



FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF “BEYOND CONFLICT”

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Life and business will always include conflict. There is no getting beyond that: life is set up that way. “Beyond conflict” can seem like an unrealistic promise for that idealized place of eternal peace and harmony. And maybe not much creativity. But together with the idea that the only way out is through, “beyond conflict” suggests that something comes after conflict; there is something on the other side. “Beyond conflict” can promise a way to navigate turbulent – even treacherous – rapids and arrive at another shore, assured that, although there will be more stretches of turbulence as the journey continues, we will not only survive the journey but may thrive in it.

As a professional mediator and former attorney, I am familiar with the costs of conflict run amuck in business. As an executive coach and change consultant, I value conflict for its creative potential. In February 2001, I participated in a course called Beyond Conflict™, led by James Tamm, J.D., and Ron Luyet, M.A., MFCC. We share the purpose of promoting awareness and practices for human interaction and collaboration in business that more consistently result in mutual satisfaction and gain, productivity and creativity. I chose this course for the opportunity to integrate and apply the work of Will Schutz, Ph.D., “The Human Element,” in the domain of interest-based problem solving and conflict resolution that are a core component of my professional offering. Finally, the title intrigued me: what could it really mean to move beyond conflict in my life, for my clients’ endeavors, for all of us concerned about participating in human interaction with certain standards of ethics, practices and character.

In the course Beyond Conflict™, two technologies are introduced with the promise that together they provide a reliable framework for mining the potential constructive riches of conflict and enriching the likelihood and success of collaboration. The one technology can be described as “interest-based problem solving” and is primarily derived from the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project. It maps out a process, informed by certain principles, for structuring conversations by which people can reach agreement based on reconciliation of the interests and needs that underlie more readily evident adversarial positions. Interest-based problem solving, together with the idea that people are more likely to support and follow through on solutions that they participate in deciding upon, is fundamental to the mediation process. Beyond Conflict™ takes this elegant problem-solving method that is widely taught and used the world over and combines it with a technology for greater depth of understanding in interpersonal interactions and individual awareness.

The other technology is the “Human Element,” as developed by Will Schutz, Ph.D. (and described in several books, including “The Human Element: Productivity, Self-Esteem and the Bottom Line”). The Human Element is based on Schutz’ “Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation” (FIRO) theory,



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first published in 1958. He designed a corresponding instrument, FIRO-B, to predict interaction between two people and which, over the past four decades, became one of the most widely used organizational development assessment tools, internationally. Schutz refined and further developed FIRO-B to create the FIRO-Element B and other assessment tools consistent with the framework set out in the Human Element. The Human Element provides a framework for understanding interpersonal dynamics according to three basic dimensions of human behavior: inclusion, control and openness. It illuminates core issues of how a person's behavior, feelings, self-concept and coping mechanisms affect performance. Applying the wisdom of the Human Element to negotiation or conflict resolution processes offers new facets or openings for greater understanding, personal intimacy, and creative solutions.

Consider the following four quadrants of conflict concern. How do you effectively engage with all four?

- Issues, concerns and problems: this first quadrant tends to be readily apparent and measurable in any situation.
- Problem solving methods: this second quadrant interacts directly with the first. The elegant problem solving methods that individuals bring to situations exist as cultural norms in organizations. Any program for conflict resolution and negotiation offers frameworks and principles for dealing with issues, concerns, and problems via some problem solving method. People tend to stop there. But that is not sufficient because people have persistent difficulties dealing with conflict, even when they are familiar with the methods and apply them fluently. There must be something more to consider.
- Individual subjective, non-measurable, and often unarticulated intentions, attitudes and self awareness.
- Interpersonal dynamics: the similarly subjective area regarding understanding, sincerity, and connection between people.

The value of considering all four quadrants shows up in practice, not just in theory. Working with interest-based problem solving and conflict resolution methods, I have experienced its many benefits but also its limitations. I have witnessed a rather high degree of cynicism about problem solving that is supposed to result in “win-win” solutions. While “win-win” can seem to aim for mutual gains, what many people ultimately experience—especially in the world of business—is the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing. What often passes for a “win-win” approach is often a misguided re-languaging of “win-lose” attitudes, behaviors, strategies, and power moves. A very clever “wolf” with an unsuspecting negotiation partner can apply the methods and language of interest-based problem solving and achieve stunningly Machiavellian outcomes.

Intention, attitudes and self-awareness together with understanding, sincerity and connection are critical. Deeper reflection about personal motivation and automatic patterns of thinking and acting helps ground the skills and methods of interest-based problem solving and allow it to be truly powerful. Finally, relying on interest-based problem solving can only take you so far. Working with the Human Element as well as trust-centered frameworks bridges into the realm of forgiveness and healing that is the ultimate destination when we seek to move beyond conflict.



FOCUSING ON INTERESTS

To use the interest-based approach effectively, it helps to understand how the term “interests” is being used. Roger Fisher and William Ury were among the first to distinguish between “interests” and “positions” in their seminal work: “Getting to Yes” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981). The idea is to reframe the negotiation from a battle in which one side wins against another to a problem-solving session where attention is on the underlying interests of each side, the options for satisfying them, and the standards of fairness for resolving differences.

The “position” is what a person says he or she wants or needs. The stated reason for that “position,” however, may argue more for a certain outcome than reveal an underlying need. For example: a “position” statement would be that management needs to terminate 30% of a company’s jobs (what they say they need) in order to cut costs (the “why” that supports a certain outcome).

The “interests” in a problem situation are the motivations behind a position statement. It is really a way of asking about the root need in order to open up possibilities for finding alternative ways to fill it. So, in the above example, one could ask why it is important to cut costs, how much of a cost reduction is necessary, what the time frame is, what is driving high costs, etc. Maybe there would be other preferable and creative ways to meet the stated need of cutting costs. By asking further, one might discover that costs are not the core issue; the problem solving could focus, for example, on creative ways to increase revenues.

At that level, “interests” are pretty straightforward and accessible. Indeed, if people were not part of the equation, factual conflicts could be resolved, even at a root cause level, by computers that would make a cost-benefit analysis of any move and offer an optimal solution. Rather like a game of chess.

Interests get tricky when you consider the human motivations and predictable yet complex patterns of interaction. For example, when two “reasonable” people disagree, a predictable response is to assume that the other person lacks information (along the lines of: if they understood the information, then, being reasonable, they would agree...). In the interest of reaching agreement, both people offer more information. At a certain point, one or both people give up on the strategy of providing information: now, the other person is the problem. The other person is no longer reasonable, intelligent, compassionate, or whatever; the other person has to be dealt with.

In interest-based problem solving, one of the mammoth tasks is to separate the person from the problem; then you can change the problem, not the person. This is where the Human Element becomes especially relevant.

The Human Element reveals causes and patterns of rigid, fearful, defensive behavior. It also reveals causes and possibilities for open, truthful, generative behavior. Neither of these causal concerns in human interaction is substantively addressed in the domain of interest-based problem solving methodology.



INTENTIONS, ATTITUDES AND SELF-AWARENESS

As we become more self-aware about our intentions, attitudes and patterned behavior, we can make choices to shift the patterns and thereby open possibilities for different outcomes. Self-awareness and accountability are the foundation of personal power that exists independent of any role, authority or coercive capacity. By understanding basic issues of self-concept and the dynamics of what makes people defensive and rigid in their behavior, we can take fuller responsibility for our own intentions, impact and actions.

High-level, creative problem solving is extremely inhibited by reactive defensive behavior. We stop listening; our IQ and EQ plummet. We work with this as “**RED ZONE**” behavior, typical of adversarial interactions. It is behavior motivated by a need or a desire to “protect, defend, defeat, win, or be right.” **RED ZONE** attitudes turn what could be a partnership into a contest, one in which one or both partners play for one-sided, short-term gains. This can be quite confusing where sugar-coated words state an intention for mutual and long-term gain; the truth lies in the actual (not stated) intention. And while we may judge ourselves by our intentions, we tend to judge others (and impute their intentions) by their behavior.

“**GREEN ZONE**” behavior is motivated by a need or a desire to “grow, learn, connect, understand or achieve mutual gain.” It is necessary for interactions that are to create mutually beneficial—or collaborative—outcomes. Even in highly competitive situations you need **GREEN-ZONE** behaviors, at least about the boundaries of competition. Good-faith, **GREEN-ZONE** attitudes are essential for genuine partnership. Partners remain open to influence and persuasion in reaching agreements that provide long-term, mutually beneficial solutions. Working together in the **GREEN ZONE**, immediate and future disputes are easier to resolve. When we build relationships on a foundation of a strong self-concept, we have a greater chance of surviving mistakes together and achieving desired outcomes.

According to the Human Element, self-concept is the basic motivator and driver of behavior. The Human Element describes three dimensions of self-concept that correspond to dimensions of behavior: inclusion, control and openness. When one’s self-concept is threatened, the fear created is largely unconscious, but the resulting defensiveness and rigidity become apparent. Rigid or defensive behavior concerned with inclusion arises when a person perceives a threat related to the fear of being ignored, neglected, insignificant, excluded, or abandoned. Rigid or defensive behavior concerned with control arises when a person perceives a threat related to the fear of being humiliated, shamed, embarrassed or being perceived as incompetent. Rigid or defensive behavior concerned with openness arises when a person perceives a threat related to the fear of being rejected, unlikable, or despised.

The point is to become aware of these concerns and realize how one’s self-concept affects one’s capacity to act appropriately in a situation. The awareness opens the possibility to listen and to act from a different place or presence: centered, creative, choosing to alleviate the suffering without causing more. Similarly, as we become more self aware, we become more able to discern what may be happening for another person and to approach them with understanding and compassion. We can choose actions that are coherent



with our values and more likely to produce desired outcomes. With this awareness, self-interest takes on a wholly different dimension of depth and definition. It is first and foremost in my best interest to call myself back to myself before I engage with another.

The idea is to stay (or become) flexible, not become (or stay) rigid. It is how we stay connected to what we care about. When you know what you care about—what your deeper interests are—and are grounded in a commitment to promote that, then you only agree to what's in your interest. Sustaining the benefit of interest-based problem solving is a function of relationship skills more than anything else.

WHEN RECONCILIATION IS WITH SELF: HEALING FROM CONFLICT

Developing mastery in interest-based problem solving or the Human Element is not about mastering a secret formula or more manipulative method for getting one's way. So, what happens when interest-based problem solving is not sufficient to resolve the conflict or to reconcile the relationship?

Interest-based methodology presumes that people are willing and able to interact in good faith, can discern their needs and feelings and can make rational choices on the basis of information internal and external to themselves. For any number of reasons, these conditions may not be uniformly fulfilled. There are limitations on what can be changed and by whom. Even highly skilled and self-aware individuals have a bad day or encounter people and situations that defy all efforts at reconciliation. Further, there is inherent conflict in certain systems (political, economic, social, commercial, organizational); these are natural tensions that occur from how we organize ourselves, especially into hierarchies and power structures.

Some conflicts live on well past the point where negotiation or problem-solving for another outcome is possible. Sometimes the best outcome is to quit a person or situation. Sometimes the other person involved in the conflict disappears. This is where, in the dance or aikido of conflict, one is left with a conversation with a phantom.

To fulfill the promise of moving beyond conflict we must reconcile ourselves to ourselves. Moving beyond conflict means reaching into deeper resources to realize—not necessarily agree with or condone—what has happened and, ultimately, to find a way to heal. Critical to the healing is our willingness to allow feelings to surface. From the standpoint of the Human Element, this means allowing ourselves to feel what we have worked so hard to protect ourselves from by developing the system of defensive responses in the first place. Rather than invite an open season for inwardly directed blame-storming, this is when we must be fair witness to ourselves.

Perhaps the most useful fill-in-the-blank statement I have learned in working with the Human Element begins “What I fear about myself is...” What shows up in the blanks of that statement are realizations about my self concept. And when I have the courage to be present to myself in this way, I come into real existence for myself. For it is true that we first come into existence in relationship when we are listened to. This is true with other people; it is also poignantly true for ourselves. When I am fully present to myself—willing to listen openly, learn and grow—I am more able to forgive myself and others. In that



forgiveness, I give myself the gift of releasing the poisons from conflict that hurt me more than anyone else. I open myself to the possibility of making new choices for a future that I want. This deeper listening and presence is what I can share with others, including clients and collaborative partners. It is the foundation of my power.

CONCLUSION

Collaboration is a process, a constant conversation in which people negotiate, come to agreement, encounter change and conflict, renegotiate and reach agreement again. When built on the foundational bedrock of trust--trust in self and trust in other that is continually and consciously cultivated and restored--collaboration can thrive and even serve the demands of high-speed, high-stress environments and change. Really satisfying and productive collaboration begins with awareness about ourselves, of who we are choosing to be in what we do. The challenge in moving beyond conflict is in being present to oneself and choosing to connect with another person in service of a greater purpose and mutual gain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Beata Lewis partners with business owners, senior leaders, and knowledge professionals to evolve and attain leadership goals and revitalized collaboration with new levels of effectiveness and growth. As founder of Bridging Lives LLC and leveraging decades' experience as an Executive Coach, Mediator, and Change Consultant, she helps clients navigate organizational complexity and emergent issues, cultivate engagement for diverse teams, and achieve critical business objectives. Blending the essential inner and outer games of leadership development, Beata guides clients to translate new awareness into clear goals, compelling strategies, and tangible practices for next-level success. Beata's coaching uniquely integrates systemic thinking, interpersonal dynamics, and conversational intelligence with somatic practices so clients fine-tune and authentically embody changes for positive impact. Cultivating greater agility, trust, and resilience, Beata's clients refine their capacity to risk difficult conversations, move beyond limiting obstacles, and leverage their personal power for mutual gain and fulfillment.

