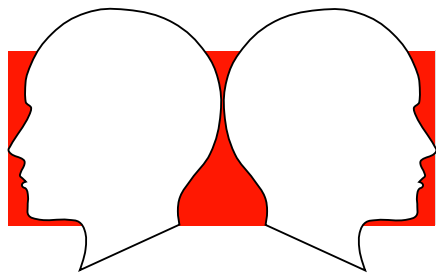


connections, conversations, conflict



some ideas for thinking
about good (and poor)
roles & relationships

Bob Dick

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What's ahead?

This brief document is intended to introduce you to some evidence and ideas that I find useful. I invite you to use this small ebook to enhance your understanding of relationships and how to improve them.

The later pages will suggest some ways of making good relationships better. There will also be some ideas on avoiding some of the common pitfalls in relationships.

Sometimes, when relationships begin to turn sour, a downward spiral begins. In this document you'll find ideas to help in interrupting downward spirals. Better still, there are some ways of initiating and maintaining upward spirals.

First, though, there's some other information I want to offer. This is to provide a context for what follows, and to present some ideas that may change the way you think about relationships and how to nourish them.

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Here in 22 pages are some practical ideas and processes for building and maintaining good relationships — and for remedying them when they degrade

- 1 Interactions that build relationships genuine engagement
- 2 There's more ... the undiscussables and their importance
- 3 What is a fact? a brief experiment on fact and assumption
- 4 Interpretations — from where? an experiment about facts
- 5 Here's what I make of it so far... implications so far
- 6 And not only that ... the ladder of inference
- 7 The perils of untested assumptions when communication fails
- 8 Motives — real and imagined resulting from our meaning-making
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- 10 3rd priority — be understood the skill of speaking
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Interactions that build relationships

Quality relationships — that's the goal. By the time you reach the end of this document, my intent is that you'll have been able to enhance your understanding of quality relationships and how to achieve them. There are several elements to this understanding. I present them in the pages ahead.

However, I think you'll make more sense of them if you know where we're headed. That's the purpose of this page — to provide a look ahead.

Imagine you're interacting with another person. That person listens carefully, with interest, to what you say. She asks intelligent questions that demonstrate to you that she truly wants to understand you. She is doing well. She checks her understanding by letting you know what she has understood. She does all this with consideration.

How would that feel?

Suppose you were to respond in like manner. How would that be for her? *What* do you think the effects of such an interaction would be? For you? For both of you?

Here, in summary, is a process that works like that —

You speak. As you do, the other person gives you all of her attention. She ...

listens intently, striving to understand what you are trying to say

asks questions, to clarify her understanding

lets you know what she has understood, encouraging you to correct any misunderstanding

and then responds, with obvious consideration, to what you have said.

In response, you reciprocate. You ...

listen for understanding; ask questions for clarification; inform her of what you have understood; and then respond.

And so it continues until you achieve a meeting of minds. That's where we're headed. The following pages assemble the components of this approach.

I invite you to remember the essentials of that process as you read on ...

There's more ...

Of course, there's more to it than that. Otherwise I could finish this document right here.

In particular, there's another important and necessary element. I'll mention it briefly here, and return to it again later. It will make more sense after we've explored some other aspects of relationships and connections.

The previous page is more about listening than speaking. This one is more about speaking than listening. Together, they are more powerful than either alone.

Here is this other important element ...

There are aspects of relationships that it would be valuable to talk about. And we don't talk about them.

To borrow a term from Chris Argyris, you can think of them as important *undiscussables*.

You may not be sure what to do with that idea just yet. That's fine. I'm happy to leave it hanging there. It's something we'll return to. It *is* important, in my view.

For now, you might keep it in mind as a question about important relationships —

what would it be useful for you to discuss that you don't presently discuss?

As I say, we'll return to this. For now, let's explore some other issues ...

What is a fact?

Here's a small experiment for you to try. Find a place, indoors or out, where there are moderate amounts of activity and noise. When you find the place, settle down and relax.

(I think it's a useful experiment. I suggest you stop reading, and do it.)



When you're ready, close your eyes so that you can focus on what you can hear. Describe, silently to yourself, the raw sounds that you hear. Don't interpret them. Don't say "I hear a car going by". That's interpretation. Instead, describe the **sound** of the car.

Listen for a few minutes. Then reflect on your experience. What was it like? How difficult was it? If it was difficult, why?

...

If your experience is at all typical, you found that hearing *without interpretation* was difficult.

Immediately and without effort you *heard* human voices, or a car passing, or a door closing, a bird singing, the wind rustling some leaves. But that's interpretation, you reminded yourself. You were supposed to report the raw sounds, uninterpreted.

My guess is that the **interpretation came first**, without effort. You had to probe beyond the interpretation to recover the raw sound. **That** took conscious effort.

And then you found you often didn't have the language to describe the sound to yourself.

Is that how it was for you? **If so, what sense do you make of that?**

Interpretations — from where?

Here's another experiment. You don't have to do this one. It has already been done, by B.F. ("Fred") Skinner. He's better known for many experiments teaching pigeons to track targets, and the like.



BF Skinner

This experiment was different. He called it the "verbal summator". He asked people to listen to sound recordings of sentences. He invited them to play the recordings over, as often as they wished, to try to decipher the sentences.

The sentences were very faint, almost lost in noise. It was a difficult task. People did play the recordings over and over. Eventually they did hear sentences ...

... **that weren't there**. There weren't any sentences. The recordings were of random English vowel sounds. They were only just discernable above the background noise.

If the *sentences* people heard weren't in the recordings, **where did they come from?**

Skinner reported that if a door slammed in the background, people might "hear" a sentence about a door slamming. If a car passed by, the sentence might include something about a car. And so on.

Sometimes, the sentence they heard was determined by whatever they had been thinking about. That was actually Skinner's motivation. People often constructed sentences almost out of nothing. Skinner therefore assumed that the sentences told him something about the *people*.

What do you make of that?

I'm not surprised. I think we all have a profound need to make sense of what happens. At least, I do. I am strongly motivated to make sense of what occurs. Sometimes that doesn't at first happen. If not, I relax my critical faculties. I take more into account. I persist until I *do* find some meaning. **Or I create it.**

How trustworthy do *you* think perceptions are? Your *own* perceptions?

Here's what I make of it so far...

(I'm not necessarily asking you to agree with me. I'm inviting you to compare my ideas to yours. You can then decide on the implications for you, if any.)



It makes sense to me that what I *hear* are barking dogs, closing doors, or passing cars. My fast thinking, as Dan Kahneman calls it, sums up a lot of information quickly and effortlessly. I'm not consciously aware of how it happens. (*Thinking fast and slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011)



This saves me a lot of effort. I don't have to listen carefully to the raw sounds. I don't have to make conscious sense of them. I need not *decide* which of them requires my further attention. Most of the time that all happens effortlessly.

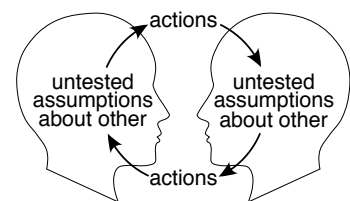
When it's the physical world my unconscious mind is almost always correct. It's therefore understandable that I treat my perceptions as fact. In reality what I "hear" are interpretations. They aren't really *facts*. But, usually, they *almost* are.

Is that true for you too?

Then there are less tangible situations. Suppose, for example, someone does something that I don't expect. Or perhaps the person doesn't do something that I do expect. Suppose their actions, or lack of actions, impact on me in some way.

What then? It seems to me that I still try to make sense of the situation. I reach conclusions about what is happening. Again, very often, I do so without conscious thought. And again I'm tempted to treat my assumptions as if they were facts.

If they are "facts" then I don't have to check them. I can act on them. I can respond in some way to the other person. Now suppose that, in response, the other person forms assumptions about me and my behaviour ... and acts. That could be the beginning of a downward spiral.



What do you think? Is this how your mind works too? And if so, so what?

And not only that ...

I may think I deal in facts. But I never really do so. I deal in interpretations ... in assumptions. However, I can be aware of this. What I take to be facts are *not*. I can remember this, and try to get as *close* to the facts as I can.

The ladder at the right is based on Chris Argyris's "ladder of inference". (*Overcoming organizational defences*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, 1990.)

Like everyone else (or so I assume) I'm not aware of **all** the data. My brain is selective. When I add meaning to the situation, I'm influenced by previous experience. When I take action, that action may be based on my assumptions and decisions. They, in turn, are biased by my prior beliefs.

I move up and down the ladder of inference. Doing so is unavoidable — and often useful. However, it helps if I make an effort to be conscious of where I am on the ladder. I can treat my "facts" as only probably true. I can remain aware that my assumptions are assumptions.

I can try to hold my beliefs lightly. I can remember that acting on unchecked assumptions can be dangerous. It risks creating a downward spiral.

It can happen like this ...

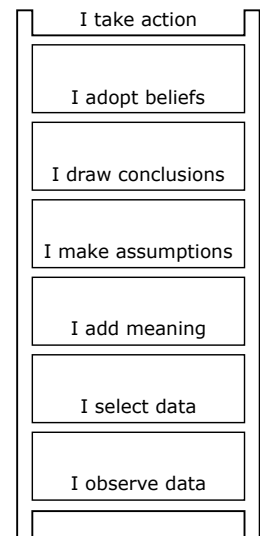
I observe a person's actions toward me

I make sense of the actions by assuming their intentions

I treat the intentions as fact

I act on them, or on my feelings about them

perhaps triggering a similar process for the other person.



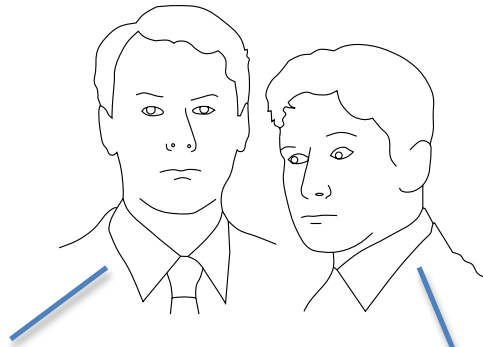
Take a moment to think of some relationship that isn't working. It's better if it's a relationship close to you. It may be *your* relationship with someone else. Or it may be a damaged relationship between two other people that you know well.

Consider the ideas we've so far addressed. Reflect on that relationship in the light of those ideas. **Do you think the ideas might fit? If so, with what implications?**

The perils of untested assumptions

We'll shortly look at some skills and processes for building and maintaining good relationships. You'll find them easier to use if you keep in mind this idea —

It is often *untested and acted-on* assumptions that undermine trust
Consider this **spoken** (and unspoken) interaction ...



(I can't tell how well George is doing at his new job. How can I raise this issue with him?)

George, how happy are you with your recent performance?

(Oh oh! What's going on here? Am I in trouble?)

Yes, very happy, Bill. Everything's going well. No problems.

(Is that too good to be true? It can often take people a couple of months in that job before they're comfortable.)

That's great! I'm glad to hear it. Well, keep it up. When you need any help, just ask.

(No way!)

Yes, of course. Thanks for your concern.

(I don't trust George. I'll have to keep an eye on him.)

(I don't trust Bill. I'll stay out of his way.)

How often is what **you** say different from what you are thinking? And ...?

Motives — real and imagined

As I've said, we look for meaning in whatever attracts our attention. That includes in the behaviour of others. If we can't *find* the meaning in the evidence, we *make it up*.

We deduce the motives driving the behaviour of others. Or we think we do. The motives we deduce may be real, or imagined.



This is Chris Argyris, unfortunately no longer with us. He spent most of his professional life studying how *and why* we try to improve situations and, very often, fail. I've learned much from his insights. I use them, often, in my work and life.

One of his key findings was this ... We often make assumptions about other people's motives. We act on those assumptions without checking them. In doing so, we often don't improve the situation. Instead we make it worse.

Argyris deciphered this puzzle. We *don't* reveal our assumptions about other people's motives. It's regarded as inappropriate. Such matters are *undiscussable*. Not only that. Their undiscussability is also undiscussable. We are often mistaken.

Argyris called it "the cover-up of the cover-up".

I suspect you've already applied this idea to the situation on the previous page. You've noticed that neither Bill nor George has been open about their own motives. Also, each has formed assumptions about the other's motives.

I'd be pessimistic about the future of their relationship. I expect you would be too. But suppose they could wind the clock back and behave differently. **If you were to rewrite their script, what would you have them say instead?**

I invite you to make a note of your suggestions to them. You can then keep your suggestions in mind as you read the next few pages.

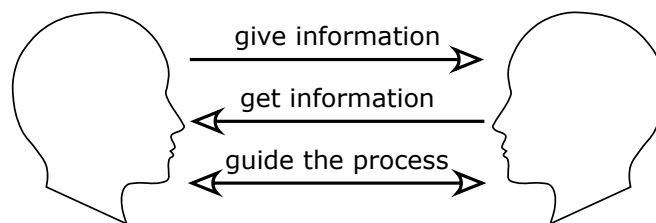
Communicating

Perhaps you already know much of this. If so, I invite you to treat it as a refresher — a chance to remind yourself of things you often don't have to give much attention.

Imagine an interaction with another person. You may not know how effective *they* are at communicating. Therefore you may have to be skilled enough for both of you.

For assured outcomes you therefore need three sets of skills:

- giving to the other person the relevant information that you have
- getting from the other person the information they have, and you don't and
- guiding the process of interaction towards mutual understanding.



If your communication is at all like mine, then perhaps you do as I sometimes, thoughtlessly, do. You give most of your attention to giving information. From this perspective, I am likely to think success is when the other person adopts my view.

How do you think it would be if instead I treated ...

- *a process for reaching mutual understanding* as the highest priority
- *understanding the other person* as the next highest priority and
- *conveying my own point of view* as still important, but third priority.

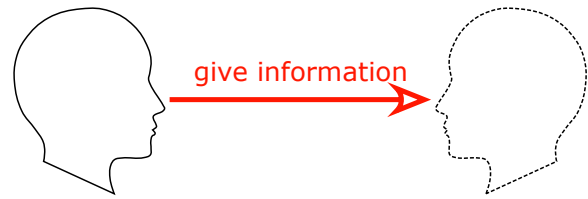
How do you think that would be for the other person? And eventually for me?

Increasingly, that's what I try to do. When I do, it works better than my more usual way of treating the interaction.

What do you think? Does that make sense? Might it work for you?

3rd priority — be understood

Suppose you wish to raise some issue within a relationship. It's important: third priority. It is here that many interactions begin. Speaking begins the discussion.



Here's an approach I find useful. It's easier to use when there is time to collect my thoughts and plan what I'm going to say. Over time it becomes easier with practice. I based it on ideas from Viviane Robinson (*Problem based methodology*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1993). She based her ideas on Argyris's work.

There are three components: ■ an **invitation** to the other person to join me in addressing the issue; ■ my **assumptions** about what is happening; ■ the **evidence** on which my assumptions are based. The order of those three components can vary. I choose them to suit the situation, the other person, and my own style.

Incorporating information from previous pages, here they are in more detail:

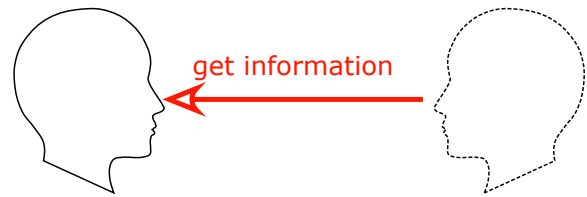
Invitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I invite the other person to join me in a discussion. I make it clear that it is intended to improve matters for both of us ■ I clearly state <i>my own</i> motives — my desired outcomes and ■ I make it clear that I <i>encourage</i> the other person to be willing to challenge my assumptions, or evidence, or both. Truly.
Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I state my assumptions about the issue, <i>especially my assumptions about the other person's motives</i> — with consideration and honesty ■ I am tentative, <i>clearly labelling my assumptions as assumptions</i> and therefore possibly mistaken and ■ I phrase them <i>without blame or criticism or demand</i>.
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I describe the evidence on which my assumptions are based. If possible I draw on evidence that the other person can verify ■ I am as <i>specific and concrete</i> as I can be and ■ again I phrase them <i>without blame or criticism or demand</i>.

It's fine to be gentle *provided it doesn't distort or disguise my message*. I can aim for both gentleness and clarity. It is important that I am genuine and use my own words.

If you wished, you could choose a relationship you'd like to improve and **work out how you would begin**

2nd priority — understand

Sometimes this is where you begin, perhaps when the other person raises the issue. Your priority is then to understand *what it is like for the other person*.



On other occasions, you may begin to speak. Whenever the other person speaks you then switch to *trying to understand*.

Listening for understanding is a particular form of listening. It's *very* different from half-listening or pretend listening. That's when you plan what you will say when it's your turn again. It's also very different from listening for ammunition. To listen for understanding you temporarily put aside your own concerns. You listen with intense curiosity. *Your aim is to truly understand what it's like to be the other person.*

This form of listening can have four components, LACE, as follows. Or sometimes three — it's better to avoid enquiry while the other person is at all upset.

Listen	for understanding. Use eyes and ears. Seek to understand what is <i>really</i> being said, both stated and implied — the “ <i>real message</i> ”.
Acknowledge	what you have understood. Say it in <i>your</i> words. The other person then knows you've listened. Be tentative — you may be wrong.
Check	your understanding. Encourage the other person to correct any errors and to challenge any assumptions you've made.
Enquire	for more understanding. Ask for further information whenever there is something you don't yet understand.

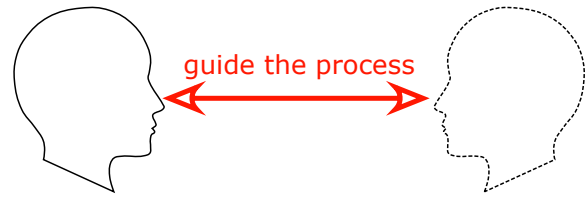
Acknowledgment is the component that is least used — yet *it makes the most difference*. I find that if I do it well, the other pieces fall into place more easily. I predict you'll find that that is true for you too.

I also find that **curiosity** is immensely useful. If I arouse my intense curiosity about what it is like to be the other person, I am more likely to behave constructively.

Acknowledgment and curiosity. Seems easy enough. What do you think?

1st priority — get the process right

Yes, this is the highest priority. Sometimes information is given and gained well. Yet the outcomes are still poor. The likely reason is that the **process** — the nature and style of the interaction — was poor.



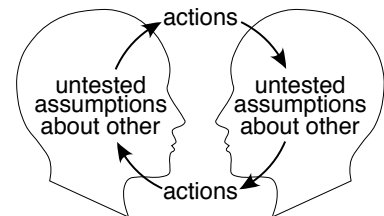
[As you may know ... **Content is what** people talk about — the issue, and other relevant information. **Process is how** they interact — the style, the climate.]

The purpose is to agree on, and achieve, a *process* that gives good *content* outcomes to all. Many elements of this will be similar to those for giving information — but now directed towards the process rather than the content of the issue being explored.

The key principles are similar:

- be transparent and clear about motives and
- seek agreement on a process that both of you can agree to, willingly.

Remember this diagram? Sometimes we form assumptions about another person. If we treat our assumptions as facts, we may act on them without first checking their accuracy.



Then, sometimes, the other person responds similarly. That can be the beginning of a downward spiral.

The interaction between Bill and George above was an illustration of how it can happen in practice. The three communication priorities above are some of the building blocks we can use to develop a better approach.

There are a few other building blocks I want to mention. I introduce them in the next couple of pages. We can then assemble all of the building blocks into some more constructive processes. We can apply them to the task of forming and maintaining relationships that become and remain effective and satisfying.

Relationships

The better my relationship with someone is, the easier it is to maintain it. The easier it is to enhance it further. I expect that is your experience too.

That's a bit of a "Catch 22" — a bind. If a relationship is poor, it needs improvement. But it's difficult to improve. If it's good, further improvement is easier, but less imperative.

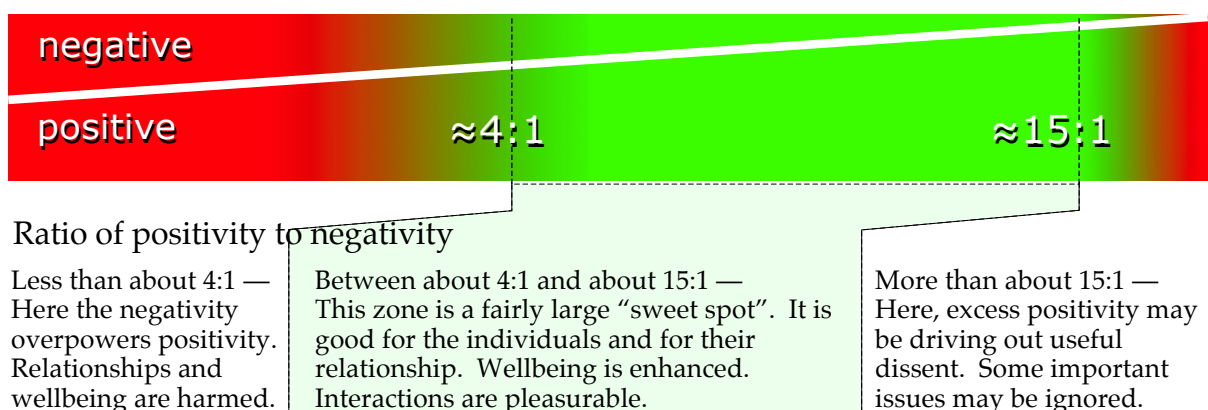
The way to escape the bind is to act before the relationship sours. Continue to maintain and improve it before there is an issue. One way to do that is to try to ensure that almost all interactions with the person are enjoyable — are positive.

We've already looked at a communication style that helps. It treats others as worthy. It seeks to meet their needs as well as our own. It demonstrates effective listening, which people tend to find satisfying and affirming.

There are several lines of research that offer an additional strategy. For instance here is one by Barbara Frederickson (John Gottman has done similar work):

When the ratio of positive to negative *interactions* exceeds a certain point, positive *outcomes* follow. There is also a desirable upper limit to positivity, probably because it implies an unwillingness to disagree or to offer constructive feedback.

I treat the actual ratios as approximate. However, it does seem that relationships are helped when **the ratio of positive to negative interactions is greater than about 4:1**. There may also be an upper limit, beyond which issues are ignored rather than confronted.



Consider the George and Bill example. How likely is it that their future interactions will be positive?

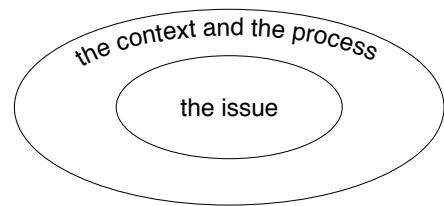
Context and process

It's not enough to deal well with the *topic* of discussion. There are also some other matters to be communicated.

Some previous pages looked at integrating three communication skills: giving information, getting information, and guiding the process. The content of a discussion will be better addressed if all three communication skills are used.

In addition, all three skills can beneficially be used to address two further elements of the situation:

- enough **context** for the other person to understand the issue adequately
- enough about the **process** — the interaction — for the other person to know and accept that her or his needs *are* being taken into account.



For example, recall the interaction between Bill and George. Suppose Bill had begun the conversation saying something like this:



(Friendly, and at a time when the issue can be given enough attention) George, do you have a few minutes ...

In your job, it's usual for people to take a few months for people to feel completely competent and assured. So that I can help you settle in, I'd like to know what's working for you, and what isn't. I'd also like to know anything I can do to assist you to perform well, and to enjoy the work.

I'd like this discussion to work well for both of us. Let's see if we can agree on an approach that benefits us both. What do you say?

It's my guess that George would respond in a more positive way than before.

And if George doesn't? Then remember the priorities. **The first priority — the process of interaction — becomes the topic.** Bill initiates a no-blame discussion about what inhibits George from responding in a positive way. Bill again makes it clear that he is looking for outcomes that are good for himself and George.

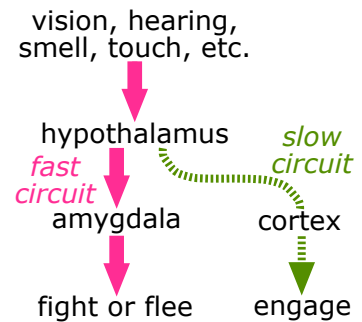
In this approach the other person's concerns are anticipated and allayed. All three communication skills are used. The process, the context and the topic are addressed. For each, mutual outcomes are sought. **Imagine how that would be for you.**

Fight, flight, or mutual engagement?

Some parts of our brain are much older, shared with many other species. Their primary responsibility is our survival. To this end, they respond to threat very quickly with fight or flight. For physical life-threatening situations this makes sense.

For interpersonal issues a more thoughtful and less automatic response is likely to be more appropriate. This will necessarily involve the cortex, the “thinking” part of our brain. But it reacts less quickly.

Incoming sense data reaches the hypothalamus, which assesses the threat. If threat is high it triggers a fast circuit, activating readiness for fight or flight.



For most interpersonal issues that isn't helpful — for us, or for the other person or people involved. As we can't know what their response will be, again we need skills enough for both of us.

Note the benefit of a *trusting prior relationship* and *positive prior interactions*. These reduce the likelihood of a threat response.

You can learn to override your own threat response. To do so you deliberately slow down your response. You breathe slowly, deeply and evenly. Then and only then you raise the issue with the other person, or respond to what they have said or done ...

PAUSE then BREATHE then ENGAGE

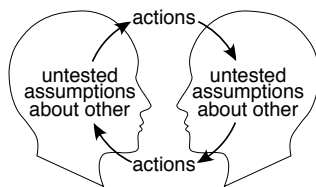
You can also make it *easier for the other person to engage* rather than fighting or fleeing:

- If you can, choose a suitable time and place, with no rush or distractions
- Provide enough context for them to understand the situation
- Be clear to them about your motives in raising the issue or responding. Include your wish that the outcomes will be beneficial for both of you
- Remember the three priorities. If appropriate, negotiate the process with them. Whether or not you do so, be prepared to table and address the process at any time when it isn't working.

We've now assembled enough pieces. We can begin to put them together ...

Self-fulfilling prophecies — and the information chain

We're now ready to explore self-fulfilling prophecies in more depth. To do so, we'll first revisit the negative self-fulfilling prophecies. We'll then examine a number of related processes that build positive self-fulfilling prophecies. They can also be used to turn around negative self-fulfilling prophecies.



We've already considered a simple version of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was diagrammed like this. For each person there are two components: actions, and assumptions in response.

To this we could also add the material effects of behaviour, and the feelings that accompany the assumptions. In more detail:

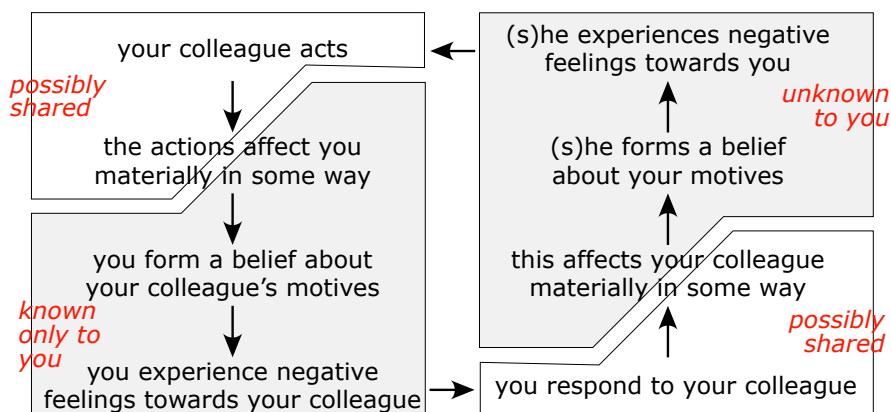
A person's actions ...

may have material outcomes for you ...

that trigger your assumptions about the person's motives ...

that in turn arouse feelings about the person and the relationship.

Those feelings and assumptions may lead to a response. If so, the conditions for a self-fulfilling prophecy may then be created. And here's an important point. *Only some of that chain of information is known to both of you.* Imagine an interaction between yourself and a colleague ...



The actions, and sometimes the material outcomes, may be known to both of you. Until you reveal your beliefs and feelings, *they* are fully known only to you. Similarly, your colleague's beliefs and feelings are known only to him or her.

In other words, neither of you understands the situation fully. While that is so, bringing about improvement is going to be difficult.

That chain of information underlies the strategies on the following pages.

Actions → outcomes — and what else?

Not all of the information is relevant to every situation. There are advantages in beginning with two elements of the chain that almost always apply:

actions → outcomes → reactions

and the corresponding information chain for the other person.

Sometimes this may be enough to bring about full understanding of a situation. Even when it isn't enough, actions and outcomes are a constructive beginning:

- you can be concrete and specific, close to the base of the ladder of inference
- specifics are easier for the other person to understand, and to verify
- when actions and outcomes are understood, that may sometimes be enough to identify alternative more-desirable actions and outcomes
- if other less-tangible elements become relevant they can be related to the actions and outcomes, helping understanding.

Criteria can be used to indicate when to exchange information about further elements.

Sometimes feelings are triggered in the moment, by the interaction. *When either person becomes emotional*, that typically indicates that information about **feelings** is now relevant:

actions → outcomes → feelings → reactions

with feelings added, if relevant, to the other person's half of the information chain.

Sometimes the feelings are aroused, not only by the immediate situation, but by previous situations. *When the feelings have a history*, that is a sign that information about **beliefs** is also likely to be relevant:

actions → outcomes → beliefs → feelings → reactions

sometimes also with another belief components in the form of intentions:

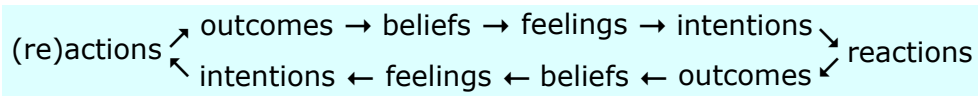
actions → outcomes → beliefs → feelings → intentions → reactions

again, often, with the corresponding information chain for the other person.

These elements — actions and outcomes, and feelings and beliefs if relevant — are conveyed using the process described early in this document.

In partial summary ...

The following pages describe how this information, or the relevant elements of it:



are exchanged within this iterative process for information exchange:

One person provides the relevant information	
while the second person	first listens for understanding may ask questions for clarification restates what she has understood
The other person then responds	
while the first person	listens for understanding may ask questions for clarification restates what she has understood
and then responds	
while the second person	listens for understanding and so on ...

continuing until a satisfactory outcome is reached. It is when this style of communication and engagement is practised daily, in all interactions, that the best outcomes are achieved. Relationships are enhanced. Effectiveness increases.

And next, third-party applications

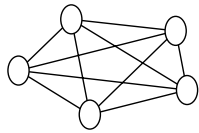
we'll briefly address three more-formal and structured applications. They are most easily used when some skilled external person guides the process:

- role clarification and role negotiation
- team building and relationship building and
- conflict management

As we work through them, notice how **you** might make use of them

Role clarification and role negotiation

Suppose there is role confusion within a team. People don't coordinate their efforts well. Relationships seem good. Feelings and beliefs may not need direct attention. Clarifying and renegotiating the actions and outcomes may improve the situation.



(There are several processes for role clarification and negotiation. All aim to improve the *task* relationships within a team. The approach described here builds on the ideas in the earlier pages.)

Role clarification. The aim is for all in the team to understand what actions and outcomes from each of them will help the team to meet team outcomes better. A suitable process might be as follows:

- The team as a whole agrees on the team outcomes required by the organisation
- Each team member describes her outcomes, the actions she takes to achieve them, and the actions and outcomes she requires from other team members
- As each team member does so, other team members ask questions for clarification
- The team as a whole identifies which pairs of team member are to renegotiate their task relationships, and within what boundaries.

Role negotiation. The renegotiation takes place in pairs as identified by the team as a whole. Each pair may usefully use a third team member as a process guide. After the renegotiation the pair reports back to the entire team. Within each pair renegotiation, a suitable process might be as follows:

- The process guide reminds them of the desired whole-team outcomes
- Each member of the pair, working individually, tentatively prepares two lists, both intended to improve outcomes for all team members and the team:
 - a list of actions she proposes to take to improve outcomes
 - a list of actions by the other pair member that she thinks would improve outcomes for herself
- Pair members exchange their lists. They use the process for information exchange described earlier. They mutually agree on which actions they will change and how it will be beneficial for them, their relationship, and the team
- They report back for the whole team to ratify or modify their agreements.

How might you use this? How about informally, in other relationships?

Team building and relationship building

The effect of role negotiation, above, is usually to improve personal relationships as well as task relationships. Feelings towards the team and other team members usually improve. Sometimes, however, it is desired to address feelings explicitly. Some form of team building is then appropriate, in pairs or in the entire team.

Again, there are several varieties. Here, the approach again draws on the material in the earlier pages of the document. It does so by addressing actions and material outcomes as well as feelings.

Many approaches begin by inviting the people involved to begin with individual thinking time. Each person prepares lists. The organisation development literature often recommends three lists: ■ appreciations ■ resentments and ■ an “empathy” list that predicts the contents of other people’s lists.

I like this approach. As with role negotiation, my preference is for it to take place in pairs, with another team member as process guide. (Whole-team versions can also work well, though they are time consuming). My variation is as follows.

- Each person, working individually, prepares these three lists:
 - things you do that I appreciate, and the outcomes for me when you do so
 - things you do that I would prefer you to change, and the outcomes for me that I would prefer
 - things that I think you may have on your lists about me, and the associated outcomes.

All lists include feelings (emotional outcomes) as well as material outcomes

- Using the process for information exchange the two people exchange their appreciations
- Taking turns, one item at a time, the two people exchange their preferences for changes. Each item is resolved, and agreement reached, before moving to the next item. The process for information exchange is again used. For each item, any changes are recorded on a flip chart (etc) to assist in reporting back
- They report all agreements to the whole team for ratification or modification.

Here, I’ve described a version very similar to that for role negotiation. In both, I recommend working in pairs, with colleague as process guide. Each session begins with thinking time. The process for information exchange is used.

Again, how might you use this? In informal ways outside work settings?

Conflict management

Within a team, if people give attention to interacting positively, conflict is less likely to arise. If there are also role negotiation or team building sessions, this further reduces the likelihood of conflict. Because this is not done, or for other reasons, conflict may emerge.

A process is then needed to interrupt the negative cycle of interactions and convert it into a positive cycle. For this purpose, the following process can be used. (For serious conflicts an experienced facilitator may give better results.)

- The facilitator meets with each person separately. She clarifies that both wish the situation to improve and that she is acceptable as facilitator to both of them
- The two people come together with the facilitator. She reminds them that both have agreed that they wish to improve the situation
- Each person is given time to prepare lists. The lists above for role negotiation or for team building can be used
- The facilitator insists that the process for information exchange is used
- The exchange begins with appreciations or positives. This familiarises the two people with the process. Changes are not attempted until the process is being used consistently. Desired changes in actions are then addressed ...
- Each information exchange then focuses on a specific item for change. In this:
 - information about actions and outcomes is exchanged first
 - when feelings are aroused, information about feelings is added
 - if the feelings have a history, information about beliefs is added.
- In pursuing agreement about changes ...
 - the facilitator first seeks a resolution to a single item — this must be a resolution that is genuinely accepted by the person being asked to change
 - if this is not attainable, the person being asked to change is invited to add a second item that might allow a trade-off. The two people then negotiate, agreeing what each is willing to forego in order to gain some benefit
 - if this fails, the facilitator ensures that at least each person fully understands the other persons situation and its context. The people in dispute will then usually agree to differ and find some way of managing their difference.
- The session concludes by confirming the changes each person has agreed to. The facilitator reminds the people that sometimes, despite best intentions, agreed actions don't work in practice. A follow-up session is planned, to identify which actions have worked, and which need further modification.

Again, how and when might you use this?

Where to from here?

We've covered some basic ideas about relationships and communication. We've addressed some foundational skills in communication and related topics. Finally, we've briefly examined processes for enhancing relationships, particularly in work teams.

If you'd like to take some of these ideas further, there are several ways of doing so:

You'll find a detailed description of the process for conflict management at <http://www.aral.com.au/resources/frameworks.pdf>

From time to time I offer a two-day workshop on this approach to conflict management. See <http://www.aral.com.au/wshops/wscm.html>

If you'd like to contact me about any of this material, my email address is [bd \(at\) bigpond.net.au](mailto:bd@bigpond.net.au) or [bobdick \(at\) mac.com](mailto:bobdick@mac.com)

