The facilitator manages the large group through the first steps of the 3 x 5 card task. He has the two or three recorders move to the easels. He explains to the group that we are going to report on the worst outcomes first. They will be recorded in their entirety by the recorders. The facilitator begins with himself.

When the worst outcomes are completed, remembering to include the recorders at the easel, then he reverses the sequence. The person who spoke last will now speak first. The facilitator will speak last. This introduces the idea of balance.

People often get impatient and apprehensive with this task. It is designed to slow people down, to provide the opportunity to say what they want to say without rushing, with the possibility of being heard, being acknowledged.

But, many people will read fast, too fast to be recorded. The recorder will have to ask for repeats until the person becomes self conscious and passes the card to the recorder. Or the person will edit what has been written, feeling embarrassed by the length of the statement. Sometimes the group will help this out with humorous, cutting remarks.

Some people will assert that their statement has already been recorded, or that they feel represented by the others' statements. Some will become impatient with the group, and say so before making a brief statement to be recorded, as a sign of displeasure with the time it is taking.

All of these are normal reactions. If they occur, and seem to be affecting the group, I will stop them and give them my insight on the situation.

"This task is designed purposefully to slow you down, to give you the opportunity to say what needs to be said, free of interference from others, or of time constraints. Because we are not used to getting our turn, or are not listened to, we either speak fast, or not at all. Only those who are more competitive will speak, and they know they are rarely listened to."

"In this process, we will take the time for each person to have their say. You have time to read your statement slowly, so that all in the group can hear it, so the recorder can record it. This will feel different."

"You may feel self-conscious, because you don't normally get, or take this much time. It is OK to have that feeling. This time is set aside to hear everyone's worst and best outcomes. It is a time to begin recording what is said so we have a group memory."

"Read your statement slowly and clearly, to the entire group. Read it all, even if it is a duplicate of what someone else said. You honor the other person by affirming their thought. You will add to the richness of the information base of the group."

"For those of you who are impatient, that is because you are now an equal member of the group. You can relax. You don't have to carry all the load. Listen and hear what can be added to the knowledge base."

"I know how it feels to be impatient, because I am that way myself. I know that my definition of impatience is: I wish they would just hurry up and do it . . . my way!!! I have learned there is some value in taking time to listen so we can do it OUR way."

Often humor is used to express apprehension. People seem to laugh at whatever anyone says, using double meanings for words. If this happens, I stop the process and talk with them about their behavior.

"I am observing laughter in the room when others are speaking. While humor is good in a group like this, sometimes it can have negative consequences. If you laugh while I am talking, then you can't hear the rest of what I am saying. I feel as if the laughter is taking away from my right to be listened to."

"Laughter also tends to trivialize the statements I am making, and this will have the tendency to either make me angry, or make me shy away from expressing myself in the future."

"I find that laughter is one way we express the apprehension we have about the situation. Let's just agree that this is an apprehensive process, and then transcend that with our listening posture."

Normally the group will become more centered and focused on the task with this information from me. I hesitate to do this, but have learned that it is necessary to help the group be respectful.

Worst/Best Outcomes

What is the **worst** possible outcome of this workshop?

What is the **best** possible outcome of this workshop?

In this task, we explored the fears and hopes of the participants. It is important to explore the worst fears before the best hopes. Fears are uppermost in the minds of those who are apprehensive, uncertain, unwilling.

It is normal and right to fear the worst possible outcomes. Consider these situations:

- You are sleeping and the phone rings at 2:00 AM in the morning. What do you think? How do you feel as you answer the phone?
- Think of how it feels when your boss calls you and asks you to come to her office. What do you say to yourself? What do you imagine will happen? How do you feel?
- You are a senior citizen, walking home from the grocery store, with a bag of goods and you see some juveniles standing around on the street corner. What would you think? How would you feel? How would you react?

- You are picking up an airline ticket for your first ever flight cross country. What are you thinking of? How do you feel? What actions do you take? How does the take-off impact you?
- You are driving down the freeway, and are surprised to see a state trooper behind you, coming fast, with lights flashing, siren screaming. What is the action you take, and how do you feel in that moment, what do you think will happen?
- Your young toddler is chasing a ball toward the street. There are no cars coming. How do you react? Do you yell to him and demand he stay away from the street? Even though there are no cars there, you experience the worst possible outcome-THE CHILD BEING HIT BY THE CAR! Not only that, you feel the potential emotion of that moment just as if it is happening right now.

In such a way, people, fear the worst outcome of any situation and operate emotionally out of that fear just as if it were really happening in the present. This is a major motivator for most conflict.

It is instructive to look at the dynamics of these situations. When *my* boss asked me to come to his office, I immediately wondered, What have I done wrong? I begin to feel tense in the pit of my stomach. I can feel my jaw clench, and my anxiety rise.

The event has not occurred yet. I am not in his office. Yet, I am *imagining a future outcome*. The future outcome is based on some *past* experiences with bosses who asked me to come into their office only when they were upset with me. These were not pleasant experiences. I remember this unpleasantness, often magnify it in my fears.

I feel anxious, apprehensive, uncertain. I rapidly search past events to determine potential mistakes. I mentally practice my defenses. My jaw clenches in anger at being confronted by such trivial situations. My chest is tight, my heart is beating rapidly, my voice is shaky. I am now in a "Fight or Flight" mode. I will choose to fight.

I am imagining my worst fears, fearing a *future* outcome, based on *past* negative experiences, and feeling the emotions in the *present* moment. I feel as if the worst outcomes are actually happening now. This causes chemical and physical responses in my body that are more appropriate to life-threatening situations. My strategies are defensive, based on preventing the worst outcome.

Just imagine how I will look as I enter the office of my boss. I am adrenalized, am tense and this is apparent in my demeanor. My voice is strained. My mouth is dry. I speak loudly, demanding to know why I am there. I make excuses for the imagined event, not knowing that is the wrong event.

My boss will not be pleased. His worst outcomes will come to the fore and he will act in a defensive and controlling manner. He is the boss, and he has the right to request my presence. No matter what the reason for the meeting, he will remember me with disapproving feelings. I am creating my own worst outcomes.

This is the way it works. The emotions are so strong that we behave as if the worst outcome was actually happening. The result may be that we foster the negative outcomes.

It is right to imagine these worst outcomes. They assure our survival. We will focus on survival issues before anything else, that is our first priority. But, survival is rarely the issue. The event is not life-threatening. It is just a life experience. And, we are behaving in ways that may foster the outcome we fear.

Since the event has not happened yet, there is still the possibility of the best outcomes. We can imagine the outcome we want from going into the office. I hope he has noticed the improvement in the quality of my work. I hope he has noticed the extra effort I am making, and wants to reward me in some way.

This is a future imagined best outcome. I may have had such an outcome in my past. But, given the normal situation, it is highly unlikely I have experienced this in the past.

This is what makes Best Possible Outcomes different. We may never have experienced the best outcomes we want. I worked effectively for many years without being recognized and rewarded. So, how could I imagine being treated with recognition?

If I am a child who has always been abused by adults, how can I imagine a good relationship? If I have been divorced three times from bad marriages, how could I imagine a good one? If the teacher always makes me feel stupid or powerless as a student, how can I imagine being treated as an intelligent being?

We are more focused on worst outcomes. They seem to occur more often because they are remembered more vividly. The good events fade into the background.

When I was a child, my parents had an emotional and angry relationship. They fought bitterly, on the edge of violence (my worst fear) about money, the children, bills, relatives. I remember these arguments and the feelings associated with them. They are vividly imprinted in my childhood memory, with all the attendant fears and anxieties.

From my childhood viewpoint, their relationship was a continual argument. From my adult viewpoint, I realize they only occurred two or three times a month. The intervening time had some good, yet indistinct memories. I have to work to recall them. They are overshadowed by the emotional events.

The result is, we may find it difficult to imagine best outcomes. This is especially true when confronting conflicts. Can you remember a best outcome from a conflict?

It is possible to create a best outcome memory. When I was sent to the Catholic Charities summer camp, my relationships with the adults were positive and peaceful. I experienced adults working together in a positive manner. This is a memory I can tap. It was created for me by others.

This is a function we can play in helping confront conflict. We can create an experience that is positive and effective. This experience can balance out the worst outcomes.

Best outcomes are possible. They are inherent in any situation. They can be imagined just as vividly as worst outcomes. They can have the same emotional impact in the moment, positively affecting the emotional, chemical, and physical responses in the body. The strategies you develop will tend to foster these outcomes.

Everything is possible

I am not suggesting "positive thinking." I am suggesting "negative *and* positive thinking." All events/issues have a potential worst or best outcome. Either is possible.

Typically, some of us choose to focus on either the worst or the best outcome. We are labeled as the pessimists or optimists. When these views become pitted against each other, we tend to see the worst outcome or the best outcome as the exclusive possibility. This results in polarization of views and stereotyping of individuals as positive and negative. This is one of the major barriers to resolving conflicts.

The best outcome is often not experienced by people in conflict because they get focused on talking about the worst possible outcome. Rarely does anyone acknowledge their worst outcome so they can move to the best outcome.

The fact is, all of us will have worst outcomes for any event. I know this because the thousands of people I have worked with have always expressed a worst outcome for their situation. Those for and those against had worst outcomes. Those who were positive had worst outcomes, as well as those who were negative.

Rarely, someone will deny the possibility of a worst outcome. These people explain that they have been taught only to think positively, to see negative as negative. Eventually these people realize how they are denying their own reality. While a worst outcome may be seen as a negative, it is right to have one.

It is also right to have a best outcome. I know this because the thousands of people I have worked with have always expressed a best outcome for their situation. Those "for" and those "against" had best outcomes. Those who were negative had best outcomes, as well as those who were positive.

It is highly unusual for someone to deny a best outcome. Everyone, even the nay-sayers, want a best outcome.

I am suggesting that it is necessary in any situation to recognize and acknowledge the POSSIBILITY and both the worst AND the best outcomes. Both are inherent in the situation, because the outcomes have not happened, they are still in the future.

Acknowledge your worst outcomes. They are possible, and this will satisfy your survival. Magnify them if needed to assure they have a good representation.

Then, acknowledge the best outcomes, they are just as possible. They express the potential in any event or issue. They provide a goal, a direction, that all can agree to seek. They focus on the positive efforts of people who are seeking the best.

They will change your mental, physical, and chemical make-up so that you can imagine and implement the strategies to foster that outcome. You are now satisfying your needs for growth, for developing your potential.

Once your fears have been adequately expressed, then your hopes seem more possible, easier to express and believe. This leaves the images, emotions, and words of the best hopes in the minds of all the participants. This will guide their thoughts and behaviors in resolving the conflicts. This will mobilize the "Vanna White Effect," so that the whole brain will move you in the direction of the desired outcome.

Worst/Best/Possibility

a summary

Worst outcomes: these are feared *future* outcomes, often based on *past* experience, with a *presently* experienced emotion and physical reaction. When people believe them, they affect their perceptions, beliefs, values, and strategies. They tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies when strongly held.

Best outcomes: these are hoped for *future* outcomes, sometimes not previously experienced, but intensely imagined, with a *presently* experienced emotion and physical response. When people believe them, they affect their perceptions, beliefs, values, and strategies. They tend to be self-fulfilling prophecies when strongly held.

Possibility thinking: an acknowledgment that both worst and best outcomes are present and inherent in each moment, up to and often after the event. This balanced view allows the movement toward desired outcomes.

Life threatening or life experience?

As I explored conflict resolution with others, I became impressed with the magnitude of reactions people had to ordinary events. To me they seemed overreactions, magnified out of proportion to the event. I wondered about this behavior.

I soon realized that imagining worst possible outcomes triggered our survival needs. This appears to cause us to see everyday stressful events as possible "life threatening situations." We are constituted to assure individual and family survival. Our survival needs come first.

This was theorized by Abraham Maslow in his famous Hierarchy of Needs. This theory is based on his studies of personality and its relationship to motivation. He developed a conceptual hierarchy that begins with the most primitive motivational needs and climbs to the most advanced human needs.

At the lowest level are the needs for basic human survival: food, water, sex, sleep. At the highest level are the needs for the truest and most fulfilled expressions of self, and a connectedness to universal needs.

The worst possible outcomes trigger behaviors related to the survival need motivational level. Here, the motivation is to protect the individual life. To understand how this impacts us, you need to understand about the makeup of our brain.

The human brain is really three brains, the reptilian, old mammalian, and the new mammalian. These are wrapped over each other in successive layers of complexity. We share some of these layers with the animals.

The reptilian brain is located at the end of the brain stem, and is essentially unchanged by evolution. We share this brain with our earliest animal ancestors. This part of the brain contains our genetic and instinctive memories, the heritage and lore of our species. It is the site for the survival instinct, the fight or flight behaviors, defending territory, having a sense of physical place. I suggest it seeks to meet the needs of survival and security on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

The older mammalian brain we share with other less complex mammals. This brain is involved in hoarding, bonding, nesting, in establishing hierarchies (pecking order), and in playing activities. The older mammalian brain registers pleasure and pain, reward and punishments. It is the seat of deep emotion, of love, anger, hate. Being mostly emotional, it is unable to express itself clearly in words.

This part of the brain appears to respond to the motivational needs for social belonging, the need to be accepted by others. It also responds to the need for status, to have a sense of place in the larger community. It seeks to be recognized, acknowledged by others. As such, it is dependent on external forces for its sense of self. It becomes codependent on the other to meet its needs.

The newer brain, or neocortex, is wrapped around this older brain and consists of our thinking cap. With this brain we have the ability to observe, to cope with external and environmental events, and to learn from our experiences. We can imagine the future based on past experiences. We seek to influence future events.

This is where we gain the ability to express ourselves, verbally. This part of the brain is analytic, holistic, can synthesize, is rational and intuitive. This is the part of the brain that separates us from the animals.

With this part of the whole brain we seek self actualization, self esteem, self appreciation. We seek autonomy, a sense of internal place. We seek to see things more broadly outside ourselves. We create ideas that tend to have universal meaning, that can meet community needs as well as individual needs.

There is a tendency to reduce everything we study into parts. In fact, there is one brain, one person. But this whole brain has three evolutionary parts that provide us with different functions. We must respond to all these

needs if we are to become a whole person. That is why the reptilian and older mammalian brain become so important in our everyday life.

When we imagine the worst possible outcome of a situation, we are sending a strong signal to the reptilian part of the whole brain. This part of the brain cannot distinguish between a *life threatening experience* and an *everyday life experience*. The tendency is to respond to a situation with imagined worst possible outcomes as if the life is threatened.

Imagine my boss saying to me:

"Bob, come into the office, I want to talk with you."

I immediately experience worst possible outcomes. This converts the message my lower brain hears:

Bob, come into the office, I want to kill you!

This may appear to be an overreaction to you, the reader. I am magnifying and overreacting to the situation. And, it is real to me. It is the message that I respond to. There is a possibility that my security, my survival are threatened. It determines my response to the situation. I become emotional, reactive.

I am immediately into "fight or flight" behaviors. My strategies are now oriented toward individual survival. My strategies are intended to be protective and defensive. My body may respond with a rush of adrenalin. My heart rate increases. My muscles tense, I will either stand and fight, or distance myself from the threat.

This response will be felt in the simplest of situations, that are not in the least life threatening. Our older brain does not know how to make this determination. It is interested only in survival.

This is the reason that consensus cannot be reached through worst outcomes beliefs. The purpose is individual survival, not community survival. The fears are individual, the reactions are defensive, aimed to protect the individual.

People operating out of their individual, and often competing worst fears are not interested in developing a win-win solution. They want to win, even at the expense of the other.

Expressing the worst possible outcomes of a situation allows this concern to be expressed verbally, through the newer brain functions. Recording these on the easel pad allows each person to see these worst outcomes visually. The fears can then be assessed as life threatening, or as a life experience. This gives attention to, and honors the responsibility of the older brain.

Expressing the best outcomes, however, requires that we think ahead, that we be proactive, cognitive. Since this is based on hope, on a better life, the newer brain is called into action. A different future can be imagined and created. This releases other chemicals into the system, the endorphins which are stress reducers. This, in turn, relaxes the muscles and the feelings inherent in the situation. We can see and feel that this is just another life experience.

This part of the brain reacts to the needs of the individual and the community. It tends to be more inclusive. We can learn from the life experience, can solve the problem. But, this part of the brain will not be involved with reality if the worst outcome remains unexpressed. The survival needs will take precedence over the higher needs.

This is the reason that one "negative" individual will prevent an entire group from moving ahead on a decision. Expressing her worst fears, triggers worst fears in all of us. We try to ignore our feelings and put the blame on the one person. We become immobilized, the decision is not made.

In order to move ahead we need to honor the whole brain, our fears and hopes, our past and potential future, our emotions and intellect. We must be reactive, then proactive. This consensus process allows you to do that.

Balance

Balance is defined partially as a force that counteracts another, a bringing into proportion, establishing a pleasing harmony of various elements, creating a mental or emotional stability.

Seeking consensus, whether in individuals or groups, requires careful attention to the notion of balance. By balance, I do not mean seeking a middle ground, a compromise. I refer to the actions taken to assure that the opposing points of view, of information, are represented fairly, or equally. This also applies to beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Groups that have no balance, that are oriented around one emotion, one belief, one behavior, one view, will become a group-think, where there is little thought and lots of loyalty to the agreed upon system of thought and resultant action.

It is important to have the aggressive and the peaceful in the same room. It is important to have the most polarized positions, for and against, represented in the room. It is important to have love and hate represented. It is important to have thinking and emotion represented. It is important to have sound *and* silence.

A balance is created in this process in many different ways. These include:

- In the greeting circle, a person experiences being the greeter and the greeted person. Each of these is a different experience, providing a balance.
- When asking questions in the talking circle, the direction and sequencing of the participants is reversed, so that the last person is first, and the first person is last. I experience being first, last, and in-between. This provides me different experiences, different information, and exposes different parts of my personality.
- After a group has verbally explored an issue, the group is asked to write what they heard or learned from others in the group discussion. This allows silence to occur, to balance the talking. This allows people to go internal, as opposed to external. This allows people to write their thoughts in advance, to be proactive, rather than emotional, or reactive.
- Co-facilitators are male and female pairs. When establishing a panel, a diverse group of males and females is selected. The grounding and the closing is done by a male and female. This provides balance in representation.
- There is balance between the experience and learning from the experience. This is done with the life-long learning questions after an event. It is also done with the grounding and the closure at the end of the day.
- We ask questions that require thinking and feeling answers. This not only taps the right and left lobes of the brain, but expresses the whole self.
- Exploring worst and best outcomes provides a balance of information and emotions in responding to a situation. The entire brain, the reptilian, older mammalian, and new mammalian, are recognized and engaged.

An inclusive process

In our culture we normally will continue with an activity when half, or slightly more of the group has completed the task. This is based on a competitive belief system. We believe in the survival of the fittest. This means that those who are faster should not be held back by those who are slower. "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," I have been told. Get rid of the weak links.

Somehow, those who can't keep up must be punished for this behavior. So, we move ahead without them. Or we say, "let's move ahead, you slow ones can catch up later." Later never happens. This separates the group into the "fast learners" and the "slow learners."

There is a tendency to foster this difference between individuals and groups. As a result the slower individuals do not get represented in the group situation. They become sensitive to this discrimination. They will begin to feel more apprehensive and drop out, or will become resentful and prolong their slow behavior. Either way, their information and ideas are lost to the group.

I have learned that we all need to participate if we are going to resolve the conflict and reach a consensus. This requires that we allow all members to complete a task before moving ahead, even if it appears to take more time.

In tasks that require writing, or recording, I wait until each individual, or group, has completed the assignment. This means that the fast writer has time to just sit and think while the others are completing the task. This is a good time, a balance for that person. Who knows what serendipitous material may enter her mind?

If a group finishes the task before the other groups, then they have time to dialogue informally. This is an uncertain moment at first. Who will speak? What will we talk about? This is their dilemma to resolve, their opportunity to seize the moment. Often, these discussions are more productive toward resolution of the issue than the assigned tasks.

We must be concerned with the survival of all, when a conflict affects all of us. This requires that we allow all to participate fully. The process must be inclusive, rather than exclusive. The process must allow for spare time to be experienced by some, just for balance, for serendipity.

When the process is inclusive, I have observed that the "slowness behavior" moves around among individuals. The person who finishes fast this time, is the last one the next time. The person who is slow now, is faster later. This allows people to express a broader set of behaviors, to have a broader range of experiences.

Stand-alone activities

The activities you are learning can be used as stand-alone activities.

1. Use the grounding to sense the mood of a group. Ask a thinking and feeling question and use the talking circle. (Example: What is the situation and how do you feel about it?)
2. Use the greeting circle to get a group of protagonists together to agree to consider seeking resolution. After the greeting, ask the two life-long learning questions: How did you feel about the greeting circle? What did you learn that will help us solve this problem together?
3. Employ the Life Long Learning process before or after any experience. This will ground each person's emotions in the experience. It will provide closure by developing meaning from the experience. This will prevent the experience from being a barrier to progress.
4. Use the worst/best outcomes before any experience to balance the whole person, to develop outcomes, and to create positive strategies and behaviors.

Any of the processes you learn in this book can be used stand alone. You will think of many ways to apply them.

The role and behaviors of the facilitator and recorder

The facilitator and the recorder roles are central to the consensus process. Three facilitators, myself and the two helpers, have been a model for the group. Three recorders wrote the worst/best outcomes on the flip charts. It is time to share the power, to help the groups learn to facilitate and record for themselves.

This is a good time to introduce this task. They have been together as a group. There is a sense of security and belonging. But, they are dependent on me to be the facilitator. I want to balance this up so they do not become dependent on me.

Creating small, diverse groups

I establish three to four small groups with a diverse makeup. I want at least five people and up to eight people per group. Knowing that people tend to sit together, I will have them count off to a number like 4 or 5, depending on the size of the group. This ensures diversity, because those groups sitting next to each other will be distributed into unlike groupings.

I assign each easel a number, then let them move to a group location by one of the easels. the process of moving, of taking their chairs with them is noisy, humorous, chaotic. This balances the sense of order they have been experiencing.

Now they are in small, more intimate, groups that are different to them. The small group includes different viewpoints, the protagonists, the "for" and "against," the powered and the powerless. They are uncertain and apprehensive again. It feels like starting the circle all over.

This movement is purposeful, and part of consensus seeking. I am moving them out of established patterns of behavior, keeping a balance between comfort and discomfort. The small group climate will eventually become comfortable once again. That is the time to change the group makeup.

I designate a person to facilitate each group, being certain to balance with male/female, old/young, for/against. This may be done by selecting the person closest to the easel, or the first person to the right of the easel. I tell the group what I am doing, and why I am doing it.

My instructions to the facilitator are simple.

"First, select a recorder, someone who can write on the easel. Repeat the question I ask you to the group. Start with a person and use the talking circle, where each person takes a turn in sequence."

My instructions to the recorder are just as simple.

"Be sure to record all the words expressed by each person. This will require that you begin writing when the person starts to speak."

I ask the first question to all small groups at the same time. "What is the role of the successful facilitator?"

I walk away from the groups (see **Detachment**) and let them carry on the task. There is some chaos (a good balance for order) as the groups decide how to do the task. The facilitators are new at this, self-conscious, uncertain of this new position they have. Often, they are the powerless ones in the system, so this is a new and powerful experience for them.

I rarely intervene in this task. There are some groups that violate all my beliefs about how to facilitate and record, but this is *their* learning experience. The groups will learn from each other as they progress.

When all the groups have completed their task, I have them report their recorded information to the larger group. I know they are complete when each person is represented with a statement on the flip chart. This means that some groups will finish early and want to move on. I advise them to use their informal time until all groups are done.

The recorder for each small group reads the recorded information to the full community. This allows each person's statement to be heard by the larger community.

Normally, this activity takes about seven minutes to record and seven minutes to report to the larger group. I point out how much information they have collected, and the fact that the 30 people in the room all had an opportunity to speak. This would not normally happen in a meeting that took a whole day.

I then ask them the second question, "What is the role of the successful recorder?"

I ask the facilitator to become the recorder, and select a new facilitator. This moves the power to others, reinforcing empowerment. I ask the new facilitator to reverse the sequence in the talking circle to bring balance to the group.

I walk away from the group. They are quicker in focusing on the task. The facilitators and recorders have learned by watching each other. I can see that more words are being recorded than previously. People seem freer to talk.

When this task is completed, all the groups are brought back to the larger circle. The recorders report the small group information to the larger group.

This task normally lasts less than an hour. Each person has experienced being in small, diverse and intimate groupings. This activity redistributes the participants into new relationships. It allows the group to focus on a common task and introduces them to facilitating and recording.

The facilitator and recorders are members of the group. They are behaving and experiencing these roles while they are exploring them. Everyone has been listened to with respect, and the information is recorded on the flip chart. This has been shared with the entire group.

Thirty people have spoken twice, and their information is now in a group memory. These recorded notes will be used later to create collective statements.

A guide on the side

I have often wondered how to describe what I do when people ask me. I do not regard myself as a mediator, because I seek to have the parties mediate themselves. I am not a negotiator, because the parties negotiate themselves to a consensus. The closest term that I have found to describe my role is a facilitator.

Normally a facilitator is perceived as someone who eases a process. But I know that I do much more than that. There is not a term yet that describes what I believe to be a new role in resolving conflicts. So I am willing to settle for facilitator.

The term is not as important as the beliefs and behaviors for what I do. I am willing to be called a negotiator, or mediator, or hired gun, or facilitator, as long as I get the opportunity to do what I do best . . . help people resolve their conflicts while learning to do it themselves.

These are some of the behaviors that describe what I believe is needed to facilitate people to a consensus:

I must be willing to take the risk of failing in bringing people to conflict. I must be willing to risk confronting a worst outcome during a session, and know that I can work it through to a best outcome.

I must be willing to acknowledge and confront my uncertainty about resolving an issue. I must be willing to learn, to accept my uncertainty as a condition for learning. If I am certain, I have no need to learn. I limit my opportunities to gain the information needed to facilitate the group to a consensus.

I must be willing to let go of control, the desire for power in the lower brain sense. I must be willing to serve the group to meet their needs and not mine.

I must be willing to be powerful in the higher brain sense. I must be able to confront the group if they begin to conform to avoid an issue. I must be willing to confront the group when they violate one of their own standards for honesty. I must be willing to let the group be apprehensive about the direction I am leading them, and still influence them in that direction.

I must be willing to let the individuals and group experience freedom; the freedom to speak, to question, to confront, to learn, to be who they are. I must be willing to let them move the process in the direction that is right for them, giving up any predetermined direction of my own.

I must be willing to be open to what the group needs, observing, understanding, accepting their needs. I must be willing to accept that the group has its own organic needs separate from my own. They will tell me through their words and behaviors what that direction is.

I must be willing to let the group learn through experience, accepting behaviors or actions that are still immature as they learn. I must be willing to trust that their time together will create the maturity needed to resolve the conflict, to create consensus.

I must be willing to stay in the background, allowing others to move forward to represent, to learn, to facilitate, to share the power.

I carry out these behaviors by using the process, adapting it when necessary to respond to their organic and holistic needs.

I will see that each person gets the opportunity to speak and be listened to with respect.

I will see that each person has the opportunity to facilitate, to record, to be empowered in some way.

I will ask the "right questions" based on my intuitive sense as the process progresses.

I will remain on the outside, detached, observing for the group.

I will provide insight to the group, or individuals in the group, to assist them in moving toward a consensus.

I will push the group beyond the impasse, beyond their apprehensions and fears of the confrontation. I do this while being aware of, understanding their uncertainty and fears.

The best description of my role was provided by a workshop participant:

"You are not the sage on the stage, but the guide on the side."

Detachment-a move to autonomy

People in positions of authority have been taught, in word and deed, to take responsibility for the actions of those in their "care." The power (parent) figure is often seen looming over the shoulders of those provided a task to do. They are there, of course, to provide guidance, to answer any questions, to immediately correct any deviation from the direction.

This is known as "management control." It is based on the subtle, and never expressed belief that those given directions, like children, must be guided by the parent figure.

This approach has some validity in some circumstances, like learning a new process with people entirely new to a situation. It is limiting in its effect on the participants, and its impact on time in other situations.

As soon as the participants sense they are dependent on the power figure, they will begin to determine what they need to do to get approval. This will include asking questions to clarify what the leader said. Or, maybe asking how to do the task. The leader is prone to explain, then overexplain what is needed, using tones that indicate the listeners are children, or simpleminded.

Those who resent power will challenge the leader's information, or task. This will lead to a power struggle, until the leader asserts her authority. All this takes time away from accomplishing the task, and focuses on the leader rather than the participants as the important persons.

As the leader roams the room, looking and listening into each group, aloof yet in charge, members of the group will engage in conversation with her. Or, she may enter the group and end up in a debate over the task.

The net result is to shift the attention to the leader, to allow the participants to behave as children, unable to cope with the simple task. This creates codependent behavior. The participants will continuously look to the leader for signs of approval, aware of her every movement, signs of displeasure. They look for cues to determine the information they need to develop to satisfy the leader.

In the consensus process, this role is changed. The leader learns to detach from the group as soon as the task is given. Detachment means leaving the circle of participants, sometimes even turning your back on them, or leaving the room. This places the participants in control of doing the task.

If there are questions, the participants are told to use their own judgment. If the questioner asks how to accomplish the task they are told:

"Whatever you decide to do is up to you."

If the facilitator is challenged about the task, the challenger is told to do what they feel is best. This leaves the power with the person, the group. They are empowered to do the task.

If the group answers a question different than the one asked, the information is accepted as part of the information base. It must be needed for the group to hear. Or, the question answered was better than the one asked.

This is a different approach, because it means the leader becomes a facilitator, trusting in the individuals and the group, expecting them to respond in an adult way. Rarely will you be disappointed. Expect some laughter, some "horsing around," as the group becomes used to freedom. Stay with them, and they will eventually focus on the issues and the situation.

This leaves the facilitator time to think through the next task. When you return your focus to the group, they will be hard at work. By being emotionally detached, you will see the process at work, collect information that will assist your intuition and insight for the next tasks.

The historian

The recorder role is as important in facilitating the process as the facilitator. In order for consensus seeking to be successful, each person must feel listened to and acknowledged. These two attributes allow a person to learn and grow. The recorder's actions facilitate this possibility.

When I come to a meeting with you, I have this need to be heard. I have something to offer. If this information is not presented, or listened to, then I am left with that unfulfilled need, that unexpressed or unacknowledged information. This effectively stunts my growth. I cannot create a new perception until I have gotten rid of the old one.

The result will be that I will attempt to make my case at the next opportunity, even if it is an inappropriate time. If you reject me again, then I am left with that old information and that old need. Since I must have closure, I will seek to speak longer and louder at the next opportunity.

If I am continuously rejected (my perception), then I must continue to seek to get heard. The result will eventually be that I become a nuisance in meetings, seeking to bring you back to my unfulfilled needs. You will respond to this with the words, "I don't want to meet with Bob again, he always says the same thing."

This is not a reflection on me, it is a reflection on your unwillingness to acknowledge me. I want to be heard, to be acknowledged. I do not exist, at some level, unless I am responded to in some fashion. I need your reaction to know that I am there. If I can only get that by disrupting the meeting, then I will do that.

The consensus-building process is designed to assure that each person speaks. It provides the opportunity to be listened to with respect. It also provides a visual and permanent means for recording what I say as I say it. This is the recorder's role.

When the recorder writes down my message, I can see visually that it is acknowledged. It becomes part of the message reported back to the larger group. It becomes part of the collective statement. It may eventually be included in the consensus statement.

Someone may refer to my statement and add to it. Someone may see it differently than I, and this view is recorded on the same easel pad. I can accept this view, be influenced by it, as they may be by mine.

I exist! There is an acknowledgment of my existence on the board. There is a history of my individual input, and it is made part of the group memory.

This allows me to let go of the old information and move on to the new. I can now let new information flow into the space created by your acknowledgment of my old information. I can learn and grow. I can move toward my potential.

The recorder makes this miracle possible. The recorder facilitates the movement of these words, these ideas to the easel pad so that I am released from them. The recorder writes as I speak so that I feel accepted and acknowledged. The recorder affirms my right to speak, to have a view, to be part of the history of the group's knowledge.

The recorder can be effective by:

Beginning to write as soon as the person speaks. Turn to the board, put the pen to paper, and write. This movement will allow you to hear what is said, so that the person speaking does not have to repeat.

If you face the speaker, holding the pen, waiting for the speaker to say what you want to hear, he will become nervous. He will begin to overexplain. He may add introductory remarks that are not part of the message, while he waits for you to record.

Writing every word the speaker says, exactly as he says it. Do not paraphrase, do not replace words with your own. Accept the message as given.

Do not question the words of the speaker, or the intent. This is his point of view, not yours. Do not ask him to clarify, that is the role of the facilitator. Just write down what is spoken. This allows the speaker to be focused, to move through his statements, to get closure.

Not worrying about spelling or penmanship. This is not a moment of importance for you, it is the speaker's moment. He wants to be heard. The spelling and penmanship are less important at this time. These can all be corrected later. Just write as best you know how.

It is not necessary to write each person's name next to the recorded statement. Each person knows what is theirs. Use some mark, an *, +, -, or o. Shy away from negative descriptors like -.

Recording is the best way I know to increase your memory and recall power. You are focused on the person's information, serving that person, providing the sense of acknowledgment that will help that person grow. You will remember the person, recall what they said why you do the collective statements. You become a historian for the group as they proceed toward consensus.

Color my world

Recording information is an important part of consensus seeking in that it provides opportunities to influence the outcome through nonverbal behaviors. Writing all my information down as I speak makes me feel accepted, with a sense of closure. Listening as I speak, as you write, makes me feel safe. Writing immediately speeds up the process, as we move to the next person without endless debates over what I said or meant.

Another important nonverbal message is in the colors of the markers used. I use watercolor based felt-tip pens, with a specific pleasing odor for each color. At least five different colors are placed at each easel. The colors include all those in the spectrum.

I know this violates some research that says certain colors are not effective for recording. But, the participants are close to the easel. They can see what is written. And, I know that each person, each culture, has favorite colors. If they see these are available, it makes them feel, at a deep level, accepted.

The research says that red is an emotional color and should not be used. But for the Mexican person, red is important to his country, being one of the colors in his flag. The same is true of the Italian person. Each person is honored by seeing colors that are respectful of their culture.

I see that all colors are available at the easel. I observe to see the colors people use. I observe the diversity of colors that are present on the different easels as the recorders write. If there is no diversity, this tells me that the knowledge base may be limited. I may have to "push their knowledge envelope." If there is a lot of diversity, it tells me that I have a deep knowledge base to tap.

The pleasing smell of the pens is helpful to the sight-impaired person who records for you. He tells what color he has by smelling. This allows him to have a choice otherwise not possible. This is a symbol of acceptance, of respect.

These attributes may appear small, but, like the concepts of balance and detachment, they are more powerful when they are read nonverbally. They take no more time to implement, yet they have a powerful influence on the outcome.

Exploring conflict

I now have a group of people who have experienced a morning together. They have become acquainted with each other; they have moved from being facilitated to facilitating and recording for themselves. They have been in three different groups, each providing an opportunity to experience a new task with new people. They have listened to different perceptions of the situation and they have met other people while talking with their whole Brain.

This has been done in a manner that has focused around the notion of consensus seeking, but we have not addressed their real issue. I now have the opportunity to have them explore the notion of conflict; not the conflict itself, but the definition of conflict.

There are two ways that I approach this topic. The first way is to be abstract, exploring the concept of conflict, while the second explores the reality of conflict in the environment. I can also explore both of these at the same time.

This is what I will do in this description. But, I want to give you some of my thoughts and feelings about conflict before we move into the learning modules.

I create new groups, probably using a random approach, although I may have the group develop their own diversity.

This reallocates the individuals into new relationships. I am again fostering uncomfortable uncertain feelings. They are in a new group again.

The facilitator and the recorder are selected for each group.

Conflict, an experience with power

Creating consensus is the central theme of this learning manual and this Institute. That requires confronting and resolving conflict. People like, and are attracted to, the notion of consensus. They are repelled by the notion of confronting conflict with others.

I know that I am.

What do you think when you hear that someone is in conflict with you? How do you feel? I have learned that being in conflict is probably the most feared, hated, and maligned experience in our society. We fear conflict because of all the past meanings and feelings it has for us, personally and socially.

Most people in conflict have never taken the time or energy to explore what conflict is, what it means to them, how it feels to them, and what the possible outcomes can be. The overwhelming majority of people whom I work with see conflict as negative, as an experience to be avoided at all costs.

Most of my understandings about conflict were developed with people who met to resolve conflicts using the consensus process. One of the first assignments I give these groups is to define conflict, and describe how it makes them feel. The most common definition of conflict provided during the workshops is:

CONFLICT IS A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION, OR A DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE OR A GROUP OF PEOPLE. People all have different ways of looking at an issue. This involves a difference of position, ideas, or concepts caused by each individual's own frame of reference.

This definition does not go far enough. We know we are all different, we even seek to minimize differences when we can. "Let's try to agree on what we have in common," we will say. We want to avoid our differences because we recognize they are the combustible material for the flames of conflict. There is still an ingredient needed to trigger the fire.

This ingredient is "POWER." Power is the ability to influence others, or things. Influencing can be done in an advocacy manner, stating a point of view, and hoping the other is moved to act on that information. Or it may be done in an aggressive manner, forcing the other to agree to your point of view, and to behave out of that agreement. This is the "flash point" for conflict. We now become adversaries, trying to impose our belief upon the other, rather than advocates trying to convince the other.

This is how one consensus group described the move to conflict:

CONFLICT OCCURS WHEN ONE PERSON REFUSES TO CONSIDER THE POINT OF VIEW OF ANOTHER. THERE IS AN IMBALANCE OF POWER WHICH POLARIZES US INTO ADVERSARY ROLES, SO THAT THERE ARE WINNERS AND LOSERS. Some are unwilling to see it another's way. But, people in positions of authority sometimes cause conflict or a power struggle.

Another group describes it this way:

CONFLICT IS A CLASH BETWEEN OPPOSING, UNRESOLVED, BILATERAL VIEWPOINTS ON AN ISSUE. When discomfort with differences in values, or the struggle between contrasting value systems collide, we are at war.

Implicit in both these perceptions is a notion of a "power struggle." When we get in this power struggle, the issue is reduced in importance, while the notion of winning is increased. How does this happen?

Imagine you and I sitting in a meeting with our management team. We both want to impress our boss. You make an observation that I disagree with. I state my disagreement, trying to convince you, and the others, of the correctness of my view. You are somewhat taken aback with the intensity of my presentation. You are compelled to respond, to defend your point of view. Your viewpoint has attained an increased significance to you.

We have now entered the debate stage, each person advocating for a position. If the situation is such that we respect each other to hear the differing perceptions, it may be possible to hear information that convinces us to change our point of view. Or, we may forge an agreement that represents both of our views.

If, however, I am committed to my point of view because it is connected to my ego, my sense of integrity, my need for recognition, my self worth, then I am compelled to win at any cost. This may require that I begin to respond more aggressively. I may laugh at, or otherwise trivialize your point of view. I may want to use my organizational position to force you to agree with me.

Now, I am moving us into the world of conflict. What is important is no longer what is the truth. What is now important is who is going to win.

Conflict resolution begins at this point. The other may decide to use the "flight approaches," to conform, to deny there is a difference, to distance himself from the issue. Or, the parties may seek a third person to mediate the situation to a conclusion. Or, the other may become equally aggressive, equally disrespectful, setting up a no-win situation for both parties.

CONFLICT OCCURS WHEN WE HAVEN'T AGREED UPON COMMON GOALS. Competing interests create a we/they mentality. We are not getting along. We lack acceptance of others' views, along with blocking their desires.

Conflict--an emotional experience

"If not resolved, conflict can result in war, the opposite of peace, serenity, and calmness." --Workshop participant

As soon as it is apparent that conflict is looming, the impact on the emotions of the participants and the observers is apparent. The competing parties become adrenalized, pitted in confrontation that has attained a significance beyond the issue. They may appear calm, cool, collected in their demeanor, but their voice tones are challenging, hard, quivery. Their faces are flushed, their muscles tense, their breathing is fast.

The observers are horrified. What was supposed to be a typically monotonous meeting has suddenly become a potential "killing field." Many take mental flight, glancing at the boss in the hope she will control the situation, or glancing at the clock to see if it is break time yet. Others seek to alleviate the tensions by attempting to change the subject, or stating that the parties are "really saying the same thing." Others are anxious to join the fray, choosing sides with possible future rewards in mind.

Make no doubt about it, conflict is an emotional experience, not an intellectual one. This is how participants have described it:

CONFLICT CAN MAKE ME FEEL SELF-CONSCIOUS OR AGGRESSIVE, UNCOMFORTABLE, UNEASY. I feel self-centered with a rush of adrenalin, headaches, stomachaches (Rolaids time) which produces a feeling that is overwhelming and exhausting. I have the "flight or fight" syndrome.

CONFLICT IS A STATE OF EMOTIONAL DISAGREEMENT, BASED ON DIFFERENCES OF BELIEFS, RESULTING IN DISEQUILIBRIUM. Those involved may be uncomfortable, anxious and frustrated. Conflict causes people to become afflicted with tension, stress, and nonproductivity.

CONFLICT RESULTS IN A BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNICATION. It brings about win-lose situations and a disruption in status quo. Conflict causes feelings of frustration, anxiety, fear, discomfort, intimidation, defensiveness, alienation, and unrest.

When the body becomes adrenalized, motivated to either "fight" or "flight," the perceptions of the people involved are altered. Survival needs rise to the fore, and worst possible outcomes magnify the significance of the situation. The world is divided into enemies and friends. Information gathered is intended to protect the person from harm. Defensive needs become paramount. All of these emotional responses serve to worsen the situation, to move it toward violence rather than toward solution.

Conflict need not be feared

The wisdom of the group may take over at this time. We instinctively know that there is potential for good. The participants state it this way:

CONFLICT NEED NOT BE FEARED. Generally, people feel the need to resolve conflict. If handled successfully, the process of dealing with conflict can be a learning experience for those concerned. Dealing with it provides an opportunity for positive things to happen.

SOMETIMES WE CREATE CONFLICT TO DEAL WITH ISSUES. This requires personal involvement, which produces strong feelings and emotions that are stressful. At times I want to be a protector, because I fear I will lose my friends.

CONFLICT IS ACCEPTABLE AND CAN BE EITHER GOOD OR BAD. It may be resolved or not resolved. It may also include a sense of challenge, stimulation, excitement, health, and growth.

CONFLICT CAN BE PAINFUL TO RESOLVE, BUT MAYBE IS RESOLVABLE IF DEALT WITH AT THE TENSION STAGE. Conflict feels good when it is over.

CONFLICT IS PRODUCTIVE AGONY WHICH HOPEFULLY LEADS TO GROWTH. I know it is something I have to deal with if I am doing my job. I have creative anxiety which may be challenging, stimulating, exhilarating, fun and have a high emotional impact.

Conflict--"the irritant that creates the pearl"

Each of us has had a different life experience with conflict. Most of us have learned, or been taught, to avoid conflict. We conform to the greater power, seeking to please. Or, we deny the problem exists, that we are more in agreement than in disagreement. Or, we may put distance between ourselves and the other.

Yet, in each of us is this understanding that our response is inappropriate. By avoiding the conflict, we somehow feel less, a loss of opportunity, a loss of self.

CONFLICT CAN'T BE RESOLVED IF THE PARTIES INVOLVED REFUSE CONFRONTATION. Conflict can lead to unresolved issues coupled with displays of emotion. It may be related to an issue that is not apparent at the surface, and can involve any issue or a multiple of issues.

There are intrinsic benefits to conflict, it is a natural process, created by the infinite differences that are inherent in us as individuals, or as groups in cultures and society.

This is recognized by the people I have worked with. They express it this way:

CONFLICT IS NOT GOOD OR BAD--BUT IT IS JUST A NORMAL, HEALTHY PART OF OUR LIVES, LIKE DEATH AND TAXES. CONFLICT IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH, CHANGE AND LEADS TO PROGRESS, WHICH LEADS TO BETTER DECISION MAKING. Conflict is stimulating and an antidote to boredom. Conflict is the fuel for creativity and makes me able to shift my paradigm.

CONFLICT IS A FACT OF LIFE AND IS USUALLY RESOLVABLE. Through conflict, you arrive at solutions.

We cannot escape the certainty of conflict, no matter how trivial. This gift is actualized only when the issue is resolved.

As one participant put it: "Conflict is like the irritant in the oyster that creates the pearl."

Let there be conflict on earth, and let it begin with me

In the early '80s, while living in Portland, Oregon, I was enjoying a "Neighbor Fair" on the banks of the Willamette River. It was a glorious summer day experience. Tens of thousands of people were rubbing shoulders with each other in peace and harmony. The young/old, rich/poor, Anglos, African American, American Indians, Asians, people with disabilities, city people, urbanites, rural people, homeless people had come together to have this annual communal experience.

Rotating bands provided music for all tastes. People sat on the grass, with picnic lunches, beer and pop, listening to the music. Children ran around with balloons, careful to keep in sight of their parents. People danced and sang to the music. The homeless people collected the discarded beer and pop cans.

Food booths ringed the crowd, their ethnic smells and tastes enticing the crowd to buy. Artisans hawked their wares in small booths, alongside the inevitable advocacy booths selling ideas and pushing petitions for reform.

It was at an advocacy booth, "Oregonians against Nuclear War," that I saw the T-shirt. The shirt was light blue, with a white dove floating across the front. The words **LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH, AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME** were imprinted above and below the bird.

I wanted it. I wanted not just the shirt, but the idea, the actuality of peace. Not just peace. I wanted to be rid of conflict; interpersonal conflict, mostly, but my internal conflict as well. I hated it, I feared it.

My environment seemed filled with conflicts that were unresolved. They took all my energy just to avoid them, to please the ones who were conflicting with me, to rescue those in need. The number of conflicts appeared to be building, getting out of control. My family, my job, my work, my community seemed filled with them.

Environmentalists were questioning the harvesting of trees in the forests I was managing, causing me to question my belief and value systems. My children were exploring life in a way that challenged all my values. The world was playing the game of "Chicken" with nuclear warheads.

Why couldn't we just do away with conflict and live in harmony and peace? Then we could be like this group of sun and music worshippers. I bought not just a shirt that day, but the hope I would purchase the peace I have been searching for all my life.

My desire was to run away from, to avoid conflict. My childhood memories connected conflict to highly emotional states, to violence, to the possibility of death. Conflict seemed fruitless, out of my control. The emotional turbulence associated with conflict reminded me of the turmoil in a hot tub. The water bubbles and boils where opposing jets of water come together. My reaction is to put my hands over the nozzles to stop the jet streams, attempting to bring peace and calm to the tub. This is impossible, because the water jets out somewhere else. I use my feet, and still the water jets out.

I switch hands trying frantically to stop all the jets of water. I don't have enough hands, feet, or energy to stop all the conflict. The result is, I am exhausted. I vow never to go back to the hot tub.

That was my response. I wanted to stop the conflict, to avoid conflict, to deny it existed with others. I wanted to please others rather than to confront, to control the situations so conflict was overlooked.

I have since learned that conflict will always exist. It is a natural part of life. It can be postponed, avoided, run away from only at a high emotional and physical cost. It requires incongruence with those I am conflicting with. It requires I subordinate my needs to others out of fear.

The only possible way we could do away with conflict would be to hold everything stable, to make everyone a clone of everyone else. We would need laws that assure each person spoke the same language, belonged to the same religion, had the same beliefs and values, and were all the same age and experience.

That will never happen. We are continually changing beings, surrounded by other beings with different ages, values, beliefs, races, cultures, religion, and abilities. Our situations and experiences are continually shifting, responding to the new global perspective. Each of these people and situations poses a challenge to us.

We can attempt to make these people similar to us, to get them to believe in our beliefs. Or, we can accept them as they are and seek a creative and consensus solution.

Conflict exists with purpose. It causes us to be aware, to be self-conscious. It establishes the opportunity for learning, for increasing knowledge, for actualizing our being. Through our conflicts we create and refine our beliefs, values, and behaviors. It is through conflict that we evolve.

Confronting conflict requires an element of risk. I must confront the situation, and be the catalyst for the emotional outburst that may be inherent. I must be ready to confront the violent consequences I fear.

When the moment of venting is past, there is the calm and the peace that I seek. There is the possibility of understanding, the possibility of new knowledge, new beliefs and behaviors that will make me a more congruent and adaptive person.

I can sit in the hot tub, accepting the jet streams and the turbulence as the essence of the tub. I can move through the fury and intensity, letting the energy massage my body and mind. I become relaxed and peaceful. My mind is open to new ideas. Accepting the turmoil brings the peace.

I know the peace won't last long. Conflict will rise because of my growth, my adapted beliefs and values. I must confront again. I can choose the times, the places.

Today I am willing to risk confronting. I am still uneasy, uncertain and anxious, but I want to grow, to learn from each person, from each experience. This requires a willingness to be aware of when to risk. It requires being the one to "start" the conflict by confronting it.

I have a new idea for a T-shirt. I want a hostile goose, beak upraised in wicked threat, with the words, LET THERE BE CONFLICT ON EARTH, AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME on the front of the T-shirt. Let that be what you see first.

On the back of shirt I want the dove with its peace symbol and the words LET THERE BE PEACE ON EARTH, AND LET IT BEGIN WITH ME. That is what you will see as you turn around in reaction.

This will provide the balance and possibilities for growth that I want in my life, and in yours.

Life Forces

We all sense that there are other forces around us that we don't understand. Many books have been written in an attempt to give them some scientific validity. These normally go overboard in an attempt to prove, to justify the presence of these forces.

I know there are many natural forces at work in this universe. These forces have been acknowledged by most cultures in many forms. They have been deified, given names and specific meanings, or purposes.

I do not have to label these forces as "gods" or "spirits." These are just terms used to acknowledge the forces. I wish only to acknowledge they exist. I also know there is some purpose to these forces. That purpose is often a mystery to me. I do not have to "worship" these forces, give them power they don't need. I just know they will influence what happens in a consensus-seeking session.

There are two life forces that I experience each time I am in a conflict resolution session with a group. I also feel these in my everyday life, but they are more pronounced, or have more significance and immediacy in these sessions.

Coyote--the Trickster--the teacher

The most frustrating life force that I encounter in consensus-seeking workshops is "COYOTE." This life force is known from American Indian Myths, or tales that were, are, told to the children of the tribe during the winter storytelling times. They have been translated into many books by whites attempting to codify and understand the myths.

These books include the myths recited as stories, with attempts in some to explain them in a rational manner. While they serve some good purpose, they miss the point.

Coyote is not just a "myth" or a story to the People, the American Indians. He is a reality, a life force that exists in our environment at all times. Coyote is a trickster, he will get your attention, divert you from what you are setting out to do. Coyote is also a teacher, for in each trick there is a lesson to be learned.

Coyote is not just a figure of one culture's imagination. He exists in other forms in other cultures. In my culture, the English, there is a similar creature known as the "brownie" who lives in the coal bin, and is capable of all sorts of bad tricks. The Irish have their "little people," the Leprechaun. The South Sea Islanders have the Sea Snake play the same role.

During the Second World War, pilots had a similar life force called the "gremlin" who seemed to cause the plane to malfunction. The Gremlin caused the attack plan to go awry, making the weather change. The Gremlin life force is the creator of all of "Murphy's Law."

This mythical life force is explored in some detail by Joseph Campbell in his many books about myths. In each culture, the figure plays the same role. Part man, part God; trickster, teacher, male and female, foolish and wise.

I have encountered the Coyote force during my sessions at those times when it was least expected or wanted. I have learned to be aware when this happens, to acknowledge the presence of "Coyote" and to learn from the experience.

Some anecdotes will serve to describe this experience. I met with a community of educators negotiating compensation, benefits and working conditions. Our meeting room was in the community center which included space in a neighboring room for the Senior Citizens. As we began to focus our discussion on the culmination of negotiations, pay and benefits, we were interrupted by singing. The Senior Citizens, in the room next to us, were singing "Amazing Grace," with their loudest and most joyous voices.

This immediately interrupted the discussion we were starting, causing the participants to stand up and mill around, asking what they could do. We could not ask the people next door to stop singing. It was determined the location of the meeting had to be changed. I knew that this was just "coyote" playing with us. Here we were, ready to resolve a key issue, and he was tricking us with this noise. We were losing our focus on the issue. We were reacting to forces outside our control.

I advised the participants to sit down. When they did, I asked them to listen to me carefully. I spoke to them about "Coyote." I suggested that this interruption was intended to provide us an excuse to avoid confronting our differences over salary. If we did not do it here, there would be little time left to complete the process in a new location.

I suggested that we would need to listen at our very best if we were to overcome the sound of singing. I asked the person making the presentation to start again. I encouraged the others to listen intently. I assured them that Coyote would leave if we did.

We proceeded with a discussion of the pay and benefits issue. The presenter spoke slowly and clearly, while all leaned in to listen. In a few minutes we were unaware of the singing. In about 10 minutes the singing stopped entirely. The group hardly noticed because they were focused so intently on listening.

In a second instance, I met with a group in the mountains of Colorado. The meeting was held in a large room in a mountain lodge. Double doors entered the room at each of the four corners. Two of the doors led outside to the forest.

In the afternoon of the second day, we were focusing on the key issue that needed to be confronted and resolved. There was some unfinished grief and anger about a manager who had been fired some 11 years earlier. Confronting this issue was the key event for this community of people. Resolving it would make a consensus on their issues possible.

As we were about to begin a panel describing the historical situation, a chipmunk ran across the center of the circle, between the feet of the surprised participants. The group immediately disintegrated into movement away from the circle. Some stood on chairs and yelled. Others grabbed a broom and chased the chipmunk.

Needless to say, I could see that Coyote had decided to make his entrance. And he was tricking the group. The men in the group were chasing the "man-eating chipmunk" around with a broom. Everyone's attention was diverted away from the issue.

I decided to break for coffee while the braver men in the group chased the chipmunk around the room. At the end of the break, the chipmunk was still in the room, under some chairs along the wall. The chipmunk tamers were tired and frustrated. They were discouraged at their inability to chase this fierce animal from the room.

I asked all to return to the circle. I talked to them about Coyote. I asked them to re-focus back on the issue. I started the panel presentation. When the panel was complete, I asked the group to look for the chipmunk. Without any fanfare the chipmunk had left of his own will.

I can give many similar anecdotes about this force. I just know that Coyote will come at important learning times. Coyote may be a phone call to one of the participants. It may be rain dripping through the ceiling of a southwestern town during the grounding, it may be the lights going out at the beginning of a workshop. Each of these is a learning experience. The approach I use is to welcome coyote, help the group learn about this force, and then focus on the issue, moving the group ahead.

The universal force

When I was younger, and new at consensus seeking, I felt that I was in control of what happened in planning or facilitating a session. "I" decided the schedule for the session, "I" determined, with others, who attended. "I" controlled the environment by selecting the location, the type of meeting room, etc.

I soon gave up this belief when evidence to the contrary showed I was fooling myself. My scheduling was postponed by an unplanned event in the community. It turned out the new schedule would facilitate the resolution. Uninvited participants showed up, and turned out to be significant in reaching a consensus. Invited participants did not show up for personal reasons. It turned out the final group was the right mix to get the conflict resolved.

The meetings were held in Grange halls without water, in darkened lounges adjacent to bars, in tiny rooms that forced the participants together. I soon learned that my plans were limited, and had only partial impact on the outcome. I soon learned to trust that the "Universe" would see that the right things happened, if I was willing to do my part.

The best anecdote to illustrate this occurred during a session in a high mountain valley in northeast Washington State. A community group met to resolve a conflict around a proposed major ski development. Many of the group that showed up the first day said they could not make it the next two days. They felt the situation was not solvable anyway. They were going to work on their ranches. Some wanted to move the rodeo grounds those next two days.

To lose all these people would have ended the session. There was not enough diversity without them. The community members helping me facilitate the session were alarmed, feeling hopeless, turning to me for a solution. I suggested we focus on today, and let the "Universe" decide what to do about the next two days. I asked them to suggest some ways to help the rodeo grounds get moved if everyone stayed.

It began to rain as we started. It worked itself into a downpour by later afternoon. This was not an expected seasonal event. Everyone returned the next day because the rain continued, making it near impossible to work outside. It rained the next two days, and stopped as we were doing the closure on the third afternoon.

One of the community facilitators had suggested that everyone bring work clothes the last day, so they could all work together to move the rodeo grounds. At the successful conclusion of the session, the community, the former enemies, went together to do this chore.

I know that if I continue to do my part in facilitating a session with people in conflict, the force I call "the Universe" will do its share. I have learned to trust in that. My role is to adapt to the situation as it changes. I have no need to go further with this knowledge, other than to accept this as a reality.

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