

Listening to Undersand

Clearing Blocks And Opening Pathways

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*Being Heard is so close to
Being Loved
that for the average person
they are almost indistinguishable.*
- David Augsburger -

What are the blocks that get in the way of *really* listening?

For us (the “Professionals”):

For our clients (the ones with the “problems”):

What is our primary job? (This is an either-or question - **choose only one!**)

_____ to listen **OR** _____ to solve problems

What’s the problem with “either-or” questions?

In your work, what types of behaviours signal to you that people are in conflict?

In **conflict** moments, are you: _____ more curious than usual **OR** _____ less curious than usual?

Becoming Curious about How We Use Our Minds in Conflict

Excerpt from Dr. Megan Price's article in Revista Mediacion Journal:
(available in Spanish and English online)

The investigator needs a well-stocked mind, else he will see but not perceive; but the mind needs to be well- stocked more with questions than with answers, else it will be closed and unable to learn. (Lonergan, 1985, p. 17)

In conflict ... we are wired to use our minds less well. We are contracted, constrained by threat, and pulled down by meanings riddled with error and bias. We resort to uncritical thinking, reactive valuing, limited deliberating, rash evaluating and constrained deciding aimed at defending ourselves against threat. The result is conflict behavior –the kind of stress-based behavior that ignites the conflict cycle that Picard (2016) characterizes as defend-attack-defend patterns of relating. The Insight approach proposes that if we become curious in a targeted way about how we and others are using our minds to make decisions that result in conflict behavior, then change becomes possible.

Researchers have been studying the effects of both being curious –of asking questions and wondering– and the effects of being on the receiving end of curiosity –of being wondered about. What they are finding is that when we are wondered about and when we feel understood by others, transformative shifts take place. Three decades ago, Prilleltelsky and Lobel (1987) replicated a 1969 study by van Kamm on the experience of “really feeling understood”. They discovered that when individuals have the experience of another’s understanding of them ... three emotions pre- dominate: satisfaction, security and tension relief. These emotions are the opposite of the anxiety, fear and stress that accompany threat. When we feel understood, we relax and we open up; we make connections that feel good, ease threat, and temper defense.

Part of this is due to the fact that people have an inherent desire for self-disclosure. According to Tamir and Mitchell (2012), 30-40% of conversation communicates personal experiences and feelings. Through a series of five studies, they showed what people have experienced for ages – that sharing about ourselves with others has intrinsic value. In fact, self-disclosure is associated with the reward and social bonding centers of our brains and “may serve to sustain the behaviors that underlie the extreme sociality of our species”. (Tamir & Mitchell, 2012, p. 1842). On the flip side, when we do not have the opportunity to self disclose and as a result feel misunderstood, the experience is associated with negative affect and social pain (Morelli, Torre & Eisenberger, 2014)

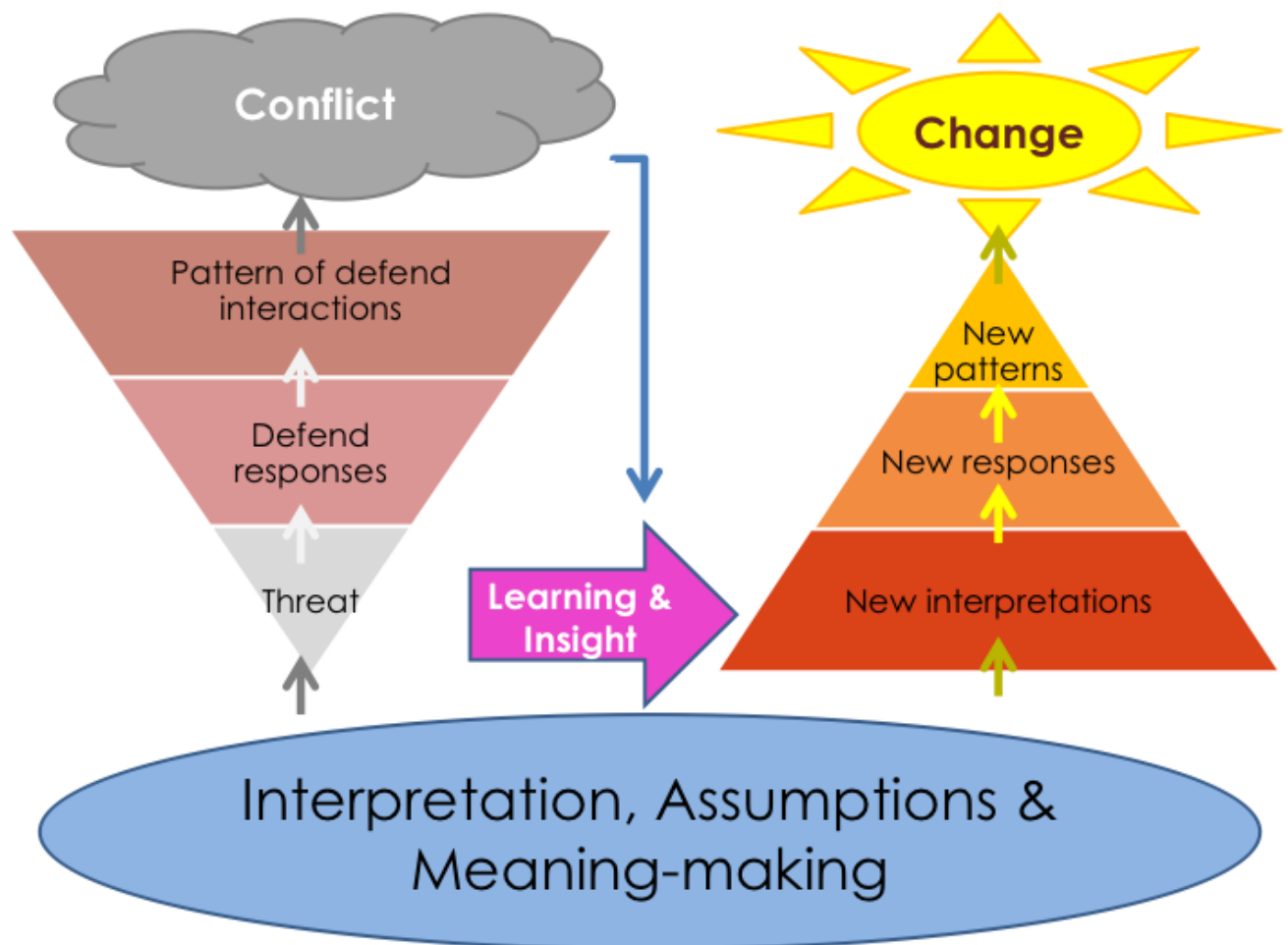
This is particularly true in conflict. Conflict escalates when we feel misunderstood, because feeling misunderstood activates a sense of threat (Picard, 2016). But, Gordon and Chen find that when individuals perceive that their “thoughts, feelings and point of view” are understood in a conflict situation, that perceived understanding acts as a “buffer against the deleterious effects of conflict” (2016, p. 255). These findings hold true in relationships that range from intimate partners to strangers (Morelli et al., 2014). The satisfaction, security and relief that we feel when we are understood make us feel good, support clear thinking and help us connect with others.

Feeling understood happens when we are listened to and wondered about on our own terms, and the effects are powerful.

INTRODUCING THE *INSIGHT APPROACH TO CONFLICT*

1. Conflict emerges from defensive responses to threat: I respond defensively because of my interpretation that your actions will have unwelcome or dire consequences. You react defensively to my defending.
2. Conflict escalates through our ongoing defensive reactions to interpretations of threat.
3. The Insight Approach encourages dialogue that helps parties discover new interpretations and engage in less threatening patterns of behavior.
4. This leads to learning and insights that can change the conflict situation for the better.

Cheryl Picard, *Practicing Insight Mediation*, University of Toronto Press 2016



WE EXPERIENCE SOMETHING AND MAKE MEANING OF IT

CONFLICT BEHAVIOURS: THE CLUES THAT TELL US “I’M NOT LISTENING!”

Conflict behaviours” (also called defending behaviours) include:

- trying to persuade or “prove it “
- justifying
- interrupting – “*yeah, but...*”
- repeating details, arguments, statements
- rejecting ideas before they have been fully presented
- reassuring (surprisingly, this can be a defending behavior)
- body language that demonstrates “*I’m not listening*” or “*You’re wrong*”
- other examples you can think of

The Insight definition of conflict tells us that when someone exhibits these behaviours, they are reacting to a perception of threat to something they value. (See the graphic on previous page.) This perception of threat gets in the way of listening and understanding, because people cannot listen or learn when they are defending from threat.

**When I am feeling threatened, I am not curious.
I cannot open up to learn something new
until my experience of threat is alleviated.**

When faced with conflict behaviours, many of us react with a “telling” response – informing, educating, reassuring, “making our point” – rather than a listening response – asking and wondering - and are frustrated when this seems to escalate the conflict behaviour with reactions like, “*You just don’t understand!!*” In these instances, we unwittingly become part of the conflict pattern and then we want to cry out, “*Come on! I’m just trying to help!*”

Given that many of us were trained to deal with conflict behaviours through reminders of previously agreed communication guidelines (or “ground rules”), it makes sense that we use these “rules” in the hopes this will correct the behaviour so we can move forward. But this doesn’t always work and can lead to more defending. And even when it does work – it’s often just a temporary correction and the conflict behaviour cycles back into the room later. (*It’s comin’ around again!*)

Why do you think a “telling” response sometimes lead to more defending?

LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

How often have you heard or said, "*That's not what I meant*"? And how many times does this go on, but we miss the cue that maybe there has been a misinterpretation?

How often are we listening to respond, rather to understand?

How does a tendency toward problem-solving affect our ability to *just listen*?

When we engage with others with a pure intention to listen and a desire to understand, the powerful effects of curiosity will be experienced by the other person, and by us:

Satisfaction. Security. Tension Relief.

If we are not curious – if we think we know what is “going on” - we won’t ask. We will stay in our role as “teller” (advisor, guide, director, etc.) and the person subjected to our telling might get defensive, feel judged or labelled, or just *check out*.

Trying to direct, guide or *tell* someone anything when they are feeling judged and defensive is ineffective and often leads to a further escalation of conflict.

In the Insight Approach, we want to focus on the meaning of what is said (or done) and not just on the words or actions. In our listening, we want to notice reactions and verify interpretation. Similar in formulation to what we now call “active listening”, insight listening focuses is on how I interpret what you say or do, and on verifying that my interpretation is actually what you intended. It is about the meaning that is being made in this moment.

Some Insight listening skills:

Bridging is the skill of summarizing the meaning you got from the speaker (not just what you heard, but what you understood) and then asking a question.

EXAMPLE:

Jack: *She is pushing the kids too hard to accept this separation and move on. They need time to heal and she needs to back off!*

Intervenor: Acknowledge/paraphrase **what you interpreted** from what you heard:

“Making sure the kids have a healthy adjustment is very important to you.”

Or acknowledge what you interpret to be the feeling: *“You seem really worried about the kids.”*

Then Verify before moving on. The client might nod – signaling you got it. Or they might add more content or clarify. Once you have verified that you are interpreting their meaning:

Then explore through genuine, curious, open questions, which could be as simple as:

“How are the kids doing?”

“What are you most concerned about?”

**Listening to understand differs from active listening
because it is focused on ensuring that my
interpretation of what you said is accurate.**

Paraphrasing: In insight, we paraphrase the interpretation, not just the words. If I expertly paraphrase what you said without stating what I interpreted you to mean, then I can never be sure I have captured your meaning.

But don’t paraphrase the defend story!

The “Defend Story” is the “blame story” – the evidence or justification that supports the client’s defending. For this reason, the **Bridge** must be a reflection of your interpretation of what was said, or an acknowledgement of a feeling, but don’t include content from the Defend Story.

EXAMPLE of paraphrasing the Defend Story (*Don’t do this!*)

Jo: I am so stressed with all this pressure to find a job. I want a career – not just any job! And the kids’ needs must come first. We all need time to adjust to what Jayhas done to our family. They need to back off!

If you bridged with: *You are not feeling supported by Lee.*

And then asked: *Tell me more about that?*

The speaker will give you more ammunition against Lee, and if Lee is there, they will chime in with their defend story. Escalating patterns of conflict behaviours will persist.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE: You get the content absolutely right after Jo complains that Lee **knows nothing** about how to manage the kids’ homework and refuses to change the schedule:

When you bridge with: *So you are worried because Lee has never been involved in the kids’ schooling and you think it is unrealistic for them to take on more responsibilities as a parent.*

You are **re-stating the Defend Story** which will typically lead to more defending (justifying, persuading, etc.).

Try this instead:

Bridge: *Staying in your current job and managing the kids' needs is a big worry for you.*
(This is my interpretation of what is of concern – I am choosing to focus there.)

Possible Questions:

I could seek more information – *What are the specific scheduling challenges you are facing?*

I could seek to understand the threat – *What are you worried will happen if you can't manage it all?*

I could check on motivation to have the difficult discussion: *If you and Lee are able to have a productive discussion about this, what do you hope will be better for you and your family?*

Other Examples (Remember to wait for verification after the bridge)

Bridge: *You're really worried about how this is affecting your kids.*

Ask: *What are you most concerned about?*

Bridge: *This is hard.* Pause.

Ask: *What do you hope will better if you and Lee can have a productive discussion today?*

Bridge: *This proposal is drawing a strong reaction from you – it seems hard to even discuss it.*

Ask: *What are you worried will happen if we spend time exploring this option?*

Bridge: *You seem frustrated with this discussion.*

Ask: *What's blocking you from expressing your concerns or needs?*

Curious Question: *What concerns you most about all this pressure you are feeling?*

The question needs to relate to what the speaker said, and what we interpreted and included in the bridge, but there are many directions you can take with your questions.

ASKING ABOUT THREATS

First Step:

Notice conflict / defending behavior.

Second Step:

Genuinely wonder about what is behind the strong emotion and defend behavior. (This is your internal work). Drop assumptions. Do not “diagnose”. Be internally curious about the threat causing the conflict behaviour.

Third Step:

You might start with a bridge and then a question:

- *You seem hesitant about her suggestion (bridge), please talk about your doubts so we can better understand.*
- *You seem frustrated even looking at this latest proposal (bridge). What’s holding you back from even being able to discuss it?*
- *After noticing an eye-roll of exasperation you say: Her suggestion seems to be frustrating you. (bridge) What’s your worry if that were to happen?*

You might go straight to a curious (threat-based) question:

- *What concerns you most?*
- *What is threatening about this plan?*
- *What are the dangers of doing this now?*
- *What is making you so uneasy?*
- *What’s blocking you from moving forward?*
- *What worries you about the draft plan?*
- *If you can’t agree, what are you worried will happen / or not happen?*

Or you might ask about hopes:

- *What do you hope will be better if you are able to talk openly about your concerns?*

THE HOPE QUESTION

While many of us know the importance of asking about the parties' hopes, the Insight Hope Question is purposefully focused on each party's motivation to participate in meaningful discussion. This is not a question about individual interests or needs. It's a question that aims to bring out the higher-level relational values and the underlying motivation for engaging.

The Hope Question

What do you hope will be better in your life if you are able to work this out in collaboration?

What do you hope will be better tomorrow if you are able to have a productive conversation together today?

The structure and content of the Hope Question makes a difference. We need to ask the clients what impact they hope a productive conversation will have on their lives.

And we often will have more work to do as each person answers. Bridging, layering, verifying interpretation, asking about threats – all of these interventions may be needed while working with the Hope Question.

When to Ask the Hope Question

At the beginning of the process:

The Insight Approach says start here. The structure of the Hope Question is more likely to result in reflection and response that is about relational (higher level) values. It can be helpful to tell the clients in your individual preparation meetings that you will be asking them this question, and ask them to reflect on their reasons for choosing a collaborative process. Transparency works well with this question.

Communication Flare-ups:

As the parties' conversation goes on to other topics, you may find an opportunity to ask the Hope question again. For example, if Jon begins interrupting (a conflict behaviour), and Kay complains, instead of calling on a communication guideline and asking Jon – the "offender" to change behaviour, you could go deeper by asking Kay:

If you are able to express yourself without interrupting, what do you hope will be better as a result?

As Kay responds, notice how (if) Jon is listening. Verify interpretation as the intervenor, or ask Jon to express what they understand from what Kay has said. Then Kay gets a chance to confirm or clarify. Next step could be asking Jon a similar question about hopes for productive discussions. But if you notice that they have listening to one another, the “flare-up” might have calmed, with both parties ready to move forward.

At Impasse:

In so many cases, we feel hopeless at impasse. Pause, Breathe, and Ask what will be better in Jon’s and/or Kay’s life if they are able to have a meaningful conversation to work things out. The Hope Question is about their motivation to “do the work”. Its purpose is to bring their values and concerns to the surface, and to reveal the threats that are fuelling the impasse.

If the clients are not motivated to have dialogue, and are focused on debate, it is probably time for a break or a shift in focus. Their answers to Hope Question will tell us. We don’t need to guess.

In the Midst of Conflict:

Ask what the parties hope will be better *if they can have a productive discussion*, rather than focusing on the problem to be solved. This can lead them to reflect on their higher level values. Ask each person in a joint session. And this also works in one-on-one sessions.

PRACTICE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

A CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR I NOTICED: _____

My reflection (inner work): WHAT I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT WHILE NOTICING?

DID I MAKE ANY ASSUMPTIONS? _____

Building my bridge

THE BRIDGE (an acknowledgement that contains my interpretation of what was expressed):

FOLLOWED BY A CURIOUS QUESTION:

A CONFLICT BEHAVIOUR I NOTICED: _____

My reflection (inner work): WHAT I WAS CURIOUS ABOUT WHILE NOTICING?

DID I MAKE ANY ASSUMPTIONS? _____

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