BUILDING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

How Managing Conflict Transforms Lives, Organizations, and Societies

Michael F. Mascolo, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

To Becca and Mary

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1
WE ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY MANAGING CONFLICT

We're having trouble handling conflict. We are experiencing a crisis of divisiveness at all levels of society. Within *political* spheres, we are deeply polarized[i]. In recent decades, political partisans have increasingly come to view each other as "out of touch", "stupid", "crazy" and even "evil"[ii]. Within *organizations* and *businesses*, conflict between people and among siloed divisions hamper problem-solving and mission effectiveness[iii]; perennial tensions exist among managers and employees over workplace relations. In *schools*, teachers increasingly find themselves having to manage emotional and behavior problems in their students[iv]. *Children* and teens themselves have difficulty managing harassment, bullying, and even violence[v]. In everyday *relationships*, people are struggling to find meaning and connection. The inability to manage conflict is single biggest reason for the failure of marriages and other relationships[vi].

There are solutions to these problems. Solving them requires a change in the ways in which we think about ourselves and

our relationships with other people. It requires changing the ways in which we think about the nature of conflict itself.

- *Conflict is not a state to be avoided; it is a problem to be solved.*
- *Peace is not the absence of conflict; it is the capacity to resolve it.*
- *If you want to resolve conflict, learn collaborative problem solving.*
- *To solve problems together, connect to the human needs of the other.*

It's the Relationship, Stupid!

In politics, organizations and everyday life, managing relationships is the single most important skill that people need. Conflict is inevitable in any relationship. Many people may be surprised to learn that conflict itself is not necessarily a problem. The problem with conflict is how they are *handled*. Managed appropriately, conflict is an opportunity for growth. This can happen when we think of conflict not as a battle between people, but instead as a *problem to be solved*[vii].

Most people do not know how to resolve conflict. However, we already know a great deal about how to manage conflict. The problem is that this knowledge is held mainly by professionals – therapists, mediators, counselors and other specialists. All people, however, should be equipped with the capacity to resolve social conflict. The ability to resolve interpersonal conflict is not something that is important only in extraordinary circumstances[viii] (e.g., group violence; workplace disputes). It is a skill that is relevant each time we interact with others.

The Transformative Power of Conflict Resolution

Learning to resolve interpersonal conflict literally has the capacity to transform lives, relationships, organizations – and even nations. To realize the transformative power of conflict resolution, it is important to:

(a) *Teach* the principles and practices of conflict resolution to people as early in their development as possible.

(b) Encourage people to adopt *conflict resolution as way of life.* This calls on us to rethink our sense of what it means to be a person and how we relate to others.

(c) Make collaborative problem-solving a foundational practice in *communities, organizations and socio-political life.*

Conflict resolution values transform how we relate to others in our everyday lives. As a result, they can transform our selves, our relationships, and our communities[ix].

How We Ordinarily Think of Conflict

A conflict is any form of opposition. When two people get into a conflict or a dispute, there is often some sort of argument. An argument is a kind of competition or contest. In an argument, parties take sides. Each side tries to convince the other that they are right and that the other is wrong. Arguments are rarely effective in resolving conflicts. When was the last time that you conceded your position to someone else in an argument or debate? When did you last say, "Yup – you're right and I'm wrong." It doesn't happen very often[x].

An argument is like a game of American football. In a football game, the two teams line up on two different *sides.* They take up their *positions*[xi]. Each team tries to move the football to the opposite side's goal post. As one team moves the ball forward,

the other team tries to stop them. When a team moves the ball across the field to the goal post, they score six points. Of course, the team with the most points wins. In a competition, there are winners and losers. The only exception is if there is a tie. In this case, neither team wins nor loses. But both teams can't win at the same time.

Let's use a simple example. Mandy and Mo are planning a vacation together. Mandy wants to go to the ocean while Mo wants to go to the woods. Mandy and Mo can't go to the ocean and to the woods at the same time. If they are going to choose one of these options, someone is going to win and someone is going to lose.

What will happen? Mandy and Mo will argue:

> Mandy: I want to go to the ocean this year!
>
> Mo: We went there last year. I hate the sun!
>
> Mandy: That's not true! We hiked in the sun all day yesterday!
>
> Mo: There's nothing for me to do at the ocean.
>
> Mandy: You always get your way.
>
> Mo: You mean like you're doing right now?

So, each is trying to convince the other to go to their own preferred vacation spot. Just like a football game, Mandy and Mo are going back and forth. If they stay in argument mode, someone is going to win, and someone is going to lose.

While the winner will be joyous, the loser will be unhappy. The loser will be upset because their problem will not be solved.

They may even feel defeated. Losing fosters emotions like resentment, embarrassment, shame and humiliation[xii]. Over time, resentments fester. When this happens, the losing party will typically be back for another confrontation. And then the conflict will be even worse than before.

There are better ways.

2
WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING?

The trick to solving conflict is to stop thinking conflict as a kind of battle and start thinking of it as an opportunity for solving problems[xiii]. At first, this seems difficult, because we tend to think that the other party is the problem[xiv]. If the other person is the problem, to solve the problem, we must fight them to get what we want.

But that's not true. The other person is not the problem. The other person is a *person*. They have needs, wants and feelings -- just like you. And just like you, the other person is trying to solve a problem. Just like you, they are trying to solve the problem of meeting some human *need*[xv].

Let's see how this is done. Let's revisit the problem between Mandy and Mo. In their dispute, Mandy and Mo take different *sides* on the issue of where to go for their vacation. They adopt different *positions*. This is shown in the following:

Their positions clash: they are in conflict. the couple can't go to the ocean and go to the woods at the same time. So, what do we do?

Let's begin by trying to identify the *problem* that each person is trying to solve. In a conflict, beneath each person's *position* lies a set of deeper human *needs*. Needs are a person's deeper desires, wants, motives and concerns. To resolve a conflict, we first want to understand the underlying *needs* that motivate each person to take the positions they do. To do this, we can begin simply by asking "why?"

Imagine that when we ask Mandy *why* she wants to go to the beach, she says that she wants to be able to *sunbathe and swim*. Imagine that when we ask Mo *why* he wants to go to the woods, he says that he wants to spend time *camping in nature*.

Now, we have identified the *problems* that each party is trying to solve. Mandy and Mo have different motives and needs. It looks like this:

Now, what's important to see is that the needs that lie beneath a person's positions motivate those positions! We take the positions we do because they are ways of meeting our needs! In any conflict, *each person is trying to solve the problem of trying to meet their needs.* It looks like this:

Once we have identified each party's underlying needs, the key to resolving conflict is to *ignore each person's initial positions* and find ways to *meet the underlying needs of each party* at the same time. The moment we identify the deeper motives of each person, we often see that those needs do not necessarily conflict. So, while the positions we adopt in a conflict tend to clash, the needs that motivate them often do not.

This is important. There are typically many ways to solve any single problem. If this is so, then there are many ways to solve the problem of meeting each party's needs. The trick is for each party to work together to find *new* ways of meeting each other's needs at the same time.

Instead of pitting one person against the other, collaborative problem-solving pits the two partners against the problem! In collaborative problem–solving, the partners work together against the problem. They are no longer adversaries, but partners in a process of shared problem-solving.

For Mandy and Mo, one possible solution is for the couple to

spend their vacation at a State Park that has a beach near a pond as well as woods for camping and hiking. This way, Mandy gets to sunbathe and swim, while Mo gets to commune with nature. Both partners meet their needs. Problem solved!

The Big Point: Focus on Needs – Not Positions

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

– Attributed variously to Plato, Philo, Socrates, and others

The most important principle resolving conflict is to *focus on needs – never positions*[xvi]. When we enter a conflict, we tend become locked in our own positions. As a result, we see the other person as opposing us. They are stopping us from getting what we want. We need to stop them! The other party's position is stupid! How can they think like that?

But things change once we realize that the other party is probably *not trying to stop us*. Things change when we consider the fact that, just like us, the other person's position is motivated by some unmet need. Just like us, they are trying to solve some problem. Their position is their way of solving it.

Things change further once we understand that even though the other person's position may not make sense to *us*, it does make sense to *them*![xvii] We often say, "I don't understand how you can think like you do!" But when we do that, we are usually just trying to dismiss the other person. We are saying that they are not thinking clearly, that they are being irrational, or something similar. What would happen we meant it when we said, "I don't *understand*?" What if we said to ourselves, "What you say doesn't make sense to me. But I must assume it makes sense to you. So, let me try to understand how."

Things also change when we realize that, in our dispute, what the other person needs deep down is probably not inconsistent with what we need. If this is so, if we can try to meet each other's needs, we can solve the problem. Once we understand this, we almost immediately stop being defensive. We reach out to try to help the other person – and the conflict is transformed.

So, let's look at an example. Imagine that Richard and Tanya are both supervisors of another worker -- Bob. Bob failed to meet a work deadline, and as a result, the firm lost a customer. Tanya wants to Bob to experience consequences for his error; she wants to dock his pay. Richard, however, suggests that they give him a different project.


Tanya is incredulous! She immediately questions Richard's thinking. "Are you crazy? You want to reward Bob for bad work?" Offended, Richard attacks Tanya back, "I'm not crazy – you are. You are too strict with the employees". How is this situation going to work out? Not well. Both Tanya and Richard are offended. Each sees the other as a problem – as an obstacle to what is wanted.

Things change once we look beneath the positions. What

happens if Tanya says to herself, "I wonder what Richard is thinking! What problem is Richard trying to solve by giving Bob another project? Doesn't he see that that would be rewarding Bob?" So, she asks Richard he would he want to give Bob a new project. Richard says, "I want to give Bob another chance to prove himself – both to us and to himself. I want to get him to see that he can do the work right." Tanya replies by saying, "I have a need to hold Bob to high standards".
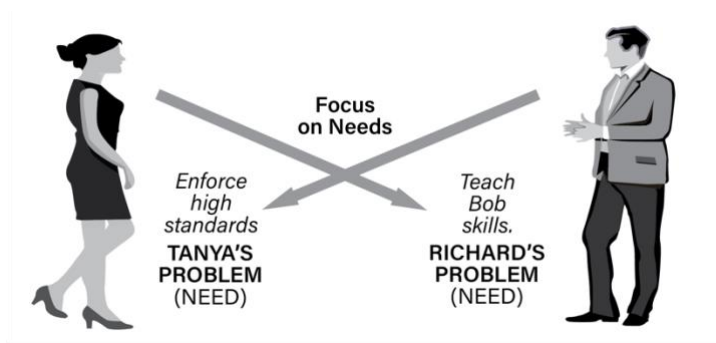

At this point, Tanya and Richard unmet needs – the problems they are trying to solve – come into focus. Tanya sees that Richard is not trying to reward Bob – but in fact wants to help Bob learn to do a better job. Richard learns that Tanya is not simply trying to be strict, she wants to hold employees to high standards.

At this point, both Tanya and Richard stop seeing each other as enemies! They stop seeing each other as an obstacle to what each person wants. *Each sees the other's stated position as a reasonable attempt to solve the problem they are trying to solve.* When this happens, Tanya and Richard can stop seeing each other as opponents and start seeing each other as *partners in problem solving.*

Understanding each other's needs, motives and thoughts, Tanya and Bob can ignore their previously stated positions, and instead work to meet the full range of each other's needs:
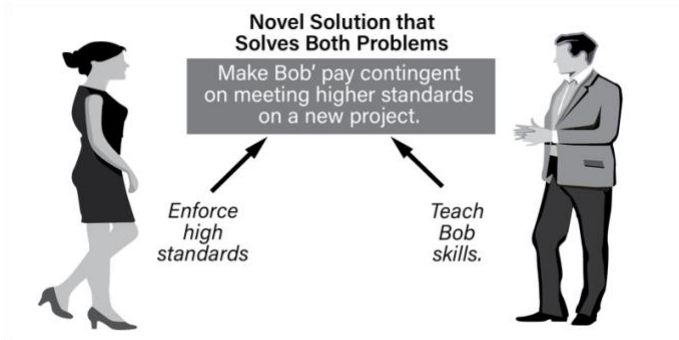
Here we see that there is nothing incompatible about the goal of holding employees to high standards and giving employees a chance to learn needed skills. It is possible to produce novel ways to addresses both Richard's and Tanya's motives at the same time. One such way is to give Bob a second chance and make his pay contingent on his meeting high standards in a new project. Such a solution might motivate Bob more than a punishment, while also teaching him how to be successful.

Again, the success of this approach relies upon the capacity of partners to move beyond what may be their initial reactions to each other – to give each other the "benefit of the doubt" and see that *each party is trying to solve a problem that is important to them*. The moment we do this, we experience our incredulity about the other person's position begin to fade. It can begin to become replaced by compassion[xviii]. That's when genuine shared problem-solving can begin.

3
AN ETHOS FOR A COLLABORATIVE SOCIETY

When we enter a conflict, we are immediately confronted with some obstacle. Our natural response is to focus on that obstacle and seek to remove it. Most often, we see the *other person* as the obstacle to be overcome. As a result, we prepare for a battle.

As we have seen, perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome is to see that the other person is *not* the obstacle. The other person is a person, with her own needs, desires, feelings and concerns. As a person, the other has dignity. To the extent that the other person acts out of an attempt to meet their own unmet needs, they deserve our compassion.

And this leads to what can seem to be a contradiction. In a dispute, how can I *advance my own needs* while simultaneously having *compassion for someone who I regard as my opponent?* Isn't that unnatural? Scholars, philosophers, psychologists and religious thinkers have long suggested that humans are motivated by two broad categories of motives: *fear for the self* and *love for the other*[xix]. This distinction is shown as follows:
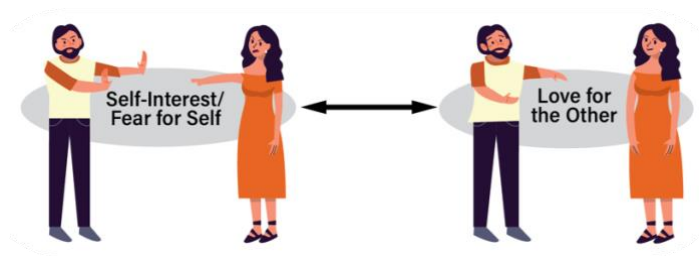
Two Basic Human Motives

People often say that humans are primarily self-interested or selfish creatures[xx]. To be sure, self-interest is an indisputable aspect of the human condition. People act to meet their needs. We are self-interested beings. However, we are not *just* self-interested beings. Humans are also deeply concerned well-being of others[xxi]. We act not only out of self-interest, but also out of love, care and compassion for others. Although we act out of both motives, we are not always able to do so *at same time*. Our capacity to act *simultaneously* out of self-interest and compassion for others develops over time.

Reconciling Self Interest and Care for Others

The capacity to act simultaneously out of self-interest and care for others – when it happens -- is a hard-won developmental achievement[xxii]. The figure below shows how this happens over time a child's development.

When infants enter the world, they show both an orientation toward both *self-gratification* and *concern for others*. We are all familiar with the self-focused needs of infants. Infants the world with needs that they cannot meet on their own. But even infants are not entirely motivated by self-interest. Concern for others is present early in the first year of life and develops gradually over the first two years of life. It becomes increasingly prominent during the second year[xxiii]. Young

infants who hear the cries of other infants often themselves begin to cry. Some have suggested that such cries are the early roots of empathy[xxiv]. As infants get older, they become increasingly responsive to the pain of others[xxv]. Their facial expressions of joy shift when a caregiver exhibits signs of pain. Infants in their first year are capable of primitive acts of helping. By 8-9 months, some sometimes help others by fetching objects out of the other's reach[xxvi]. Thus, both self-interest and concern for others are part of what it means to be human from an early age.

Meeting Your Needs is Part of Who I Am

Self-Interest ← → Concern for Other

Self-Interest

Concern for Other

Self-Interest

Conflict

Concern for Other

Self-Interest

Concern for Other

Reconciling Self-Interest and Care in Development

Both self-interest and the capacity to care for others develop dramatically over the early years of life. While infants and young children can experience both self-interest and empathic concern for others, they are not typically capable of experiencing these emotional dispositions *at the same time*. Instead, as shown in the above figure, each of these ways of being in the world develop separately – in parallel -- over the first years.

Over time, these two separate lines of development – self-interest and care for others – come into conflict. We see this in children every day. Two children are together playing in the yard. There is only one swing. One child takes the swing for herself. Wanting the swing for himself, her friend asks to swing first – and begins to cry when his request is denied. In this situation, the first child is aware of both her own interests (e.g., I want to swing) and those of her friend (e.g., he wants the swing). However, while the child's self-interest and concern for his friend are in conflict, the child does not know how to resolve the conflict. A child may cling to the swing and ignore her friend's pleas, or he may resentfully give up the swing. Perhaps the two children will fight over the swing.

This type of conflict occurs thousands of times over the course of a child's development. By the time children reach adolescence, they will have developed a great deal of knowledge and skill about how to advance their own interests and how to tend to the needs of others[xxvii]. By adolescence and early adulthood, people are capable of much more developed modes of thinking and feeling. They can now begin to face the apparent contradiction between between self-interest and care for others head on.

When this happens, adolescents find themselves at a choice point. There are at least three ways to resolve the conflict between self-interest and care for others.

1. I can separate myself from the interests and feelings of others and develop my primary identity around the goal of *self-interest*.
2. I can push away my own needs and feelings and develop my primary identity around the goal of *serving others*.

3. I can *reconcile* my conflicting experiences of self-interest and concern for others.

The first strategy is to put myself before others. The second strategy is to put others before me. The third strategy brings these seemingly contradictory feelings together. When this happens, the adolescent (or adult) is able to *reconcile self-interest with concern for others.* That is, I make your interests, feelings and well-being *part of my own self-interest.* In so doing, I do not lose myself or give myself over to the other – I am aware of my self-interest. Instead, I act out of love and compassion. As I do, I am enhanced by the ways I give *of* myself to you.

When this happens, my identity is transformed. I have come to identify myself not simply with my own interests, I have come to make meeting the needs of the other part of who I am. I am organizing my identity around moral values and virtues. I am becoming a new self.

The Need for Self-Transformation

When we experience conflict with others, the first thing we think of is how our interests have been thwarted. In a conflict, we are *suffering.* When this happens, it is natural to put our own unmet needs before our concern for the other person.

However, the other person is also suffering! Compassion calls on us to act out of concern for the suffering of the other[xxviii]. And so, if we want to transform conflict into collaboration, we must put our own needs "on hold" long enough to stop ourselves from immediately attacking the other. We need to be able to "check our needs" long enough so that we can consider how the other person's unmet needs – their suffering – leads them to act in the ways that they do.

When I make your needs and interests part of my self-interest, I make *compassion for you* part of *who I am* as a person[xxix]. When this happens, self-interest and care for the other need not be contradictory motives. In fact, I am *enhanced* when I contribute to your well-being. This is like what Eric Fromm says when he speaks of acting out of *love*[xxx]. If we really love someone, we respect and care for them. We act out of concern for them. We give *of ourselves* to that person. However, to give *of ourselves* is not to *give ourselves away*. It is not a form of self-sacrifice; it is a form of self-enhancement. When I give of myself out of care, I am not diminished; I feel my own power and vitality.

In a conflict, the capacity to reconcile my self-interest and my compassion for you allows me to rise above anger and hostility. It allows me to see that I gain nothing by attacking you and denying the legitimacy of your needs. It allows me to see that my request that you meet my needs is tied up with your request that I meet yours.

How we view ourselves and our relationship to each other is central to how we approach conflict[xxxi]. If we want to foster a more collaborative society, we need to foster more collaborative, moral and relational selves[xxxii].

This Isn't Kumbaya: We Need both Care *and* Power

The biggest obstacle to conflict management – especially in difficult situations – is the belief that it is simple impossible. People may think that resolving conflict collaboratively is naïve. We often imagine the process of resolving conflict as one in which people sit around a circle and are nice to one another. People often think that managing conflict means being nice or giving in to the other party to eliminate conflict. They tend to imagine conflict resolution as, well…the *absence of conflict*! That's not resolving conflict – that's appeasement.

Conflict resolution is not *kumbaya*.

Here are some things that conflict resolution – at least as discussed here – is *not*:

- Resolving conflict does not mean *giving in* to the other side.
- Resolving conflict does not mean being *nice* so the other party will be nice to you.
- Resolving conflict does not mean *seeking a compromise* (although that sometimes is the best that can be done).
- Resolving conflict does not mean trying to *reason* or use *logic* with the other person.
- Resolving conflict does not mean trying to *convince* the other to see things your way.
- Resolving conflict does not mean trying to *persuade* the other party to do something *they don't want to do*.

If people are trying resolve conflict, that means that there is…conflict. You can't resolve conflict by pretending that it is not there, wishing it away, or pleading with the other person. You don't resolve conflict by *giving in* to the other side. You must *deal* with the conflict.

Managing conflict, as discussed here, involves coordinating *needs* between people. It is based on the idea that often (but not aways) it is possible to create ways in which both parties in a conflict can meet their needs. If this is true, then, in a dispute, the only thing I must convince you of is that *I want to help you meet your needs*.

However, meeting your needs doesn't mean that I am willing to give up meeting my needs. I am not. My needs are inviolate. I'm standing by them. *I am not going to let the other party hurt me*. I am not going to allow the other party to violate me. I must

assert my own needs as I seek to show you that I am also willing to try to meet yours. The process is a mutual one (even if the other party doesn't understand that yet).

And so, I have two motives in any interaction that I have: I want to meet my needs, and I want to connect to you, meet your needs and transform our relationship. In seeking to meet my needs, I will not allow the other to violate them. This means I need both *power* and *compassion*. I need compassion to understand you well enough to be able to connect to your needs. But I need power – the capacity to assert myself – to ensure that I am not hurt and that my needs will be met.

Open Strength

This is expressed in the above diagram. In each interaction, I metaphorically hold up two hands. I hold one hand out in a gesture of protection. If the other attacks me or is a threat to me, this hand says, "Stop. I won't allow you to harm me". The other hand, however, is held out, open to the other person. It says, "I am open. What are your needs? How can I help resolve them?"

If needed, the two hands can help each other. Without animosity, I can extend my open hand and say, "I want to help", but extending my protecting hand, I can say, "but I cannot help if you are attacking me. Stop attacking me, and we can find a way to meet our needs together." In this way, I use my *protecting hand in the service of my open hand.*

But it also goes the other way around. I see that the other is attacking me. Holding out my open hand – acting empathy and compassion in the face of the other's attack – often has the effect of disarming the other person. When the other sees not only that you are not against them, but that you are willing to help, their anger and aggression often dissipates. They are more willing to collaborate. In this case, *the open hand acts in the service of the protecting hand.*

Managing conflict involves acknowledging conflict. We can't acknowledge conflict without *asserting our inviolate needs – and holding to them*. This is not always pleasant – at least at first. We should not expect conflict resolution to be the absence of conflict. It is not. It is the managing and resolving of conflict.

What Would It Be Like If We Were Continuously Sensitive to Each Other's Needs?
or
Why Do You Blow Your Horn in Traffic?

Consider the following common situation. People are driving on a busy street. One driver moves into the other's lane without signaling. The first driver lays on his horn. A finger is raised.

What happened in this situation? What was the first driver communicating with his horn and his finger? "What do you

think you're doing? You are violating *my* space! Stay in your lane!"

The streets of Delhi in India are more congested than virtually any other streets in the world. On any given day, cars share the street with trucks, motorcycles (sometimes with entire families riding on a single motorcycle), scooters, bicycles, rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, cows, beasts of burden, and pedestrians. At any given moment, one can hear the constant "beep, beep, beep" of horns. What is being communicated by those horns?

You can be forgiven if you think the horns mean "You're too close!" or "Get out of my way!" But they don't mean that at all. Instead, they mean, "I'm coming! I'm here! Look out for me!" In fact, it is common to see vehicles exhibiting signs that ask drivers to use their horns:


A Common Message in Delhi Traffic

What's the difference?

The American and Indian approach to beeping the horn in traffic is shown in the diagram that appears below. As shown in the left panel, in the United States, we see ourselves as separate and distinct individuals. I have the right to pursue my own agenda as what I do does not violate your right to do the same. I can't violate your boundaries, and you can't violate mine. If you do, we have a conflict.

In traffic, this literally occurs! We have lines that identify the boundaries of the lanes that we are supposed to occupy. We have explicit rules that indicate when we must "stay in our lanes". One person has the "right of way" and the other does not. If you cross the line, I'll beep my horn to tell you are violating my space. The system of boundaries and rules is a very efficient way of organizing traffic (and social interaction in general).
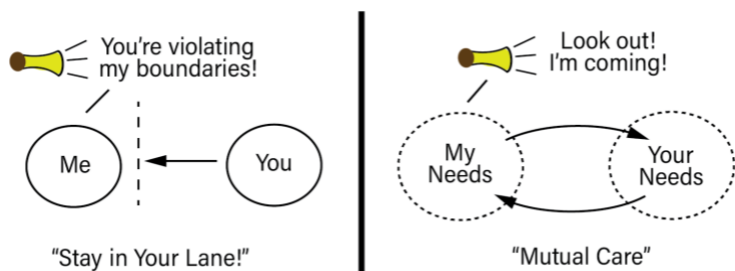
In traffic, this efficient system is, it comes at a price. We are all concerned about our boundaries: "don't tread on me!". The result is that when someone intrudes on our boundaries, we experience rage. In the United States, this often takes the form of road rage. When you violate my space, I'll beep my horn, raise my finger, and scold you with obscenities. Why do I have road rage? Because you've done something wrong. You've violated my rights. I am within my right to tell you to "back off". I am angry and express myself – my superiority to you -- through my rage.

The Indian approach, shown on the right side of the figure, is different. The population is enormous; there are many vehicles on the road. Traffic is congested, confusing, and convoluted. Perhaps as an outcome of having to deal with the chaos, there is a shared ethos of "looking out for one another". In this

context, beeping the horn is not normally considered to be an aggressive act. In fact, it is encouraged so that I can let you know that I'm here. I beep so you can adjust to me while I attempt to adjust to you.

We can use the rules of traffic in the US and India as metaphors for how we think of ourselves and our relationships to each other. The United States is an individualistic nation. We see ourselves as separate and distinct from one another. We value the *rights* of the individual person. Each person has rights – but "my rights end where your nose (or lane) begins". As a result, each person is expected to stay more-or-less "in their own lane."

The "look out for each other" approach is different. In this approach, we don't see ourselves as separate and independent individuals with fixed or rigid boundaries to defend. Instead, we see each other as connected. We have duties and responsibilities to each other. Instead of simply acting to make sure that we respect each other's rights and boundaries, we act out of a sense *concern* for each other. I look out for you, and you look out for me.

4
FOUR STEPS OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

There are four basic steps to collaborative problem-solving. These steps are broadly applicable to virtually all forms of conflict – in everyday relationships, in the workplace, in communities, in political life, and even between nations. To be sure, not all conflicts can be solved in this way – but this basic process can be used to solve many more disputes that one might otherwise think possible.

The four steps are:

1. **Connect** to the *humanity* of your partner.
2. **Identify** the genuine *needs* of each party to a conflict.
3. **Brainstorm** *ideas* for meeting the full range of needs of all parties to a conflict.
4. **Create** a novel *solution* that meets the needs of all stakeholders to the maximum extent possible.

In the initial dispute described above, Mandy and Mo adopt different positions on where to go for their vacation. Mandy wants the beach; Mo wants the woods. Let's look at how the four steps can play themselves out.

1. Connect to the Humanity of the Other
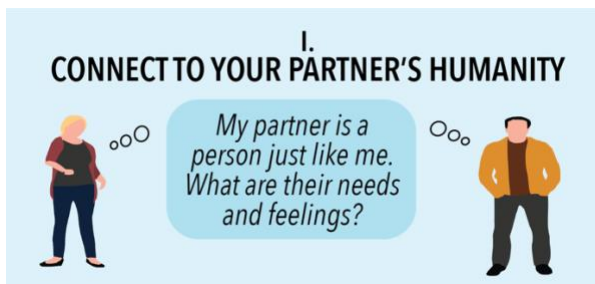
The first step consists of *connecting the other humanity of the other person[xxxiii].* This step is perhaps the most important – and most difficult! It involves shifting one's attention from oneself and one's own emotions and focusing on the other person. This is often difficult because, in conflict, we are often angry and frustrated. Part of connecting to the other person is *calming* ourselves. This sometimes requires that we remove ourselves from the conflict long enough to take care of our own negative feelings.

Connecting to the other's humanity is easy to *say* but difficult to *do*. It means acknowledging the other person's behavior – even their bad behavior – comes from a *human* place. We are all always acting to meet our human needs and goals. In a conflict, it is easy to forget that. We tend to think that the other person is intending to hurt us. Perhaps we think that the other person is acting out of bad intentions. Or we think the other is simply a bad person.

No—connecting to the humanity of the other means understanding that the other is a person, just like us. It means asking questions about our partner's motives: why is my partner taking the position that they do? What needs and feelings motivate them? And the moment we are able to engage in this difficult act, something wonderful begins to happen: we begin to feel compassion for the other person.

Sometimes, in a conflict, we hear people say, "I don't care why the other person acts the way they do – I just want what I want!" Or we might say, "Look at how he is acting! I don't want to have compassion! I don't care what they're thinking or feeling."

But that's not good enough. We have to care. We must care about what the other person wants and needs and how the other person feels. We must do this for two reasons. First, we must care about the other person for the sake of the other person. We must care about the other person simply because the other person is a person worthy of care.

The second reason is that when we care about the other person – when we listen to the other and make them feel heard – they will be more likely to do that for us. Then we can really solve conflicts.

2. Identify Each Party's Core Needs
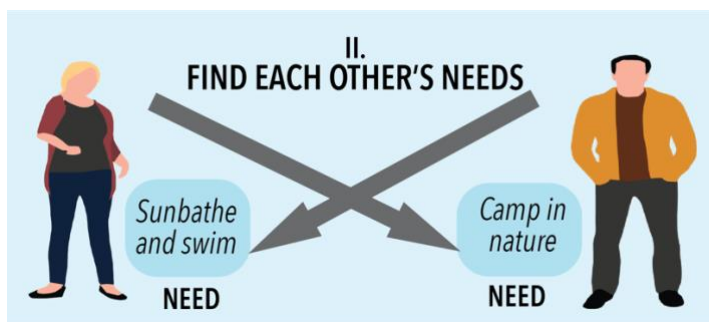
The second step is identifying needs. We can do this in many ways. The most obvious way is to simply ask the person why they take the position that they do in a dispute. What problem are you trying to solve? What is it that you really need or want? When we care enough to ask this question, things change.

At the beginning of a conflict, two parties are *against each other*. They are each on the attack! They are afraid that they are not going to get what they want. They are probably even more afraid that they may lose the argument. Losing an argument causes feelings of embarrassment, shame and even humiliation. We don't like to lose.

However, when we begin to inquire about the needs and feelings of the other, the other person is surprised! They think, "What is this odd thing that my opponent is doing? Do they really *care* about what I want?" The more one partner seeks to understand the needs, feelings and thought of the other, the safer the other person feels. They begin to realize they may not have anything to fear from their "opponent". Your empathy will cause them to lower their defenses. And when they begin to express their real needs and feelings, your empathy will begin to generate trust.

In the case of Mandy and Mo, we find that what Mandy wants

is to sun and swim. What Mo wants is camp in nature. These are their genuine motives! Are these bad things? Do Mandy and Mo have bad intentions toward each other? Or course not. They have human feelings, human needs and human wants. Time to take care of them.

3. Brainstorm Ideas

Once each party's needs are on the table, it's time to start to try to find ways to meet those needs. The goal here is not simply to meet one's own needs – it is to meet the needs of all parties to a conflict. This is why the process is called collaborative problem-solving. All parties to a conflict work together to solve the problem at hand – where the problem is meeting the needs of all constituencies to the greatest degree possible.

You might think that this is the hard part of the process. Depending on the nature of the problem at hand – the number

and complexity of the needs of the people involved – it may or may not be difficult. But, in many cases, once the needs are expressed, problems all but solve themselves. Once we stop pitting one person against the other, we free ourselves from the burden of having to fight. Now, we can begin to think. The hard part is largely over – that is, the emotional task of connecting to the humanity of the other person and identifying each other's needs and feelings.

At this step, when we brainstorm ideas, it's important to do so without a lot of judgment or evaluation. Just brainstorm. Generate and list all kinds of solutions to the problem. Generate good solutions, bad solutions, crazy solutions and even ugly solutions. Why? Because the more ideas we generate, the more likely it is that we'll cover all the bases and create a good solution. And also, it's because those bad, crazy and even ugly ideas – the ones that we are afraid to speak about -- often turn out to be the good ones.

So, Mandy and Mo should entertain a lot of ideas before they try to actually solve their problem. They could go to either a beach or the woods. They could go to the beach during the day and the woods at night. They could find a pond near the *woods*. They could find a beach near the woods (huh?). None of these ideas really work, right? However, these bad ideas could lead to a good idea.

4. Create a Novel Solution
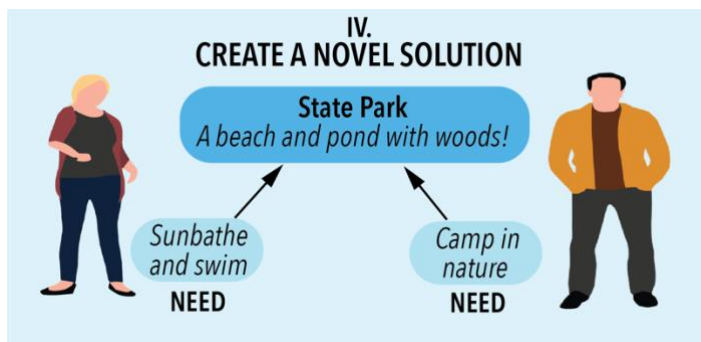
To create means to invent or construct something that *was not there before*. And something is novel if it is new – that is, if it *was not there before*. Most often, the best solutions to a conflict are the ones that *were not there before*.

The best solutions tend to be *new*, *novel*, *created*, *invented.* They are the solutions that *no one could have thought of* before the process of working together! Why is this? Because each party needs to know the needs of the other to create a solution! It can't be done alone! If we only focus on our own "side" of the problem, we will only produce a partial solution. So, we must know the full range of the needs and motives that define the problem!

And we need the benefit of the other's intelligence in finding ways to meet the full range of our needs. The other always has a different view than we do. They see things in a different way. And they are going to be able to generate ideas for solving problems that we don't and can't see. We need each other to create truly novel ideas to solve problems. We influence each other; we stimulate each other; we work off each other.

And so, in the end, together, we can create novel solutions that

we might not otherwise be able to entertain by ourselves. As Mandy and Mo were working together, let's imagine that one of the "bad" ideas that they created together was going to a "beach by the woods". This idea makes no sense; beaches are not near the woods! Or are they? Many state parks located in the woods have ponds with sandy beaches. Problem solved!

5
STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE

The process of collaborative problem-solving begins before you attempt to resolve any given dispute. Collaborative problem-solving goes more smoothly if you can develop a *Collaborative Mindset*. The Collaborative Mindset is the idea that solving problems with others requires the development of a compassionate understanding of how and why others do what they do.

At its most basic, the Collaborative Mindset consists of an appreciation of two principles: *compassion* and *credulity*. *Compassion* means acting out of concern for the *suffering* of the other person. *Credulity* is the idea that even though what the other person thinks, feels, says, or does may not make sense to us, *it makes sense to them*. Internalizing and acting on these principles can change how you relate to others. It can transform the quality of your relationships.

Let's start with *credulity*. In a conflict, we disagree with the

other person. As a result, we may feel that we don't "understand" them. We may think that their thinking is inferior, that they are ignorant, stupid or even crazy. The problem is that the moment we think of someone this way, we give up the possibility of solving a problem with them. We've already dismissed them. This is the worst thing we can do.

As stated throughout, we are always acting to meet our unmet needs, goals, and concerns. If this is true, no matter how crazy we think the other person might be, the other person has reasons for acting the way they do. Don't make the mistake of assuming that their needs, feelings, values and feelings are the same as yours! People differ dramatically in how they understand and interpret the world. If you want to play a role in solving a problem with someone, you will have to try to appreciate the needs they are trying to meet.

And so, the first part of the Collaborative Mindset is to see that the other person is doing "the best they can" with the knowledge, experiences and resources available to them. *It doesn't matter if, at first, the other doesn't make sense to you. Keep asking questions to find out how the other person's beliefs, needs, feelings and actions make sense to <u>them</u>.*

Once this happens, you will understand that the other person is fighting a great battle. They are trying to solve a problem. And if this is happening, at some level, your partner is suffering. And your partner is not the only one suffering: you are too. Once you can understand the other person's suffering, you will likely feel compassion for them (even if you are frustrated or angry). And the more you see that you are also suffering, you can begin to feel compassion for yourself.

Ultimately, a Collaborative Mindset develops slowly through practice – by engaging repeatedly in collaborative problem-

solving with all types of conflicts, not matter how grand or trivial they may be. Let's look how you can engage your partner during each step of the collaborative problem-solving process.

Some Specific Strategies

Let's go through each of the four steps of collaborative problem-solving. Here are some ways you can connect with your partner and solve problems together.

1. How to Connect to Your Partner's Humanity

Connecting to the humanity of the other is the first step to collaborative problem solving. However, it is not restricted to the first step. It must occur throughout the entire process. Here are some ways, however, to start off the process.

Adopt the Collaborative Mindset. The best way to connect to the humanity of the other is start with a Collaborative Mindset. In a dispute, if you start with a disposition of compassion and credulity, you will always be saying to yourself, "I may not like or understand what this person is saying (thinking, feeling or doing). Why are they saying this? What problem are they trying to solve? What unmet need are they trying to fill?" The moment you do this, you transform the interaction.

Calm down. You can't solve problems when you are angry. And I repeat: you can't solve problems when you are angry. It simply can't happen. If you are angry, calm down. If you can't calm down, say something like, "Right now, I am too angry to engage in a constructive conversation. I'm going to go away and take care of my anger. When I am ready, I'll come back,

and I'll initiate a conversation."

You also can't solve problems when your partner is angry. If your partner is angry, try to use empathy to calm them down. If that fails, and your partner remains angry, you can say, "I see that you are angry. I can't have a conversation with you when you are angry. Let's postpone this until we are both calm." If that fails, simply remove yourself from the conversation with a promise to return when the other is calm.

Ask your partner to tell their story. One of the most important social motives that people have is the desire *to be heard*. In any conflict, each partner has a story. Your partner wants their stories to be heard. Ask your partner to tell it. Listen without judgment. Hear their needs, feelings and values. Find something that they have said to care about. Express empathy for the plight that they have expressed to you through their story.

2. How to Identify Each Other's Needs

Understanding needs and feelings is the key to collaborative problem-solving. It is important to find ways to identify both your own and your partner's needs. So, take turns expressing and hearing each other's needs. Decide who will speak first. The speaker will be in "speaking mode", while the listener will be in "listening mode". After the speaker has finished speaking and feels that they are understood, switch roles. The speaker becomes the listener, and vice-versa.

Listening empathically. When the other person is in "speaking mode", your job is to listen for understanding. You want to listen carefully enough that you can repeat back what your partner is saying after they have finished speaking. You have to listen carefully enough that you will able to summarize

what the other person has said.

This is difficult! In a dispute, we are usually not listening very well. We listen just long enough to plan what we want to say – which is usually some line of attack. But in collaborative problem-solving, we don't want to attack. We want to understand. And so, it is important to listen empathically. We want to make the other person feel heard and understood. the best way to do this is to, well, hear and understand the other person to his or her satisfaction.

To listen empathically:

1. Invite your partner to speak. Be curious; ask them questions. "What is your sense of what happened?" "What did you think and feel when this was happening?" "What do you think you needed that you didn't receive?"
2. Put your own needs, feelings and thoughts aside. Don't defend yourself. Don't judge or criticize. For as long as your partner is speaking, put your own needs and issues in a box – and lock it. You'll have your opportunity to express them later.
3. Listen to understand.
4. Don't interrupt.
5. When your partner is done speaking, summarize what they have said. Say something like, "Did I get that right?" or "Let me see if I understand what you are saying". After you summarize what they've said, ask them to correct you.
6. After your partner indicates that they feel understood, express empathy for their situation. Say something like, "If that happened to me, I'd feel angry too", or "That's an awful way to feel" or something similar.

When the other person feels heard and understood, it's time to switch roles. The speaker becomes the listener, and the listener becomes the speaker.

Expressing needs.   When you are in speaking mode, your goal is to express your needs, feelings and observations. The best way to express needs is to use "I-statements" rather than "you-statements". "You-statements" are utterances that blame, criticize or characterize the other person (e.g., "You are always late!"; "You are responsible for losing the client", "My opponent is out-of-touch"). In contrast, I-statements describe one's own needs and feelings without blaming or criticizing the other person. An optimal "I-statement" has three parts:

1. An _observation_ about something that happened.
2. A statement, using emotion words, of how one _feels_.
3. A statement of one's _needs_, _wants, and desires_.

Here are some good I-statements:

- When you _didn't ask me about my day_, I felt _hurt_ because I have a _need to be heard_.
- When you _asked me to be home before midnight_, I felt _mistrusted_ because I have a _need for independence._
- When you _told the waiter that he was too slow_, I felt _embarrassed_ because I have a _need for people to be kind to each other_.
- When you _read your notes from the PowerPoint_ I felt _frustrated_ because I have a _need to make the audience to feel engaged_.
- When the candidate said that _she wanted to ban homeless peopl_e from sleeping in the square, I _felt frustrated_ because I have _desire to take care of the poor_.

41

- When the candidate said that she wanted to *allow homeless people to sleep in the square*, I felt *worried* because I have a *desire to keep the town square safe*.

Note that each of these statements (1) makes on observation about a situation without (or with a minimum of) blame or judgment, (2) reports the feelings that the person experiences because of the situation, and (3) identifies the unmet need that led to the feelings in question. As a result, I-statements point to the *self* – to what is inside of *me* – and not the other person. I-statements separate what how <u>I</u> feel and what <u>I</u> want *independent* of judgments about you. They express one's own feelings and needs without blaming or making characterizations about the other person.

3. How to Brainstorm

If you listened carefully to each other – or even if only one you are doing the listening – you will have identified the unmet needs and feelings of each party to the conflict. Now it's time to brainstorm. Both parties should work together to list as many different ways as possible to meet the unmet needs of both parties. Don't censor yourself! List all types of ideas, no matter how good, bad or unspeakable you believe they are. Quite often, the bad ideas – the unspeakable ones – turn out to be the best ones. They convey what people are thinking and feeling but are too afraid to say. So list, list and list. Then list some more.

4. How to Create Novel Solutions

Once you've listed ideas, it's time to try to create a solution to the problem of meeting the full range of unmet needs and

interests expressed by the parties. You might find that some of the ideas you have generated meet some needs, but not others. You may find that some ideas meet both sets of needs at the same time. If that's true, you've solved the problem! You might find that no ideas meet the full range of needs. When that happens, you either have to generate more ideas, or work with the ones you have to modify them in ways that you meet the needs of all participants to the maximum degree possible.

Remember, most often, the best solutions are the one's no one has thought of before, or that would not be possible without both parties working together. That's because you can't resolve conflicts unless you know the problems that each party is trying to solve. You need the other person's perspective in order to understand the full range of the problems-to-be-solved. If you have truly identified the genuine needs of each party, solutions virtually create themselves.

6
EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVIING IN ACTION

Collaborative Problem-Solving is an interpersonal process. It takes place between at least two people. However, its effectiveness extends far beyond everyday relationships. This chapter contains examples of the use of conflict management in three different settings: a business situation, in a relationship between friends, and in a political context. The first two are descriptions of actual events. The last is an example of how conflict resolution principles can be used to bridge political divides on a contentious social issue, namely the question of gun violence.

I.
This is a Business -- Not a Charity!

A student in our undergraduate conflict resolution course asked about why conflict resolution principles should be applied to business. He said, "The company I work for buys and sells buildings. We bought a building in a residential area, honoring all the legal requirements. Now the neighborhood

doesn't want us to rebuild. They want to maintain the historical feel of the neighborhood." In a critique of what I was teaching, he asked, "Why should we want to honor their 'needs'? After all, we are a *business* – not a *charity*."

We talked about how, beyond having compassion for people who live in the neighborhood, it may actually be good business to seek to have happy neighbors. We left it at that. Several months later, the student spontaneously announced to the class that he had told his boss about the process of negotiating conflict to create "win-win solutions". The boss was apparently curious about the concept. The business was scheduled to demolish an old home that they had purchased and replace it with new and modern building. The neighbors objected to the new plan. The boss and his team decided to meet with the neighbors. They sought to identify what type of building the neighbors would find acceptable in the space. The neighborhood indicated a desire to have the building remain, but to have it refurbished in some way.

This solution was not feasible to the firm for both economic and municipal (zoning) reasons. However, the boss and his team nonetheless sought to find a solution that would meet a triad of needs: the *economic* needs of the business, the *aesthetic* needs of the neighborhood, and the *zoning* needs of the local municipality. They developed a proposal that would involve building a new structure from the ground up – but one that would resemble the old structure. The proposal proved agreeable to the neighborhood. It also turned out that when the boss brought the matter to the local zoning board, they also not only approved it, but the new proposal created conditions that allowed the business to purchase additional lands to improve the property further.

And so, an idea that discussed between a professor and a student in an undergraduate class blossomed into a proposal that produced a win-win-win outcome that affected real people in a real community. While we could say that this was a *business* collaboration, that's not quite true. The collaboration spanned multiple spheres of interpersonal activity. Collaboration occurred between and among many groups of people – between the professor and the student; the student and the boss; the boss and his staff; the staff and the neighborhood; the people within the neighborhood itself; and between the boss and the zoning board. The process spanned interpersonal, business and political contexts.

II.
"That's Retarded!":
A Collaborative Alternative to Cancel Culture

It is currently common for people in some social groups to seek restrict the use of words that can be regard as offensive. One such term is the word "retarded". Often, when such terms are used, people feel obligated to confront the offender to express their discomfort and to prompt the user to stop using the term in question. In some circumstances, the use of certain terms is viewed as a sign of bias, bigotry, or prejudice that results in the offending party being "canceled" – that is, shamed, shunned, or restricted from participating in the activities of the offended group.

The following account contains a description of a situation involving two friends – Chris and Jake. Chris was uncomfortable with Jake's use the term "retarded" in everyday conversation. In the account that follows, assisted by a mediator, Chris was able to have a conflict resolving discussion with Jake about the use of the term "retarded".

Unlike many discussions about such issues, this conversation was able to occur without Jake feeling demeaned or "cancelled". More important, because of their capacity to listen carefully to the needs, feelings and perspectives of each other, *both partners became transformed.* In ways that neither the parties nor the mediator expected beforehand, both friends *changed perspective on the issue at hand* – namely, their beliefs about the use of the term "retarded". This discussion shows how collaborative problem-solving provides an alternative to adversarial ways of addressing social problems.

Chris started the discussion. The mediator urged Chris to state his concerns by expressing the feelings and needs that emerged when Jake's used of the term "retarded":

Chris: When those kind of terms are used, I feel disrespected, and I feel like there is a lack of empathy for different groups of people because as just someone who is a member of that community and who has relatives to are mentally disabled and handicapped, I have a need for people to be respectful to those groups of people, to myself, to people of my family and who are also disabled..

In this passage, Chris used "I-Statements" to communicate the feelings, needs and thoughts that he experienced as a result of Jake's use of the term "retarded". Thereafter, Jake was able to summarize Chris's concerns in a non-judgmental way that made Chris feel both heard and understood. The mediator modeled the process of seeking to understand – in an empathic and nonjudgmental way – why Jake used the term "retarded" in everyday conversation:

Jake: When I use those terms… Well, I feel like maybe my need when using that *describes* something is part

…just…a way to look …that's…I use that as in my mind it's a descriptor and also use it I maybe to be *humorous* in some way…*I want people to like me* and by being funny is one way that I can do that and that is a way that previously allowed me to be humorous with other people.

Here we see that Jake uses the term "retarded" in ways that were successful in gaining the affection of individuals in previous friend groups. Even though Chris does not like the use of the term "retarded", he was nonetheless able to understand why Jake would have used the term in an attempt to gain the adulation of his peers. The mediator attempted to further understand what it was like for Jake to use the term "retarded":

Mod: These are words that people in your group used, how do you feel when they use those words? Do you feel that they are funny words? … Do you ever have bad feelings, or do you have good feelings about them?

Jake: I feel differently [about the use of the term in different contexts]. If they are ever directed at someone directly, meaning for the purpose of [trails off]… When it's used jokingly, which is like I guess is subjective, but when I perceive it as jokingly, I find it funny.

Mod: So, you are saying that if you see someone use words like "gay" or "retarded" directed at someone else…

Jake: …in a harmful way…

Mod: …in a harmful way, that makes you feel uncomfortable

Jake: It makes me feel disgusted.

Clearly, Jake has a more nuanced understanding of the use of the term "retarded" than Chris had thought – or even as Jake had previously thought. Sensing that there was more that Jake wanted to communicate, the moderator probed Jake's experience further.

Mod: [Is there anything else that] you want Chris to know that you feel that he doesn't know?"

Jake: Okay. I also use the word "retarded" to describe myself sometimes. Not severe, but I have mental stuff sometimes, kind of…I feel like it applies to me in some way…. even not to the extent…I don't know.

Mod: Great, good. That's good., And why is it important to you that he knows that?

Jake: Because I feel that I also…the word is kind of a part of me? I don't know. Sometimes. I don't know…

At this point, Jake has revealed something truly remarkable and unexpected. He *identifies* – at least in part – with the term "retarded". This is something that none of the parties involved could have anticipated before the conversation – and something that would have been almost impossible to learn outside of a problem-solving conversation in which Jake was made to feel safe and accepted. It is this realization ultimately transformed Chris's understanding of the issue.

Chris was now really beginning to understand Jake. Stumbling over his own words, Chris wanted to express the fact of his understanding:

Chris: So, you feel because you identify with the community

of people that may be like mentally disabled at least on some level, and, and, and, and, and, and, and, you find that you resonate with that word, either in a joking sense or not in a joking sense, so that is why you use that word …

Mod: What is it like for you to identify with a word that some people see as a negative? What is that like for you?

Jake: I guess I also see it as a negative. I feel that sometimes I am "less than" because of things.

Chris: So you feel like…because you do certain things and act in certain ways that you resonate with the word "retarded" because sometimes you feel lesser…

Jake: Yeah.

Guided by the moderator, Chris and Jake were able to create an agreement of how to proceed with the issue of Jack's language. No – Chris did not change his feelings that the term "retarded" should be avoided. But he did understand why Jake's invoked the word and felt much more tolerant about Jake's use of the term. He came to understand that not all uses of seemingly bigoted or stereotypical terms could be understood in that light. Jake came to understand how others felt about the use of the term, and spontaneously volunteered – even against Chris's suggestion that he need not do so -- to limit or even eliminate the use of the term from his vocabulary.

Here we have a shared solution to a problem that could have easily degenerated into a confrontation involving shameful accusations of ignorance, bigotry, or worse. Chris could have easily positioned himself as morally superior to Jake (indeed,

he actually did appear to do so at the beginning of the discussion), calling on Jake to renounce his use of an offending term. By compassionately seeking mutual understanding of each other's needs, feelings and beliefs, the conflict all but resolved itself. This example shows the importance of moral humility, genuine curiosity and compassion in the process of resolving sensitive social problems.

III.
Bridging Political Divides:
The Example of Gun Violence

In the United States, people differ in their views about whether to restrict the availability of guns to citizens. At its most basic, the question under debate is:

Should we permit or regulate gun ownership?

For some, the issue is addressed by the First Amendment to the *United States Constitution*, which states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed". Many argue that gun ownership is a right protected by the Second Amendment. Citizens in favor of gun control argue that government has both the right and responsibility to ensure the public good. Part of this responsibility is protecting the public from the dangers of firearms. Advocates of gun regulation and gun rights tend to engage in heated debates over the extent to which the Second Amendment guarantees the right of citizens to own guns.

As long as the issue is organized around this sort of either-or debate, it is unlikely that there will be meaningful or lasting solutions to the problem of gun violence. The gun debate, as traditionally framed, requires people to make a zero-sum

choice: either we permit or restrict guns. The goal of permitting guns is in direct conflict with the goal of restricting them. It is not surprising that such a stark choice would quickly divide the room:


Clashing Political Positions

But this question is not framed as an attempt to *solve a problem*. Indeed, the genuine problem is never actually stated in the question. The problem at hand is not whether to permit or restrict guns. In fact, gun regulation is proposed as a *solution* to a problem – namely, the problems of *how to reduce gun violence*. Similarly, advocating the permitting of gun ownership is not a kind of problem. It too is a *solution* to a problem – namely that of *ensuring that people can use guns for their chosen purposes*.

When stated as an either-or issue, there is no alternative to thinking of the conflict as a type of battle. Each side tries to advance their position at the expense of the other. This is what typically occurs in political debates and campaigns. Political debates are not about solving problems; they are about advancing positions. They are about winning and losing.

In collaborative problem-solving, the battle over positions is turned into a process of problem-solving. That is, instead of battling over whether nor not to permit guns, the parties seek ways to solve the full range of problems that motivate the conflict in the first place:
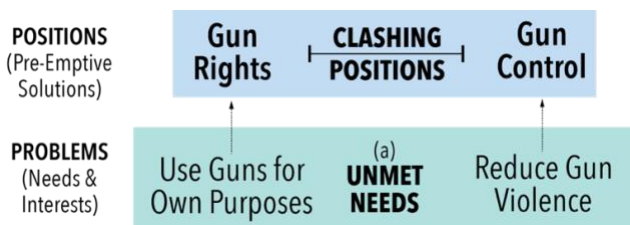
When this happens, the process starts not with the either-or question like, "Should we permit or restrict guns?", but instead with the statement of a problem to be solved -- something like:

How can we simultaneously reduce gun violence while simultaneously honoring the desire of people to own guns?

Collaborative problem-solving begins by articulating *problems*. The most important part of problem-solving is representing the problem itself. There are typically *multiple diverse solutions for any given problem*. If this is so, then once each party is assured that the "other side" is willing to acknowledge, respect and even try to help solve the full range of problems advanced by all parties to a conflict, fears begin to subside. Parties can then begin working together – without fear – to find new ways to simultaneously solve each other's problems. When this happens, novel solutions tend to emerge – often, with minimal effort.

So, how can we reduce gun violence while simultaneously protecting gun ownership? If we are open to novel ways of thinking, we can see that there are many possible ways that these problems can be addressed simultaneously. Some are shown here:

Bridging Political Divides on the Issue of Gun Violence

In the case of gun violence, the moment we look beyond entrenched political positions, we can find that there are many ways to meet each side's underlying needs and interests. Much gun violence occurs because of problems associated with lack of education, economic need, poverty and the poor means of resolving conflict. If this is so, then core origins of gun violence can be addressed by (a) improving the infrastructure of communities, such as fostering educational attainment and economic mobility.

A national effort (b) to teach effective conflict resolution help provide people with skills to solve social problems before then rise to the level of lethal conflict. Still further, most acts of gun violence occur because of suicide. One might propose (c) direct interventions to address the circumstances under which people choose to take their own lives (e.g., hopelessness, collapse of meaning, feeling left behind, depression) can help address the root causes of suicidality. Increased mental health monitoring and services can help identify individuals at risk of committing acts of violence before such crimes are committed.

A major problem with the debate on gun violence is that gun owners – the vast majority of whom have deep respect for firearms – fear that political figures are motivated ban all or most firearms. Understanding the needs of gunowners can bring awareness to this issue. To the extent that (d) their desire to use gun responsibly will not be thwarted, gun owners may be more likely to join forces with those who are concerned about gun violence to identify novel solutions. Given such assurances, it is likely that many gun owners would (e) applaud the desire to promote a culture of responsible gun ownership, complete with (f) rigorous training programs and even licensure for gun ownership.

People will rarely if ever attain full agreement on ways to solve collective problems. To be sure, in the solution described above, the full range of issues related to gun violence would not be resolved. However, collaborative solutions like that described above would nonetheless go a long way toward *reducing the number gun deaths in society while simultaneously ensuring freedom of gun ownership.* Collaborative solutions hold out the promise of meeting many of the needs of diverse parties to a conflict.

7
WE NEED TO CREATE CULTURES OF COLLABORATION

We are currently experiencing increasing levels of social conflict at all levels of our society. Collaborative problem solving is the key to resolving social conflict. Collaborative problem-solving is broadly applicable to managing conflict as all levels of society. It mediates the development of successful relationships, organizations, businesses and other social institutions. It can and has been used address social conflict between and among groups. It has proven effective in managing partisan[xxxiv] and other forms of political conflict – even in an increasingly polarized society.

Most important, collaborative problem-solving is the key to solving "wicked problems". A wicked problem is a complex and dynamic one – one that has multiple origins and many interacting facets[xxxv]. Wicked problems are those that have no easy, obvious or single solutions. Wicked problems include such problems as climate change, social inequality, international relations, effective education for society, race relations, and so forth. Given their multi-faceted complexity,

solving wicked problems requires the coordinative expertise of many people working effectively together as a team[xxxvi] and ways to mitigate the organizational obstacles and ideological barriers that stop people from recognizing and working systemically on wicked problems[xxxvii].

A society is founded upon the capacity of people to work together toward common goals. Relationships are key to the process of working together. However, relationships rely upon the capacity to manage conflict effectively. The capacity to manage conflict and complexity are at the core our ability to sustain meaningful relationships, build productive organizations, and social and political problems in a complex society[xxxviii]. The inability to manage interpersonal, social and political conflict is the single largest impediment to the development of a flourishing society.

Creating Cultures of Collaboration

We need to create cultures of collaboration in our society. A culture is a set of shared and contested meanings, beliefs, values and practices distributed throughout a given community. We often think of culture as something that is in the environment – something "out there" or "external" to the individual person. That's not true. We are all active members of the cultures in which we operate. If this is so, then we are a part of our cultures. But that's not all; our cultures are also a part of us. Persons and cultures make each other up.

What does this mean? This means that culture gets inside of us and helps us become who we are. If this is true, then changes in our cultures can produce changes in *us*. But the opposite is also true. If we are parts of culture, then changes in us can produce changes in the *cultures* in which we operate.

We can build a more collaborative society[xxxix]. We can do so by building a culture of collaborative problem solving and empathic engagement. We can do this by teaching children, teens, adults, couples, employers, employees, leaders, policy makers, and politicians how to think of everyday conflict as an opportunity for problem solving rather than as an occasion for battle. It means working to break down ideological barriers to our capacity to address and resolve the "wicked problems" of social, organizational and political life[xl]. Doing this result in new ways of understanding who we are and how we should relate to each other. Once we gain some proficiency in doing this, we can bring our newfound skills into our local spheres of influence. Those areas could include our relationships, families, schools, houses of worship, workplaces, and municipalities.

The more we do this, the more we will find that the cultures in which we operate – the cultures of our relationships, families, schools, places of worship, workplaces, communities and municipalities – will also change (even if only a little). Small changes beget larger changes; and larger changes ripple outward into communities. This can help usher in a new moral ethos for managing human relationships in our increasingly complex societies. This is how we change our worlds – slowly, gradually: thinking globally, but acting locally.

All such change, however, begins with relationships. It begins by becoming more collaborative in our everyday relationships. As we change our relationships, we can make a difference in our local spheres of influence. If we can transform how people related to each other at "higher" levels of social life – leaders, policy makers, employers, political actors, and so forth, we can set the stage for still greater change.

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We are not handling conflict well.

Politically, we are polarized. Partisans have difficulty talking to each other, let alone solving problems. A divided house, of course, cannot stand.

Organizations are hierarchical and siloed. Subordinates fear superiors; divisions fail to communicate. Important things are left unsaid, and missions suffer.

Schools are ridden with social conflict among students. Behavior problems divert teachers away from teaching. Teachers, parents and administrators are at odds about what to do about it. Those most affected are children.

Ordinary people struggle to find meaning and fulfillment in their relationships. Inability to handle conflict is the single biggest threat to lasting partnerships.

We already know a lot about how to handle conflict. We need to unlock this knowledge in order to create a culture of collaboration.