CONSULTANT PROFILE

Working Relationships
One Way to Diagnose a Conflict   by Dan Oestreich

Let's say there is a scale of effective relating. It goes from high trust and collaboration at one pole to destructive hostility at the other. In between, there are some intermediary points, so that we get something like the following:

A	B	C	D	E
• Active appreciation • Strong collaborative spirit • Differences turned into growth and learning	• Supportive • Cooperative • Willingness to solve problems	• Neutral • Objective • Polite but impersonal	• Critical • Judgmental and testing • Passive-aggressive	• Open discrediting • Negative competing • Justified hostility and conflict
High Trust	*Positive Regard*	*Reserved*	*Undermining*	*Destructive*

What the graph displays is an over-simplification, but it may be helpful in diagnosing an interpersonal conflict. The point is that between two colleagues there are always cues being sent out and picked up about the nature of their working relationship. When a conflict is present it may show up via "what I believe I am expressing *toward* you vs. what I believe I am receiving *from* you."

For instance, I might believe I am offering you support and cooperation (B), but I feel I am receiving only judgment in return (D). The relationship then isn't reciprocal in a positive sense. As a result, I may work to build more trust with you, making positive attempts and invitations to create something better than what we currently have. In contrast, however, I may also decide that these invitations are not worth it given your apparent behavior. In this case, I may well slide down the scale to meet you at judgment (D). Or perhaps, I slide even further, given you did not meet me at cooperation, dipping toward hostility and active discrediting (E).

This scale can be a useful tool in exploring the conflict. The conversation can begin with each person privately rating the relationship:

> • Behavior I believe I am receiving from my partner…………………(letter).
> • Behavior I believe I am expressing toward my partner……………..(letter).

The results are then shared between the partners. Facilitating the conversation aims to help each person see where they are and where they want to be by checking the reciprocity levels. The discussion can be quite enlightening (and sometimes painful) as feedback emerges: e.g., "You say you believe you are expressing B, but I don't experience that – I sense what I'm really getting is C at best and D most of the time!"

What's important about the discussion is the lesson that we all have choices to make around our relationships. I can choose to enter a more collaborative, high trust relationship with you, or choose to not go there with you; keep trying or give up. I can choose to explain why higher trust between us doesn't work for me — or not. I can choose to ask you more effectively and directly for what I need, and I can choose to listen to your needs in return. It's not about blaming one another for the relationship that is. It's about being clear as to the choices we have already made and now intend to make to invite another person into or deter them from the relationship we both own. In my experience, people in conflict often find that they *do* want things to change and they are willing to make commitments about their own behavior to that end. The feedback that illuminates the discrepancies between what I think I am expressing versus what I actually leak into a relationship may very well be a surprising catalyst to deeper self-knowledge and change.