

THE INSIGHT APPROACH TO CONFLICT
AND COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

by

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Background Reading for IACP 2018 Forum PFI
Deepening Without Drowning:
Accessing Hopes, Understanding Threats and Breathing Fresh Air



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Introduction

The *Insight approach to conflict and mediation* is gaining wide-spread interest. Given its profound view of how conflicts are caused and how to solve them it is being lauded as the “fourth pillar in mediation”¹. Collaborative professionals are showing interest in this new approach because it provides the knowledge and skills to transform difficult conversations, resistance to change, escalated emotions, and other difficult conflict behaviours into opportunities for learning and collaboration. This essay examines the Insight approach from the perspective of three key ideas: 1) learning is transformative 2) feelings carry values and 3) knowing needs deepening.

The Insight Approach to Conflict and Mediation

The *Insight approach to conflict and mediation* is significant in that it moves away from prescriptive responses to conflict analysis and intervention. It is new because its elicitive intercessions focus on what people are doing individually and collectively when they make decisions to engage and disengage in conflict behavior. It advances present day conflict challenges by paying attention to how personal meanings influence individual and group relations. This new knowledge creates more humanizing interactions that enable solutions to grow out of the conflict process itself. To provide an example, when family members learn to talk about what matters to each other in non-threatening ways a powerful tool for change emerges because: “*if you don’t have to fight me, you can listen to me; if you listen to me, you can change your mind about me.*”

In the Insight approach, conflict behaviour is both relational and dynamic. It is rooted in the discernment of threat followed by a decision to defend against the threat (fight, flight, freeze). Viewing conflict behaviour as a defense from threat differs from views of conflict as a struggle over claims to resources or the incompatibility of goals, interests or needs. It recognizes that incompatibility alone does not necessitate conflict; incompatible differences can exist without conflict ensuing.

Approaches that define conflict as a struggle over resources or the incompatibility of goals seek solutions by identifying the problem and its cause. The Insight approach does something different. Change is achieved through an interactive pattern of learning aimed at generating insights that facilitate critical thinking and cooperative dialogue. When working with separating couples in collaborative practice this involves focusing on each spouse’s defend responses to experiences of threat that often manifest as non-sensible or spiteful actions toward the other spouse. Learning how one’s own actions along with those of others creates or sustains conflict provides the knowledge necessary for spouses to respond to conflict differently today and in the future.

Insight practitioners deepen understanding by noticing patterns of interaction and

¹ See Santiago Madrid Liras in *RevistadeMediacion*, a free, online mediation journal which in 2018 published a 2-vol Insight Approach Special Issue in both English and Spanish (<https://revistademediacion.com>).

raising curious and non-judgmental questions about the meaning behind these actions. They attentively listen to, and deepen on, how what matters to each party feels threatened. It is this broader and deeper knowledge that releases the human curiosity to know more. And, it is from knowing more that people are motivated to search for less conflictual ways of interacting.

The application of Insight theory to mediation and other conflict resolution processes is demonstrating the transformative value of insights. It is also showing how valuable the knowledge and skills are in enhancing ones own personal life. While this is particularly evident in family matters because they are so relationally driven, the same is evident in interpersonal, workplace, group, community, and other conflicts. Here's why.

<i>Learning is Transformative</i>

Simply put - learning changes the learner². In the Insight approach learning is focused on questioning the hidden assumptions buried in parties meaning perspectives. It is through the answers to these questions that shifts how parties see themselves, and how they see others. It is this shift in "knowing" that stirs the exploration for achieving some level of congruence on issues that would otherwise divide conflicting parties.

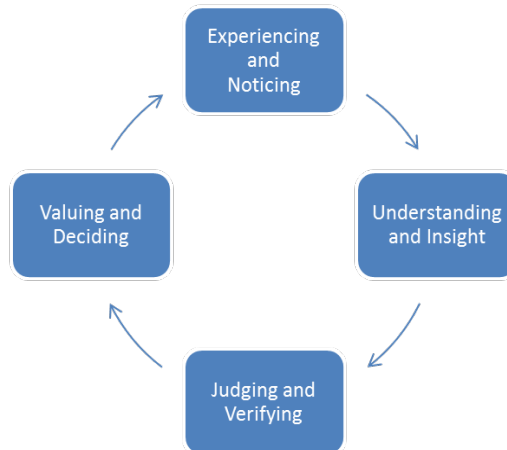
Because learning happens through social communication and is shaped by the culture of those involved, Insight practitioners engage parties in complex conversations of meaning. In fact, meaning-making and interpretive questions form the bulk of questions an Insight practitioner asks. Such questions might include, "*When you hear that explanation, how do you take it?*" *When he is late, what does that say to you? What do you mean by that remark? Clearly you take her reaction negatively, what are you interpreting it is about?* Insight practitioners know that the insights produced through genuine questioning have the power to turn the status quo into learning moments that can allow fundamentally different values to be retained without conflict.

Insights are deeply personal and their import profoundly social. They are answers to questions that come from genuine wondering. Insight practitioners use insight skills to dispel inaccurate knowing by engaging parties in conversations that help them understand the meaning behind each other actions. Their aim is to breakthrough perspectives and attitudes that will evoke questioning by the parties themselves about what is important, and why. Insight generation is about surfacing the context-specific meanings motivating a conflict so as to generate context specific interventions that will be more sustainable than prescriptive solutions. When the meanings behind conflict behavior are genuinely sought, insights are generated, learning happens, minds

² J. Mezirow, Jack. 1990. *A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-bass; and Lonergan, Bernard. [1957] 1992. *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

change, and new possibilities for interacting differently emerge.

Learning is a critical component of constructive dialogue. It results from curious³ and genuine questions that generate new insights. As a process, learning involves individuals in four non-linear yet sequential operations: 1) noticing and experiencing understanding and insight 3) judging and verifying and 4) valuing and deciding, as depicted in the illustration below. During conflict dialogues, the parties as well as the intervener, are learning and their new insights are what change viewpoints and actions.



Insight practitioners' interventions stem from informed deliberations that are in response to parties' words and actions. This is known as "responsive intentionality"⁴. Responsive intentionality signifies that conflict interveners should not be responding to what is in their mind, but to what is in the minds of the parties. They are not following prescribed steps nor acting in formulaic ways. Instead, their interventions are informed by what they have learned theoretically and experientially that would predict why a particular intervention would be useful in that context and at that point in time. Where some practitioners might reframe or re-direct a tough conversation in search of compromise, collaboration or settlement⁵, an Insight practitioner will deepen the conversation in search of new meaning. Insight trained practitioners use their minds to be curious about parties, rather than having parties respond to what is in their mind. Responsive intentionality emphasizes the principle of not leading the dialogue nor prescribing solutions. The interveners actions are in response to, and in service of, the parties' own lines of curiosity.

³ Curious questions are open-ended and non-judgmental that focus on 1) *Knowing*: "What is happening?" 2) *Valuing*: "How much does it matter?" 3) *Deciding*: "What will I do to protect what matters?"

⁴ C. Picard, *Practicing Insight Mediation*, 2016:31-32.

⁵ Christopher Moore, 2014. *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict 4th edition*. CA: Jossey-Bass.

Feelings Carry Values

One of the more daunting situations for many conflict professionals is when parties' emotions and behaviours become heated, escalated, aggressive, and difficult to manage. The Insight approach teaches that it is through feelings that we know there is something important at play; the stronger the feeling the more something matters. It also teaches that over time whatever is important has created patterns of social organization without the parties' necessarily being aware. Saying this another way - feelings come from past experiences that in the present shape what matters and how we act⁶. Over time what matters to us grow to be our values. In the Insight approach, values are referred to as "cares" to denote something more "dynamic" than tangible, and something more relational than individual. The dynamic and shifting nature of cares emphasizes that people's conflict behaviours are directly linked to the weight they place on how they imagine their beliefs and values will be impacted. It is through the assessment of outcomes, or *valuing* as insight practitioners refer to it, that actions can most readily be understood.

People in conflict are often overwhelmed by the feelings that carry their *cares*; this is why Insight practitioners explore what feelings are about rather than putting the lid on them for fear they may hinder resolution. They work to understand the intensity of emotions and resistance by discovering what happened in the past to lend so much certainty about the need to prevent something similar from happening in the future. It is this certainty about the link between this past, with its threats to what matters in the present, that keeps parties locked in conflict. Uncovering this certainty involves discovering the cares and the threats to them that are carried in the parties' feelings.

Insight practitioners understand that "cares" exist at different levels. The first level involves a person's particular desires, needs, or interests. The second level involves the patterns of interpersonal or social relations that are operative, for example, in a family, a friendship, or organization. People are often dynamized by convictions that relate to this second level, for instance, what it means to be a good parent, a good leader, a good co-worker, or a good conflict practitioner.

Insight trained practitioners learn that parties' cares very often express more than individual interests or needs. Rather, they express values for the forms of relationships implicated in the interpersonal, family, or social relations that undergird the conflict. For example, people care about being seen as "good", and they will make sacrifices that set aside their individual interests in order to be "good" at the relations that matter to them. In family matters, this is often seen in arguments about what a "good" parent would do, or how a "good" ex-spouse would behave. Insight practitioners know that the cares on this second level are the yardsticks being used to judge one's own actions along with the actions of the others involved in the conflict.

⁶ K. Melchin and C. Picard 2008:84-90.

In conflict situations, you can be sure that one or both levels of cares have been triggered. Thus, an Insight practitioner's curiosity is directed at learning which cares are at stake and how they manifest in parties' responses, feelings and behaviours. This is especially true when resistance to change makes no sense or seems contrary to parties' best interests. Making sense out of interactions that make little or no sense requires the conflict intervener to be curious about what parties "know and value", along with what makes them certain they know all there is to know. To discover this, Insight practitioners are trained to "deepen the learning conversation" and to "listen to the listener". More explicitly, they are trained to deepen on what parties know.

Knowing Needs Deepening

The longer spouses are in conflict the more certain they are of knowing each other as the "enemy". Contradictory information is either dismissed or not heard because they are so sure they know all there is to know about each others motivations and intentions. This is made more difficult in today's world where the certainty of knowing is compounded by the amount and speed of information transferred through social media. Quick access to other like-minded supporters heightens closed-mindedness and the certainty about the need to defend against those with whom they are in conflict.

One of the ways Insight practitioners confirm the accuracy of parties' knowing and interpreting is by "listening to the listener"⁷. Asking listeners what they heard other people say, or the meaning they took from certain actions, is intended to surface any mistaken interpretations that can then be corrected. Noticing when listeners are unable to repeat what others are saying is a good way to discover if learning pathways are still blocked or if more work is needed to reduce threats so curiosity can return. Listening to the listener helps the intervener to focus on the parties' narratives by staying clear of any tendencies he or she may have to be directive⁸.

Deepening the learning conversation elicits a new understanding of the deeper cares, threats and relations triggering conflicts. Deepening is not a superficial conversation, but one that uncovers values and the valuing placed on their importance. Deepening is one of the strategies that distinguishes the Insight approach from other conflict approaches.

Deepening begins with curious questions that stem from genuine wondering when it is noticed that parties' interactions have become more defensive, escalated, or emotional. During deepening, interveners will ask parties how each other's actions

⁷ This is in contrast to the more common practice in mediation of "actively listening" to the speaker to ensure correct understanding by the mediator and parties. For more on active listening see Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, 1970.

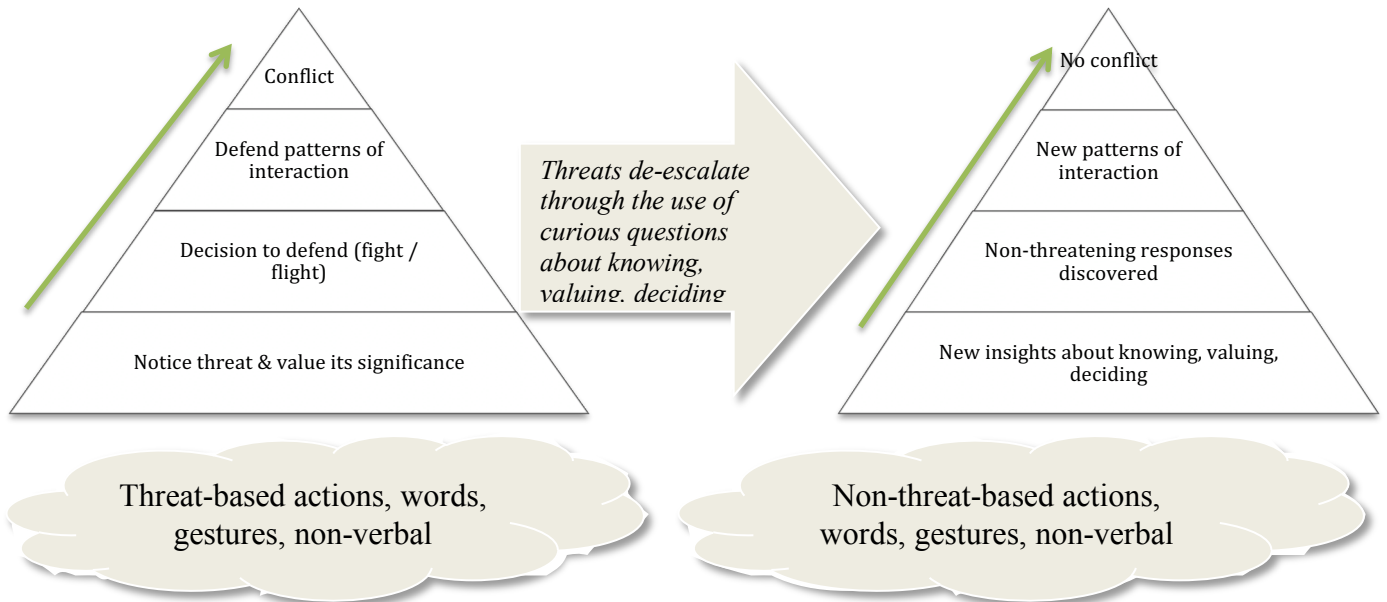
⁸ Advising parties on how to resolve their conflict is discouraged because it blocks them from using their own knowing and valuing in decision-making; it also limits ability to deal with conflict in the future.

would have differed for them to believe deliberate harm was not intended. When sense is made of actions that previously could only be seen as intentionally hurtful, or, that made little or no sense at all, powerful shifts in understanding are produced allowing curiosity and listening to return. Curiosity and listening expand knowing; expanded knowing is what opens the space to build new family relations and structures. Another way of saying this is that when the knowing that created the threat is disrupted a new process for learning replaces it making it possible to discover new ways of interacting that could never before have been imagined. This is the transformative nature of the Insight approach to conflict. This is the “magic”.

To engage in learning conversations by deepening what is known, Insight practitioners distinguish between “threat-to-care stories” and “defend stories”. This particular concept is one that all conflict practitioners could benefit from knowing. Defend stories, or narratives as they are also called, contain parties’ rationale for feeling threatened and their justification for defending. They are closed stories with no room for new information to take hold because of the certainty of already knowing all there is to know. Defend stories are firmly held narratives located in second level relational values and social cognition that support being “right and good” and knowing others as “wrong and evil”. They are the stories that, create, escalate and sustain conflict.

Threat-to-care stories, in contrast to defend stories, are more open, less certain, and less judgmental. They are narratives about what parties themselves understand, feel and value. Due to their vulnerability, these stories are seldom shared with others. Even when they are shared, others rarely hear them because of the certainty they already know all there is to know. Anything that veers from what is now known is considered Machiavellian and is rejected. Insight practitioners know that threat-to-care stories hold the potential to unlock doors to change. After surfacing the cares that underlie a disputing family member’s actions, it is quite likely to be discovered that something other than deliberate harm was intended.

There is an important distinction to be made here. While cares are at the root of conflict, it is not simply because they exist, but because they are being threatened. In the Insight approach, the path to change involves reducing or eliminating the threats-to-cares. This happens through learning conversations that change what parties know about themselves in relation to those with whom they are in conflict. Attention is focused on the threat rather than the care itself. This focus is based on the belief that “people can retain strong opposing views without conflict if they are not defending from threat” (see illustration below). In this way, the Insight approach is useful in an array of conflicts and at different levels.



Conclusion

With its focus on expanding what is known through a relational, creative and flexible learning process, the Insight approach to conflict and mediation tackles the very foundation of family conflict by teaching family members to discern whether the pattern of their actions is fostering cooperation, or, triggering defend reactions that are escalating and sustaining their conflict. Insight practitioners know that if disputing family members, or other conflicting parties and groups, are enabled to become curious about the threats to each others cares, it will lead to new insights that can shift them from intransigence to critical thinking and collaborative engagement. And, they know that this can only happen when parties no longer feel the need to focus their attention on protecting their cares. Freed from defending behaviours conflicting parties can listen more intently thereby allowing them to notice, and query, erroneous information in a genuine, curious and non-judgmental way.

Insight training offers collaborative professionals the knowledge and skills to help parties genuinely ask about, and deeply listen to, the fears they anticipate will occur if each others demands are met. They learn to engage parties in discussions about what matters to them in ways less threatening to others. And, they learn to notice, then productively query, when the dialogue once again shifts to defending. Helping spouses no longer see each other as heinous enables them to engage in dialogue about new family structures and relations.

Importantly, the skills used in the Insight approach are more than “soft” skills; they change people. They are not limited to professionals working with parties in active conflict but are accessible to anyone. They are life skills that enable individuals and groups to dig below the surface of conflict to explore the knowing, valuing and deciding

beneath it. Thus, conflicting parties need not be solely reliant on the professional to continue engaging in conversations after their sessions have ended.

The Insight approach is not “just more of the same”. Current applications highlight the merit of knowing conflict as emanating from defend responses to cares. Even when it is clear that conflict has reached a stage where harm was intended, coming to understand each other’s behaviour as protecting their cares is showing that it enough to activate the search for change. The shift in thinking generated by new insights produces new relations and the resolve to seek new interactions that allow differing cares to co-exist without threat and in relative peace. Changing personal acts of meaning has social currency that can help individuals, families and groups negotiate the challenges of a fast-paced globalized world. In this significant way, the profound nature of the Insight approach to conflict and mediation warrants scrutiny by the collaborative community.

Related Books and Published Articles:

1. Melchin, Kenneth and Cheryl Picard. 2008. *Transforming Conflict through Insight*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
2. Picard, Cheryl A. 2016. *Practicing Insight Mediation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
3. Picard, Cheryl and Marnie Jull. 2011. “Learning through Deepening conversations: A key Insight mediation strategy,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2, December 151-176.
4. Picard, Cheryl, and Janet Siltanen. 2013. “Exploring the Significance of Emotion for Mediation Practice.” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 31 (1): 31–55.
5. Price, James. 2013. “Explaining Human Conflict: Human Needs Theory and the Insight Approach.” In *Conflict Resolution and Human Needs: Linking Theory to Practice*, ed. Kevin Avruch and Christopher Mitchell, 108–23. New York: Routledge.
6. Sargent, Neil, Cheryl Picard, and Marnie Jull. 2011. “Rethinking Conflict: Perspectives from the Insight Approach.” *Negotiation Journal* 27 (3): 343–66.

For further information on the Insight approach to conflict you can visit:

RevistadeMediacion, (2018) a free, online mediation 2-vol journal Insight Approach Special published in both English and Spanish (<https://revistademediacion.com>) or you can visit my webpage at: insightapproach.ca