

Invited Papers

## Reframing Conflict: Intercultural Conflict as Potential Transformation

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### Abstract

*Many feel that conflict is destructive and the best way to manage a conflict is to try not to have it at all. While on one level that may appear to be ideal it is questionable as to whether it is achievable. For those who consider that conflict can also carry with it the potential for growth and opportunity, there is a feeling that it would be more favorable to constructively process and resolve a conflict than have no conflict at all. This article looks at conflict as opportunity for transformation.*

*There are several underpinning theoretical concepts that are collectively drawn upon to inform this presentation and integration of ideas: conflict resolution, intercultural communication and diversity, and transformative learning. Conflict is explored here using five paradigms that offer multiple lenses with which to view it. This is representative of five differing world-views typical to what may exist between and among people of different backgrounds and experiences, an area the field of intercultural communications has studied. Conflicts may be complex and when cultural characteristics are also considered other levels of complexity are added. Cultural differences and what is meant by intercultural conflict will be further explored. The reference to culture is used here in the broadest sense of the term, more so than what is typically categorized as nationality or ethnic group characteristics. The concepts and heuristics from transformative learning offer a framework that can be used to guide us toward developing alternative understandings of ourselves experiencing the conflict; how we view the other person with whom we are in conflict; and the conflict or situation itself. This deeper and expanded understanding may in fact act as a catalyst to provoke us to alter our awareness, attitudes and behaviors, with the shift potentially being as deep as changing our meaning perspectives, as well (Fisher-Yoshida, 2000).*

## Conflict

The word conflict has a variety of implications and differing types of impact according to the cultural context within which it is used and the language in which it is communicated. For our purposes, creating a shared understanding may be useful and conflict will be used here to mean “the experience of incompatible activities” (Coleman, 2003), or “An incompatible activity that prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures or in some ways makes less likely or less effective another activity (Deutsch, 1973).”

When most people are asked whether they enjoy conflict their typical response is, “no,” and their look is one of distaste in remembering past conflicts, or surprise at why you would even ask such a question. This is because, at the risk of making an overgeneralization, we don’t often handle or resolve our conflicts well. To many, conflicts are not pleasant occurrences. Some people have the attitude that conflicts do not resolve well and since they don’t have the skills or coping mechanisms to deal with them, they try to avoid conflicts. On the other hand, there are some who “see red” as their emotions flare when in conflict and they will tend toward being more confrontational. This is sometimes referred to as the *fight or flight response* that has been determined to be an inborn genetic response that we rely on to protect us from danger (Sichel, 2005). In today’s postmodern world in which we live, where the complexity of our lives requires more than simple and absolute black and white answers, more alternative responses from which to draw from are needed. There are many shades of grey with subtle nuances and each choice we make of how to respond carries with it a myriad of consequences, some planned for and others unintended.

The attraction to having black and white answers is that our choices are limited and we can make our decisions more easily because of these forced choices. Morton Deutsch (1973, 2000) developed a theory of cooperation and competition which is based on two ideas and can be used as a framework to begin to examine our conflicts: the *interdependence of goals* of the people involved in the situation and the *types of action* the people take. In the interdependence of goals there are goals that are *positively linked*, so that there is a high probability that whatever it is will happen to both of you together. Therefore, if one succeeds the other will succeed and if one fails the other will fail. In the case of *negative linkage*, if one person succeeds the other will fail and vice versa. When we act independently from others and there is no interdependence, then our goals are not interlinked and there is no relationship or impact from the other. However, in the case we are in relationship and there is an interdependence between us then “blaming and victimizing actions become relational acts because these actions can only be accomplished in the process of social interaction (Lannamann in McNamee and Gergen, 1999).” These social interactions can have either positive or negative linkages.

In the case of types of action taken, Deutsch (2000) classifies them into *effective actions*, where you are likely to achieve your goals, or *bungling actions* where you lessen your chances of achieving your goals. There is another interesting aspect of the impact of our choices illustrated in Deutsch’s *Crude Law of Social Relations*: “The characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship (p. 29).” The quality of interac-

tion and whether it is cooperative or competitive has to do with what is perceived and experienced between two people. So if I act cooperatively toward someone, that person is more likely to act cooperatively toward me. If someone acts cooperatively toward me, I am more likely to return the approach and be cooperative toward them. Some characteristics of what cooperative behavior looks like are fostering a sense of trust, sharing similar beliefs and attitudes, having commonalities and a desire for both sides to be satisfied in the relationship or interaction. Characteristics typical of competitive behavior are those marked by deception, poor communication, intolerance and hostile attitudes. We can begin to see here that the perception of shared beliefs fosters cooperation, whereas the perception of divergent beliefs could foster competitiveness and feelings of ill will. This is particularly relevant here because when we encounter difference in others it may be a reaction to an explicit difference, such as race or nationality. It may not truly reflect a difference in beliefs because our belief systems are implicit and without curiosity to explore further to confirm, we are stopping at the level of assumptions. Staying at assumptions without confirmation can lead us to take actions that may lead to conflict because we are not fully informed. We are making judgments on limited information and our own unconfirmed interpretations of our perceptions.

In any conflict there are different levels of engagement, as well as different aspects that are elevated determining what gets paid attention to and what gets resolved. Since conflicts are usually complex different people may frame the conflict in different ways as they elevate certain aspects over others. Two people may enter into a conflict and each person sees the conflict differently. The way they frame the conflict and what they choose to privilege, the aspects that resonate more strongly with them are influenced by their frames of reference, how they see, experience and make meaning in the world. Chris Argyris (1993) refers to these frames of reference as *governing variables*. This speaks strongly to the unique worldview each person holds, which is made of experiences in how they were educated, their family life, the messages they received from their communities and societies, the values that were instilled in them, what is right and wrong, good and bad, and other influencing factors.

As mentioned above, we frame conflicts and elevate certain aspects based on our frames of reference. These are the lenses through which we make meaning in the world. Coleman (2004) identifies five paradigms that are sets of lenses that frame how conflicts may be viewed. The importance of being familiar with these ways of framing conflict is that they yield insights into how that person views the situation, it highlights what is important to that person and in many ways supports making explicit what is an implicit part of the person's worldview. The five paradigms are: realism, in which security and stability surface as core needs and approaches to addressing conflict and which are based on deterrence and force; human relations in which tolerance and mutual cooperation to satisfy needs are sought after, as well as, addressing reconciliation and forgiveness in the aftermath of conflict; medical model which uses disease and pathology to address malignant systems, riddled with hidden agendas and emotional trauma; postmodernism which is based on the belief that there is not one reality, but multiple ones because we socially construct our realities and in which communication and socialization are key to both creating and resolving

conflicts; and, systems which highlight that conflicts are nested levels of interdependent and interactive components that are complex and dynamical in which chaos needs to be managed.

### 5 Paradigms

| <u>Realism</u>   | <u>Human Relations</u>   | <u>Medical Model</u>  | <u>Post Modernism</u>  | <u>Systems</u>   |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| Strategies of deterrence & force to provide for stability & security | Interdependence & cooperation to satisfy needs leading to reconciliation and tolerance | Based on disease and pathology and addresses malignant systems, hidden agendas & deep-rooted trauma | Interactions are socially constructed realities with communication & socialization playing critical role | Nested levels with interconnectedness & a need to sequence initiatives & order chaos |

Figure 1. Coleman's Five Paradigms of Conflict (2004)

## Intercultural Conflict

We can look at diversity from the viewpoint that no two people are the same and, therefore, regardless of our backgrounds and experiences we hold different values, beliefs and assumptions from others. These values, beliefs and assumptions come from our experiences in life creating our worldviews that influence how we behave and make decisions. "Each of these influences can be thought of as acting as a filter or lens that new information goes through in the process of being perceived, interpreted and understood (Fisher-Yoshida, 2003)." Each person has his or her own unique set of filters. In order to more accurately understand a person's worldview in the way they meant it to be understood, we must "generally consider that evaluations of culturally different behavior are likely to be ethnocentric and that in any case they interfere with the communication necessary to become informed about the worldview context in which the behavior must be interpreted (Bennett, 1998, p. 12)." Of course, there are areas of overlap in worldviews in which we can identify common ground. These areas of common ground can serve as unifying points upon which we can develop shared understanding and appreciation. It is when we do not have common ground that developing shared understanding and mutual appreciation can become more challenging, at best.

Another way of framing worldview influences is to think of our experiences in the local or indigenous communities within which we were raised and continue to live. "... indigenous knowledges are those acquired by local peoples through daily experience. They deal with the experiential reality of the world. They are forms of knowledge that reflect the capabilities, priorities, and value systems of local peoples and communities (Sefa Dei, Hall & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000, p. 19)." When they refer to "reality of the world" I would add that it is the reality they experience in their world. There isn't one shared reality across peoples and this is where there are also potential sources of conflict. We expect others to operate from the same orientations and values that we hold and when they don't we clash and have conflict. Capra (2002) discusses the forming of worldviews by referring to it as *culture*, which is

“created and sustained by a network (*form*) of communications (*process*), in which *meaning* is generated. The culture’s material embodiments (*matter*) include artifacts and written texts, through which meaning is passed on from generation to generation (p. 74).” So here we have four components, (form, process, meaning and matter) that shape our worldviews highlighting the complexity that is evident in the many variations and combinations of these four components multiplied by the number of people involved in an interaction. It is both fascinating and amazing that we are able to communicate effectively at all.

As described earlier, conflict occurs when there is a real or perceived threat or interference in us performing a particular activity. You may be at a lecture and want to go out the door and another person stands in the doorway blocking you from leaving and that may be called a conflict. The activity of you trying to exit is being interfered with and this could be considered a “real” interference. There might also be some intentionality to it in that the person is deliberately blocking you from performing and completing the activity you set out to accomplish. It may also be that the person decided to move his chair near the doorway to better see the speaker or to leave early and not disturb others in the audience. There was no intentionality in blocking you from exiting, but nonetheless you were blocked from leaving. You don’t know what is going on in the other person’s mind and your perception is that his actions are deliberate because he must have seen you start toward the door, which really hadn’t been confirmed. According to your worldview, or *governing variables* (Argyris, 1993), *frames of reference* (Mezirow, 1990, 2000) or *mental models* (Argyris, 1993; Senge, 1990), when someone sees you coming toward the door to exit, he or she should move out of the way. If the person doesn’t move out of the way, he or she would be considered rude. So in your attempt to leave the person might not have moved from the door and this could have ensued in a conflict because your goal was being blocked from being satisfied.

When we have these occurrences with others who have shared experiences and values, they are easier to rectify. This is so because we recognize the similarities and respond favorably to them. In addition, the manner in which the conflict will be addressed will be acceptable to both parties. At the same time, our mindsets may have been more open to exploring other possibilities in interpreting the behavior. The more varied our worldviews are, the more varied our backgrounds and experiences and values, the less likely we are to initially develop similar interpretations and shared understandings. If we are anticipating difference, then we might better prepare ourselves to encounter it with an open mind.

The part that leads us to conflict in these encounters is when we pass judgment on others and their actions. Argyris (1993) created a *ladder of inference* in which he highlights the processes we go through from seeing observable data, to making inferences by layering these observations with our cultural biases, to imposing meanings and making interpretations based on these inferences and then drawing conclusions and determining actions. We decide on a course of action without fully exploring the assumptions we made about the behavior and how this influenced the interpretations we made, the conclusions we drew and the actions upon which we decided.

## **Conflict Interventions**

In conflicts that happen across borders, negotiation is a popular means of resolution. There have been many studies done which capture some of the complexities added into conflict resolution that involve parties from different cultural orientations. Lewicki et al. (2004) highlight several recent studies that have been done to document some of the issues negotiators face, from the framing of the conflict to who should actually be in the negotiation. Based on the work of several other researchers in this domain, the authors (Lewicki et al, 2004) identify eight cultural factors that impact the effectiveness of global negotiations: how the negotiation is defined; who comes to the table to negotiate; protocol to follow; style of communication; time frame; aversion to risk; group or individual; and how an agreement will be shaped and enforced. These factors highlight the intricacies of addressing conflicts when the parties involved have different orientations that are as basic as defining how the conflict is framed, which elevates certain elements of the conflict for attention and determining if there is a shared perception on this matter between the parties. In some cultures that are more individualistic, there is a shared belief that when in conflict it is better for the relationship when parties in conflict have face-to-face negotiations to resolve the presenting issues. In more collectivist-oriented cultures, this is not the case. There is a shared belief that it is better for the relationship when there is a third party, known and trusted, who can perform a type of shuttle diplomacy between the parties, guiding them toward resolution. In more individualist-oriented cultures, when there is a third party it is usually a neutral party (except in the case of workplace issues where a manager may act as mediator), who mediates the process toward resolution without adding his or her own beliefs. In the collectivist-oriented cultures that employ a mediator to shuttle back and forth between parties, he or she is a trusted and known entity and often is looked to for guidance in recommending desired courses of action. In these situations there is an implicit understanding and sometimes stated exclamation that the conflict impacts a wider circle of people than those directly involved and, therefore, it is in everyone's best interest that they resolve this issue. And there are many more intricacies that need to be paid attention to before the conflict itself can be addressed.

In terms of communication style, there are those cultures that prefer a linear style of communication and on the other extreme end of the continuum there are those who prefer a more contextual approach. Those from the linear end of the continuum may perceive more contextually-oriented communicators as being vague, evasive and even illogical. Those from the more contextually-oriented end of the continuum, on the other hand, may perceive more linear-oriented communicators as being simple or arrogant because their communications do not contain as much context setting language (Bennett, 1998). So in a cross-border negotiation, to view a more extreme example of intercultural communication, there are two points to consider when it comes to communication style. The first is that there are good chances that the communication style differences may be a source of conflict. The second point is that because the communication styles are so different there are added levels of complexity and opportunities to escalate the conflict not resolve it, when communicators from

opposite ends of the communication style spectrum try to negotiate. In order to make adjustments for this great divergence in style and probably comfort levels, as well, there would need to be an openness to difference and an intention to approach the negotiation positively, or talks will be fraught with more conflict.

## **Transformative Learning**

As we experience life on a daily basis we recognize that in some situations we are learning. The levels of learning vary depending on what we knew before, what we are subsequently experiencing and how we are processing that experience. Based on the three domains of knowledge Habermas associated with learning, technical knowledge, practical knowledge and emancipatory knowledge (in Cranton, 1994), Mezirow (1990) frames three types of learning: instrumental, the acquisition of technical knowledge; communicative, the acquisition of practical knowledge; and emancipatory, freedom from the environment, culture and other restrictions. If we engage in instrumental learning then we are perhaps acquiring the skills we need to have in order to successfully perform certain tasks. This results in a change in some of our behaviors, which can result in observable differences. It can also be thought of as a single-loop learning process in which our actions change based on the consequences of our prior actions and the behavioral awareness that took place to make the modifications (Argyris, 1993; Marsick & Sauquet, 2000). We get a certain type of reaction, which is feedback, and then we interpret that feedback to determine if we received the desired results or if we want different results. We modify our behavior based on our assessment of this interaction.

There are different degrees of impact conflict can have on us and the times we are more profoundly impacted can be thought of as *disorienting dilemmas* (Mezirow, 1990, 2000) in which the very foundation of all our beliefs and values are called into question. This can be a very jarring experience as it attacks the very foundation upon which we stand. Since we are so unprepared at the time, we can experience this disorientation as threatening. It threatens our understanding of the world in which we live and may call our identities into question, as well. Incremental shifts can also result in transformations of how we see the world, they are just more subtle in how they are formed.

We create frames of reference, governing variables or mental models from the experiences we have. These are the structures or filters with which we interpret the sensory stimuli we perceive and through which we make meaning. Each frame of reference or governing variable can be thought of as a *meaning perspective* (Mezirow, 1990, 2000) because it predisposes what we will acknowledge and how we will acknowledge it. There are influences all around us and together with the experiences we have we create the values we live by, which include cognitive, affective, spiritual and physical dimensions. The meaning perspectives we create are assumptions and expectations we hold about ourselves, others and the world. These assumptions or *habits of mind* are expressed as *points of view* consisting of meaning schemes that we tacitly apply to our interactions and in response to our sensory perceptions (Mezirow,

1990, 2000). These meaning schemes manifest themselves in the course of action we choose to take. They are the *theories-in-use* (Argyris & Schon, 1974) we act by, which may not be the same as the *espoused theories* (Argyris & Schon, 1974) we profess to follow.

If we want to transform our own or others' frames of reference, governing variables or mental models, we would need to *critically reflect* on the assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs we employ in our theories-of-use. We would need to consider the context and other influencing factors that create the meaning perspectives we have. We would need to slow down the process resulting in action or the application of our theories-in-use, so that we are able to critically reflect on the assumptions supporting the content and/or process of problem-solving, to be able to transform our points of view. Brookfield (2000) asserts that "transformative learning cannot happen without critical reflection, but critical reflection can happen without an accompanying transformation in perspective or habit of mind (p. 125)." Brookfield (1987) documented the five phases typical to a transformative experience that links critical thinking with critical reflection, the cornerstone of transformative learning. His five phases are: have an event that acts like a *trigger* and causes discomfort; *appraise* the situation; *explore* to find new ways of making sense of the experience; *develop alternative perspectives* of the situation resulting in new behaviors or thinking; and begin an *integration* of these new perspectives into the existing ones (p. 25).

Mezirow (2000) believes that in order for transformative learning to take place we need to reframe on the objective and subjective levels, both of which entail critical reflection. *Objective reframing* includes critically reflecting on the assumptions of others, while *subjective reframing* entails critically reflecting on our own assumptions.

To think back on our actions we go through a process of *reflecting-on-action* (Schon, 1983) or *content reflection* (Mezirow, 1990) in which we identify reasons or justifications as to why we behaved the way we did. This is a process that entails *single-loop* learning in that our reflections may reinforce the actions we took or modify those actions to better capture the results we want. If we reflect at a deeper level, at the level of *critical reflection* or *process reflection*, we begin to explore the validity of the presuppositions of the meaning perspectives we hold. We may question where these presuppositions came from, how they were formed and if they are still valid. At this level we would be engaged in *double-loop* learning as we deconstruct our frames of reference, governing variables or mental models. We are accepting the structures the way they are, and we are questioning how we fill in the information they hold. At a deeper more systemic level of reflection we engage in *critical self-reflection* or *premise reflection* in which we challenge the way in which we frame problems and meaning perspectives, thus questioning the structures themselves (Mezirow, 1990). This can be done through a process of *reflective discourse* or *dialogue*. The discourse or dialogue allows us to engage with the other to explore the framing from both of our perspectives. The goal of uncovering the implicit framing we both use can be done either individually or interactively.

Ideally, the result of all of this critical reflection is to be able to test whether the assumptions we live by are still valid and supportive of us having a fulfilling life, en-



gaging in constructive interactions with others, and making the world a better place to live. The more we reflect-on-action, the more deeply ingrained our learning can become, resulting in us *reflecting-in-action* (Schon, 1983) or responding *reflexively* (Fisher-Yoshida & Nagata, 2002), so that we can be more effective in the moment.

Below is an example of a situation in which there is an intercultural misunderstanding or conflict. It is being addressed through a critical reflection process. Listed are the three levels of critical reflection and suggested questions you might pose to ascertain the assumptions in play in this situation.

Scenario: I (a woman) met a colleague (a man) through an associate (a man) and after shaking my friend's hand I extended my hand to the colleague as a form of greeting and respect. The man did not extend his hand in return, so after a short while I withdrew my hand. I felt awkward and embarrassed because I didn't initially understand why he didn't respond. I also thought it was rude of him not to acknowledge my gesture of a handshake.

| <u>Reflection Levels</u>                      | <u>Reflection Questions</u>   |
|---|---|
| Content reflection (reflection)               | What are my assumptions about greetings and extending a hand for a handshake? |
| Process reflection (critical reflection)      | What caused me to form these assumptions and how do I know they are valid?    |
| Premise reflection (critical self-reflection) | What reasons might I have for keeping or revising my perspective on this?     |

**Figure 2.** Reflection Levels and Questions (adapted from Cranton, 1994)

Our assumptions and values are hidden to us unless we consciously try to uncover them. Critical reflection provides a way to access this information. The impetus for us to begin looking inward is the reaction we get from others with whom we interact. "It is often better to deduce the nature of our hidden minds by looking outward at our behavior and how others react to us, and coming up with a good narrative. In essence, we must be like biographers of our own lives, distilling our behavior and feelings into a meaningful and effective narrative (Wilson, 2002, p. 16)."

In the event that no critical reflection is done to explore these meaning schemes we have created, no reflection on the assumptions or meaning perspectives upon which we are basing our decisions, we jump along the ladder of inference from noticing observable data to action. The risk here is that we are acting or practicing our theories-in-use from a place of uninformed decision making which may result in unintended consequences, such as conflict. In light of this it is important to keep in mind that social and cultural norms and embedded assumptions within them have acted in ways to unknowingly constrain us as they form our values and guide our actions. Without uncovering these assumptions we are keeping ourselves in the dark and allowing happenstance to dictate our lives and interactions with others.

Argyris (1993) goes on to present what he refers to as *Model I Theory-in-Use*, that was created from globally supported research in which there are four governing values: achieve your intended purpose; maximize winning and minimize losing; suppress negative feelings; and behave according to what you consider rational (p. 52).

He also found that the most common action strategies that were developed based on Model I thinking are to advocate your position, evaluate the thoughts and actions of others (and your own), and attribute causes for whatever you are trying to understand. This Model I approach refers to theories-in-use as they refer directly to the actions being taken. These may or may not be in alignment with the espoused theories or theories people say they are following. Examining this through the lens of cooperative and competitive approaches to conflict that Deutsch (1973, 2000) discusses, it would seem that this would be a competitive approach and that the interdependent goals would lead to a probable win-lose combination or negative linkage. There is nothing obvious in this process that allows for deepening understanding and arriving at mutually beneficial ways of satisfying both sides' goals, promoting a cooperative approach and positive linkage.

If we begin to examine the values and beliefs we have that inform and guide us in our choice of actions, we would be going deeper than instrumental learning to transformative learning. It would entail a double-loop learning process in which we more critically examine our values and beliefs or governing variables (Argyris, 1993) to inform us about why we made the choices we did, and deeper than that, why those were the actions we elected to select from in the first place. Here Argyris (1993) refers to *Model II* governing values which include "valid information, informed choice, and vigilant monitoring of the implementation of the choice in order to detect and correct error (p. 55)." We can see here that if we refer back to the ladder of inference, there is a space being created for the slowing down of the process of unconsciously jumping from interpreting the observable data to drawing conclusions and acting/reacting without more thoroughly exploring the variables (values) by which we are governed. One idea is to have Model II theories and practices become an espoused theory, so that at a minimum the person is acknowledging that these are the attitudes and behaviors s/he would like to follow. The challenge would be transitioning this from an espoused theory to a theory-in-action, which would require the person learn a new set of skills, as well as, adjust his/her governing values accordingly.

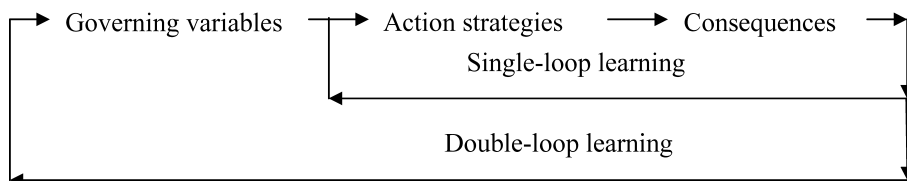
One aspect that we need to be mindful of is that the theories by which we live have been created in a context and to fully understand the meaning of this knowledge and the meanings of the knowledge by which others function, we need to always think of the context. "The holistic quality of knowledge implies that isolating pieces of experience and trying to make sense of them apart from the environment that gave rise to them flies in the face of reality and is bound to lead to frustration (Castellano in Sefa Dei, Hall & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000)." In conflict situations we are sometimes shocked and appalled by the behavior of others because it is so different from what we evaluate to be the right or appropriate response. However, slowing down our reaction process to allow ourselves to consider the historical and contextual factors that shape the other person's worldview, may lessen the impact of the dissonance and cause us to be more favorably disposed toward cooperatively resolving the issue with them. We need to remember that since knowledge is socially constructed (Wane in Sefa Dei, Hall & Goldin Rosenberg, 2000) we should consider the current knowledge and how it was socially constructed or made in a particular context and that we may have the opportunity to create new knowledge as we further develop the rela-

tionship with the other.

After exploring and identifying these new levels of awareness in ourselves and the other person, we can verify them through a process of dialogue (Pearce & Pearce, 2000; Littlejohn & Domenici, 2000) in which we engage with the other person in a process of deepening the mutual learning and understanding. It is a special kind of communication in which together, in relationship, we are making meaning. Feelings are aroused in conflict situations and dialogue can provide a space to clarify the causes and validity of these feelings (Argyris, 1993). Mezirow (2000) refers to this as discourse, based on how it is described by Jurgen Habermas, in that the conditions need to be created so that the discourse is mutually respectful and as free from self deception and bias as possible. “Discourse is the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience (Mezirow, 2000, p. 14).”

### Transforming Conflict

In a problem-solving approach to conflict, the presenting issue is the focus. The conflict is addressed either directly by the people involved, or indirectly by a third party intervener, such as a mediator. The problem-solving approach is a single-loop learning process, amending the situation by changing behaviors or tactics being employed (Marsick & Sauquet, 2000; Schon, 1983). The transformational approach explores deeper levels of resolution. Rather than staying with the presenting issue, relationship issues themselves are addressed. In this approach, asking the question, “What is this conflict *really* about?” helps those involved shift the focus to other levels of engagement. This is a double-loop learning process as it calls into question the conceptual frameworks involved in making choices, such as basic assumptions and underlying values and beliefs, our governing variables. Through critical reflection, the double-loop learning process brings into question the frames of reference that are used to shape how we see, interpret and make sense of the world around us (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Brookfield, 1987; Marsick & Sauquet, 2000; Mezirow, 1990).



**Figure 3.** Single-loop/Double-loop Learning Model (Argyris, 1993)

We can respond to these disorienting dilemmas as a result of conflict in many ways and I would like to clump these varied responses into two broad categories. In one category we can feel very threatened by the forced shift in perspective and feel invaded and not secure or stable. These feelings may prompt us to act defensively as

a protective measure in order to ward off further danger and to try to stabilize our environments. There isn't a transformation here in our perspective or a deeper understanding of how we see the world. The perceptions we have of the other are reinforced by their actions, concretizing our assumptions.

Alternatively, if we were to address these feelings of being threatened by calling into question why we feel this way and why we expected something different, we would be examining our assumptions and how we see the world. This self examination would lead us to analyze our assumptions further by exploring the reasons as to why we expected something different, what that something different might have been and what experiences, values and beliefs we have, our governing variables, that created these assumptions and expectations. "Embarrassment and threat are not bypassed and covered up; they are engaged (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris. 1993)." They are used as a source of learning.

This new awareness of ourselves could also lead to us questioning the governing variables of the other person with whom we are in conflict. In most cases, this is probably not something that we would have done before under less startling circumstances. When in conflict we often become self-absorbed and focus more on the hurt, pain and injustice we are experiencing. It is particularly challenging when in conflict to be empathic toward the other and to be open-minded and curious and want to understand more deeply what *makes them tick*, what mental models they follow and how they might differ from our own.

Senge (et al., 2004) discuss a movement they call the "U Movement (p. 225)" in which there is a movement down the U, characterized by "transforming our habitual ways of seeing (p. 224)" and then back up the U, "transforming the source of our awareness (p. 224)." The movement down the U is characterized by phases labeled *suspending, redirecting and letting go*, while the movement back up the U is characterized by the phases *letting come, crystallizing, prototyping and institutionalizing*. They approach transformation by identifying the importance of awareness, first in the habits we have and then at a deeper level, by *how* we are aware. This is something that can emerge from becoming critically reflective.

### **Self and the Role of Agency**

The degree of agency a person has depends upon where s/he sees the locus of control being, internal or external. If it is external, then there is a belief that the person cannot be individually proactive and make a difference because the decision making and control to make things happen is outside of the person. The way circumstances unfold is beyond our control to impact. It is also implying that the decision of how to act is not only the responsibility of the individual, but rather the collective needs to be taken into consideration as well. On the other hand, those who feel the locus of control is within them have a stronger sense of agency. "A sense of agency implies that one can understand perceptively. Such understanding requires the ability and disposition to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions as well as those of others, engage fully and freely in discourse to validate one's beliefs, and ef-

fectively take reflective action to implement them (Mezirow, 2000).” Here the way agency is described can refer to the individual level, as well as, collective levels, as we take into consideration our own and the others’ assumptions, too.

In taking a social construction, postmodern look at the relationship between intent and impact and the role of agency, in which “meaning is a by-product of relatedness (McNamee and Gergen, 1999, p. 14)” the authors also state that “In the same way that a joke is not funny save through the laughter of another, a hostile action is not hostility until another treats it as such (p. 14).” The person receiving the comment interprets it through his or her own worldview, frames of reference, governing variables, mental models, and assigns meaning to it. Lannamann (in McNamee & Gergen, 1999) challenges this interpretation of the role of agency in relationships because he states, “Once agency is dismissed, accountability disappears, as well (p. 86).” He is promoting the sense of collective agency and refers to a term Shotter (1984) coined, called *joint action* to mean, “People act into an emerging flow of conversation that is neither determined by their own intentions nor completely random and formless. Joint action produces the conversational resources that enable people to account for their actions (Lannamann in McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 87).” In conflict situations it is the responsibility of both parties as they co-create the conflict in the space between them, in the relationship (Fisher-Yoshida, 2003).

An interesting and useful tool to use in identifying which conflicts to address and how to address them, is by the use of a matrix that assesses the levels of skill and will you bring to the situation. The *skill axis* measures the level of capability you have in addressing the issues at hand. It is a way of highlighting your strengths and identifying what else you would need to know in order to approach and manage the conflict more constructively, thus effectively. The *will axis* emphasizes how willing you are to put any effort into addressing the conflict, your level of agency. If there is a high level of will there is a better chance that you will do what needs to be done to more effectively manage the conflict. Without enough will it won’t matter how skillful you are because you wouldn’t have the will to implement and sustain behaving constructively. In order for both sides to exhibit a high level of will and enter into negotiations to address the conflict, they both need to frame the conflict as a situation to be mutually resolved, where both parties bear the responsibility of acting collaboratively from a cooperative mindset (Deutsch, 2000). This matrix can be used to ascertain an individual’s skill and will levels, as well as, both parties’ levels or a collec-

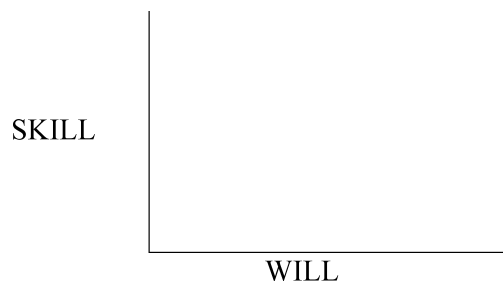


Figure 4. Skill/Will Matrix

tive's levels. As an old expression states, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink."

## Conclusion

Each of us is born into this world and we develop our own unique worldview through the experiences we have. It is this same worldview from which we interpret our experiences and make meaning in our lives. We are also fortunate to have tools with which to deepen our understanding of ourselves, each other and the situations within which we find ourselves. We can use the process of critically reflecting on our experiences to try to uncover the assumptions by which we live, as well as, the assumptions of others. It is a model of hope.

One way to become more flexible and understanding of others is by expanding our frames of reference, the lenses we use to see the world. The five paradigms of conflict are one tool we can use to expand the way in which we view conflict. Being open to others by attempting to understand their frames of reference and reflecting on the impact that has on us, in addition to reflecting on the impact our actions have on others, is one way of using double-loop learning. We can choose to act on auto pilot and hope for the best, or we can be more deliberate in our actions by taking the time to explore what makes us who we are.

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