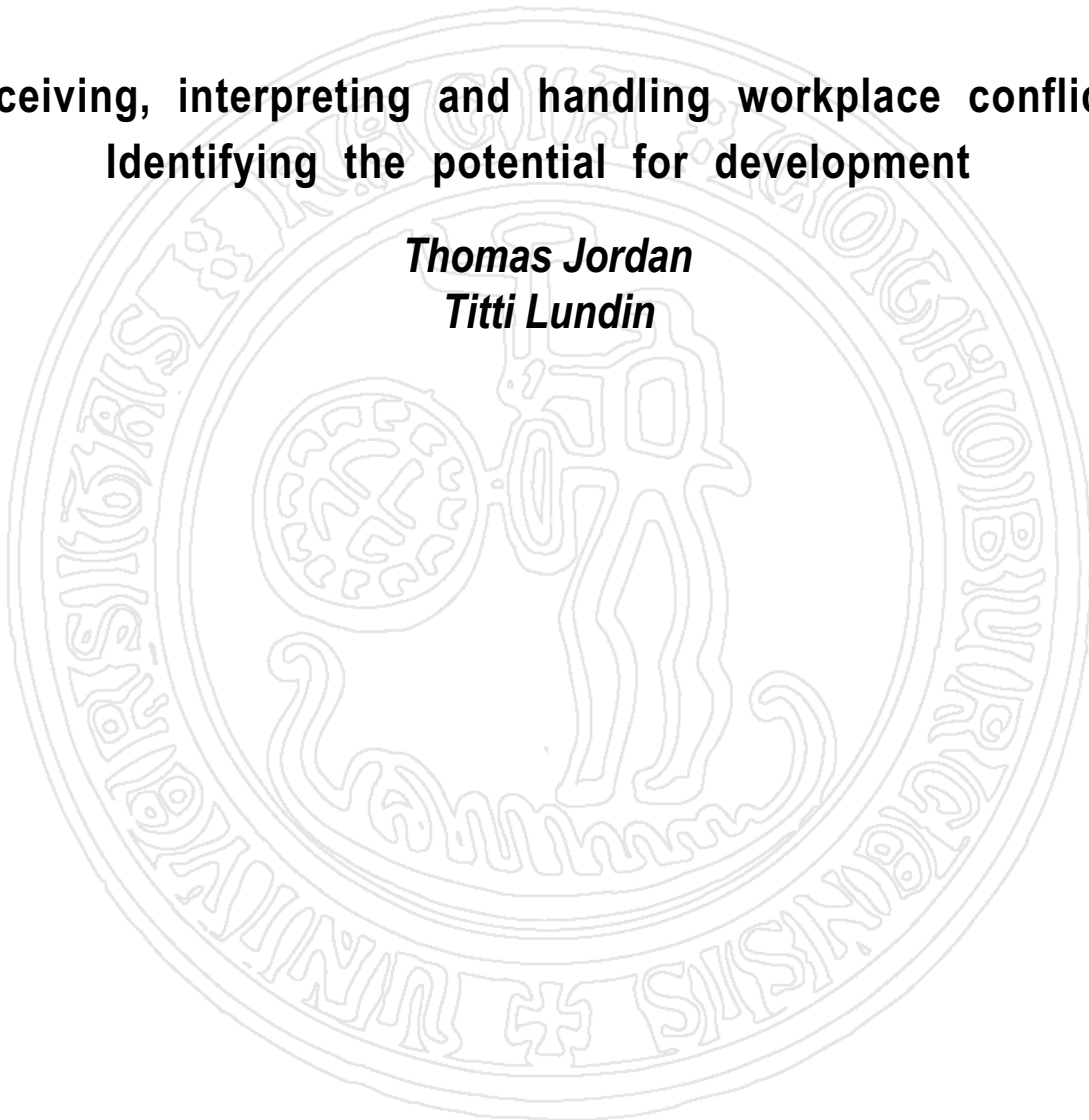


Perceiving, interpreting and handling workplace conflicts  
Identifying the potential for development

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## Preface

During our work with this project we have conducted a large number of interviews. Many individuals have openly and comprehensively told us about their experiences of a workplace conflict, experiences that sometimes lead to deep and protracted life crises. However, even for those who did not suffer during a long period because of the conflict, the interviews raised themes of great personal significance, often accompanied by strong feelings. Many of these individual fates have touched us researchers deeply. Our enduring feeling in relation to the material we have assembled is that it is immensely rich, moving and important. In this research report we can only draw upon a small part of the abundantly rich potential contained in the stories we have read, listened to and documented in the form of transcripts. However, we want to assure all the individuals who have shared their experiences with us that this report is only a beginning. We will continue working with the interview material we have collected and with the topic of workplace conflicts in general. This report is focussed on investigating and describing differences in how individuals perceive, interpret, handle and learn from workplace conflicts. In the context of this study, we can only in a very superficial way cover such important themes as deficiencies in organizational structures and leadership and problematic organizational cultures, even though these circumstances are often the most important roots of unskilfully handled problems in the workplace, leading to a great amount of frustrations and suffering for the persons involved. However, these are issues we will continue working with in the coming years.

The research project was financed through a grant from the Council of Worklife Research, a Swedish public agency. We are deeply grateful that the Council decided to support the project, even though we could not present very solid credentials in this particular field of research at the time of the application. We hope that this report shows that it was a good decision. Since we wanted to use the project to build a solid foundation for further research in this field, our level of ambition has been very high in relation to the resources that were available (600k SEK, about 60k USD during two years). Due to this (self-inflicted) imbalance between ambitions and available working time, the present report is in some respects preliminary. We did not want to give up any of the central goals of the project and we did not want to leave out any parts of the report, since we regard each part as vital for the whole. This means that we have not had enough time to work through each chapter as conscientiously as we would have liked. However, since we have been able to secure research grants for further projects, one of which involves building a comprehensive website on workplace conflicts based on this research, we can promise that we will continue working with the contents of this report until we are satisfied with the results.

It has been very enriching and developing to work with this project, and we want to express our warm and deeply felt thanks to all those women and men who have let us share in important parts of their worklives and private lives.

# 1. The individual's conflict experience

## Introduction

Although workplace conflicts are encountered by almost everyone during their working lives, and although conflicts lead to costs in the form of personal suffering and organizational damage, very little systematic research has been conducted in this area, both in Sweden and internationally. This report presents the results of a two-year research project aimed at elucidating the differences in how people involved in workplace conflicts think about and react to the causes and course of the conflict as well as conflict management. Thus, our efforts are focused primarily on the individual's experiences and reactions, only touching indirectly on other important issues related to organizational structure and culture, systems of social norms, the nature of leadership and similar factors. We believe that this focus on personal perceptions of conflict experiences allows the reader to consider the content of the report in light of his/her own conflict experiences. Although the text deals with how others perceive, interpret and manage conflicts, we hope that reading it will give rise to questions and reflections concerning how the reader him-/herself handles such experiences.

The figure below shows six important areas for competence development related to workplace conflicts. The research reported here concerns primarily boxes I and V.

	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Organization</b>
<b>Prevention</b>	<p><b>I</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop conflict management skills</li> <li>• Change attitudes toward conflict experiences</li> </ul>	<p><b>II</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systems and procedures for early identification and management of conflicts</li> <li>• System for skill development</li> <li>• Constructive conflict culture</li> </ul>
<b>Management</b>	<p><b>III</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take care of those who have met with difficulties</li> <li>• Training of staff welfare personnel</li> </ul>	<p><b>IV</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Methods for intervening in ongoing conflicts</li> <li>• Training of professional conflict consultants</li> </ul>
<b>Learning from experiences</b>	<p><b>V</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning and development through conflict experiences</li> </ul>	<p><b>VI</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• System for utilizing conflict experiences for organizational development</li> </ul>

*Figure 1.1 Tasks in constructive conflict management*

Before the project start, at the turn-of-the-year 1998/99, two main aims were formulated:

- to investigate differences in ways of perceiving, interpreting and managing workplace conflicts; and
- to develop a conceptual framework that can elucidate the potential for learning, skill development, general personal development and organizational development inherent in the process of working through workplace conflicts.

During the course of the project, we have completed over 80 interviews with individuals who have been involved in workplace conflicts. This extensive corpus has been analyzed, and the results of this analysis provided the foundation for development of the instruments presented in this report. In Chapters 2 and 3, we describe a comprehensive typology of individuals' perception and interpretation of conflict experiences. In Chapter 4, we discuss different ways of creating images of the counterpart in a conflict, various conceptions of what is important, as well as different types of learning from conflict experiences. Chapter 5 presents portraits of people who have characteristic ways of perceiving, interpreting and managing workplace conflicts. Chapter 6 contains an entire interview with a person who has a remarkably well-developed awareness of various aspects of a conflict. And finally, in Chapter 7, we outline a four-step "curriculum" for development of individual conflict management skills.

This version of the report is primarily aimed at professionals working with conflicts, particularly those taking a psychological approach. The present version is preliminary, and thus certain sections are not as thoroughly worked through as we would have liked. During the next two years, we plan to continue working with the material, both to achieve more depth and to reach a broader audience, among other things via an extensive website focused on workplace conflicts.

## Comments on the project's theoretical points of departure

The primary aim of our project is to develop concepts and models that can serve as instruments for illustrating differences in how people perceive workplace conflicts and for showing the potential for personal learning and development inherent in conflict experiences. This aim implies a certain prioritizing that also defines the role theory plays in the project. Thus, our purpose is not to scientifically test well-defined hypotheses, nor is it to use empirical data for development of stringent theories. During our efforts, the theoretical frameworks used have primarily served as a general perspective that provides hints as to what we should search for in our material, while our purpose has been to make new discoveries through the analysis. Our understanding is strongly influenced by the literature in two theoretical areas or discourses: cognitive development during adulthood and conflict management. For approximately five years prior to the project start, we have systematically studied the literature in these areas, thereby collecting concepts, models, insights and issues that we judge to be relevant to our own area of interest. It is not possible in this report to provide a thorough review of this literature, but we instead refer the reader to other overviews and summaries (Jordan, 1998b, 2000, 2001; Basseches, 1984; Cook-Greuter, 1999). Our approach is constructionist, i.e., we assume that the

meaning we humans give to our experiences is a meaning we construct ourselves. In contrast to other, very contemporary research, we do not focus on social constructions of meaning, but instead use an individual-oriented perspective. One could say that our area of study is the individual's constructions of social constructions. Within the framework of this study, however, we do not deal with the origin and nature of social constructions or with their importance for the individual. The works of central significance for the formulation of our research issues, interview questions and our preliminary theoretical framework are the following: Robert Kegan's two books (1982, 1994) on transformation of structures of consciousness in adulthood; Jane Loevinger's ego development theory (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Loevinger, 1976; Hy & Loevinger, 1996); Robert Selman's work on development of role-taking (Selman, 1980); Lawrence Kohlberg's studies of moral development (Kohlberg, 1971, 1976); William Torbert's studies of structurally different types of organizational leadership (Torbert, 1987, 1991; Fisher & Torbert, 1995); Susanne Cook-Greuter's research on sophisticated ego structures (Cook-Greuter, 1990, 1994, 1999); Friedrich Glasl's extensive work on organizational conflicts and subjective aspects of conflict escalation (Glasl, 1997, 1999); Eva Maringer and Rainer Steinweg's research on constructive attitudes during conflicts (Maringer & Steinweg, 1997); Marshall Rosenberg's principles of non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 1999); Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998); and Roger Fisher and William Ury's seminal work on constructive efforts during negotiations (Fisher & Ury, 1981). We have also been inspired by and borrowed concepts and ideas from many other sources, as well as from our own professional and private experience.

## Interview methods

Since the aim of the study was to investigate differences in how individuals perceive, interpret and manage workplace conflicts, it was important to give the interviewee as much scope as possible to tell about his or her conflict experiences in a natural manner. We developed an interview guide with general questions that was used as a checklist during the interviews (see Appendix I). The guide begins with an invitation to tell about the conflict, continues with follow-up questions for clarification, and ends with several questions that can be assumed to lead the participant to consider issues that he or she had not necessarily reflected upon previously. Our approach to interviewing has been inspired by the "subject-object interview," developed by Robert Kegan and colleagues (Lahey et al., 1988). Employing this approach, one begins with situations and dilemmas in the interviewee's life and uses these as points of departure in an attempt to elucidate how the individual constructs his/her everyday experiences and him-/herself (a description of the method can also be found in Jordan, 1998b). In her doctoral dissertation, Pamela Steiner (one of Kegan's co-workers) adapted the subject-object interview so as to analyze how individuals construct specific conflict situations. This adaptation has also served as a source of inspiration for our project.



## Presentation of the empirical material

The interview material consists of 84 interviews, divided into two different series, A and B. The A series includes 40 audiotaped interviews conducted by Titti Lundin. Participants in this series were recruited, with only a few exceptions, via an advertisement in the newspaper Göteborgsposten in January 1999.<sup>1</sup> These interviews were completed during the spring of 1999. The B series includes 44 interviews conducted via e-mail by Thomas Jordan. Participants in this series were primarily recruited via invitations placed on various bulletin boards on Usenet (in particular alt.psychology.help; soc.women; soc.men) and the World Wide Web.<sup>2</sup> A few interviewees had located the project themselves via search engines and asked if they might participate. The B series interviews were completed between the spring of 1998 and the fall of 2000. We have, in principle, interviewed everyone who declared interest, and have, thus, not systematically selected participants (further discussion below). Considerably more women than men were interested in participating. Of the 84 participants, 23 were men and 61 women. In the A series, all participants were residing in western Sweden; some were of non-Swedish origin. In the B series, 27 were residing in the US, 11 in Sweden, 2 in the UK, 1 in Luxembourg, 1 in Ireland, 1 in Australia and 1 in Israel.

Table 1.1 shows the age and sex distributions of the participants. Seven individuals failed to report their age. We have very few young participants, and among those responding to our advertisement (A series), the average age was relatively high. Unsurprisingly, the average age of participants in the B series was considerably younger than that of the A series.

Age	A series		B series		Total
	Men	Women	Men	Women	
21-30	0	0	0	2	2
31-40	1	1	5	10	17
41-50	1	16	6	12	35
51-60	4	8	0	3	15
61-70	2	5	0	0	7
71-	0	1	0	0	1
Unknown	0	1	3	3	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>84</i>

*Table 1.1 Distribution of participant age by sex*

<sup>1</sup> The advertisement text is provided in Appendix II.

<sup>2</sup> The English advertisement text is provided in Appendix II.

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<i>Health sector</i>	
Smaller health institution	7
Hospital (care ward, clinic)	6
Private clinic	1
Occupational health service	1
Prison	1
<i>Educational sector</i>	
School (elementary, high school, folk high school, juvenile center school)	9
After-school center	1
University, academic department	3
University, administration	1
University, technical services	1
<i>Other public sector</i>	
Social welfare service	5
Municipal administration	2
Employment office	2
Police department (operational, administration)	2
Armed forces, unit	1
<i>Private sector</i>	
Private business, administration	10
Private business, R&D	2
Private business, sales	2
Manufacturing	3
Smaller consulting firm (e.g., IT, training)	5
Legal services	2
Shipping agency	2
Property management company	2
Retailing	1
Construction	1
Call center	1
Laboratory	1
Architect's office	1
Bakery	1
Restaurant	2
Theatre	1
<i>Non-governmental organizations</i>	
Secretariat	3

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*Table 1.2 Types of workplaces represented in the sample*

Table 1.2 presents the types of workplaces at which the participants were employed. As can be seen, many different types of workplaces are represented. This is not of crucial significance to the study, but eliminates one possible source of bias in the results. Appendix III contains a list of the occupational categories represented among the interviewees.

All participants were asked to complete the *Washington University Sentence Completion Test*, which consists of 36 partial sentences with beginnings but no ends; the subject's task is to complete them. The test is projective and, after coding, gives a rough measure of subjects' ego development level, or more precisely of their degree of cognitive differentiation (see further, Loevinger, 1976; Hy & Loevinger, 1996). All but one of the participants completed the test. In this study, the test results have had a subordinate role, primarily being used to get an overview of the variation among our interviewees and to roughly sort them into groups for the purpose of analysis. Thus, we will not discuss ego development theory and test methodology here.<sup>3</sup> For those readers familiar with Loevinger's ego development theory, we report the distribution of participants across the various ego development stages (see Table 1.3). As there are no reliable studies indicating the average distribution in the population as a whole, we cannot comment on how our participants might differ from the population average.<sup>4</sup> The average among our participants is probably somewhat higher than that of the general population. The test results also indicate that our participants have a relatively good spread across the ego development stages, although more representatives of stage 4 would have been desirable.

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Stage	A series	B series	Total	Share as %
E4	1	2	3	4
E5	17	12	29	35
E6	14	19	33	40
E7	6	5	11	13
E8	1	5	6	7
C9	0	1	1	1

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*Table 1.3 Distribution of participants across ego development stages*

Most interviewees were asked what caused their desire to participate in the interview series. The motives mentioned often were a need to talk with an impartial person about a conflict experience that had given rise to considerable frustration; a wish to contribute to research on an important topic; a wish to get suggestions from a person knowledgeable on how an ongoing conflict situation might be handled; the expectation that such an interview might be interesting and instructive. Those who responded to the newspaper advertisement and agreed to an audiotaped interview had often experienced long-standing and difficult workplace conflicts that had led to serious personal crises. The conflicts *per se* were often over and had sometimes occurred several years earlier. Most of those who volunteered for the e-mail interviews were involved in ongoing conflicts that they wished to discuss with an impartial party. In this group, there were fewer who had experienced conflicts lasting for several years and leading to long-standing illness and

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<sup>3</sup> The interested reader is referred to Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Loevinger, 1976; Hy & Loevinger, 1996; Cook-Greuter, 1994 and 1999.

<sup>4</sup> A rough estimate of the distribution in the US population, based on tens of thousands of completed tests, suggests that approx. 10% of adults can be found in the pre-conventional stages (E2-E3), approx. 80% in the conventional stages (E4-E6), approx. 9% in the early post-conventional stages (E7-E8), and less than 0.5% in the late post-conventional stages (C9-C10) (Cook-Greuter, 1990).

serious personal crises. In a separate section below we will continue this discussion of the differences between the two interview series.

## Conducting the interviews

After having read an information sheet about the research project (see Appendix IV), interviewees in both series were asked to sign a "contract" (the purpose of which was primarily to guarantee that they were informed about the conditions; see Appendix V) and to take the sentence completion test mentioned above (WUSTC). A-series participants took the test home along with an addressed envelope. B-series participants sent the completed test at the beginning of the interviews. The A-series interviews were conducted in one session per participant and normally lasted for about 1.5 hours. These interviews were audiotaped. All of the 40 interviews were transcribed and printed, the printouts normally amounting to 20-30 DIN A4 pages. The B-series interviews were normally completed during a period of approximately 2-3 weeks per participant and consisted of between 4 and 8 rounds of questions and answers. The length of the edited printouts was more variable than that of the audiotaped interviews, the e-mail exchanges ranging from approximately 15 to 40 pages, though normally 20-25 pages.

## Differences between oral and e-mail interviews

There appeared to be a number of interesting differences between the oral and e-mail interviews in terms of conditions and results. It is difficult, however, to draw definite conclusions based on our material, among other things because different interviewers conducted the two different series. We would nevertheless like to report several observations.

For the audiotaped interviews, the interview situation had already been founded on telephone contact between the interviewer and the interviewee. Even at this stage, the participant can sense whether he/she trusts the interviewer and his/her purpose. At the interview itself, a relationship between them is easily established, which often becomes quite personal and confiding since the interviewee is relating very personal and emotionally charged experiences while the interviewer listens with great attention and interest, without criticizing or expressing his/her own opinions. The interviewee often has a long story to tell and the threshold for telling is low. The conversational situation also allows digressions and the typical meandering of spoken language, which sometimes appears incoherent when transcribed.

The conditions of an e-mail interview are quite different. Participants have little opportunity to form an opinion of the interviewer in advance, but this opinion must emerge as the interview proceeds. Naturally, we have no way of knowing how many Internet users saw the invitation to participate, but failed to declare their interest because they were unable to form an opinion of the interviewer and the project's purpose. It was not, however, difficult to recruit participants via Internet. It appeared as though many participants viewed anonymity as a great advantage. The

fact that they were being interviewed by a person at a great geographic distance from them and via e-mail means that many felt quite free to relate very personal events. The course of the interview differed greatly in character between the e-mail and oral series. There are several reasons for this. Compared to speaking, writing takes more time and effort, which means that written stories are less spontaneous, more concentrated, more carefully prepared and more focussed on the essentials. The act of writing can result in the interviewee reflecting upon the conflict in a way he or she otherwise wouldn't have. Of course this can also happen during an oral interview, but our impression is that the influence of the interview *per se* on the individual's perception and interpretation of conflict experiences is greater during an e-mail than an oral interview. An additional difference is that the interviewees receive questions via e-mail, and thus have time to consider their responses. A participant can read the questions when the message is retrieved, think about them for a day or two, and then sit down to compose his/her answers. The interview structure is, naturally, different as well. An oral interview is linear, i.e., questions are normally asked one at a time, and answers are given after each question. In an e-mail interview, the interviewee reads the entire message and follow-up questions are posed in many different places in the same round. Thus the interview isn't linear, but follows several lines in parallel. It is also easy to quote previous responses and pose direct follow-up questions concerning what the interviewee actually meant. The interviewee can, in turn, reflect upon what he/she wrote previously, consider the question and take stock of several questions and answers that might relate to different topics simultaneously. Moreover, the process takes place over several weeks, whereas the oral interviews take only 1 or 2 hours. This further strengthens the interventionist character of the e-mail interview. On the one hand, this implies that an e-mail interview is probably a poorer instrument than the oral interview for getting a picture of how the participants function in everyday life. On the other hand, the e-mail interview has an important therapeutic, or consciousness-raising, potential, something that numerous B-series participants mentioned spontaneously.

## Methodological problems

Inherent in this type of investigation, of course, is a great paradox – a problem of methodology that is difficult to solve. We wish to study the types of issues individuals reflect upon during conflict situations, and we must proceed by posing questions to these individuals. By asking a question, we have, naturally, brought just this question to the fore of the respondent's consciousness. This is analogous to elementary-particle physics, where one can only observe a given phenomenon by adding energy and where by adding energy one changes just this phenomenon. However, we aren't particularly dependent on knowing precisely what a given person has reflected upon on his/her own. It is sufficient to be able to show that great differences exist and to describe their nature. Moreover, even if our questions give rise to new reflections, it is often clear from the interviewee's response whether an issue has been previously considered or is new to him/her in some respect.

An important aspect of our recruiting methods is that participants are individuals who have experienced a conflict as a great problem, or in any case as a personal challenge. Many participants have suffered in various ways from the conflicts in which they have been involved, and they have often been in vulnerable positions, e.g., endured harassment by superiors or colleagues. We have not had access to other involved individuals who did not perceive the events as a conflict or who were the "perpetrators," i.e., those who did the harassing or had the power to promote their own interests. This is important to keep in mind while evaluating the interpretations we will present in subsequent chapters – in particular the portraits (see Chapter 5).

For our purposes, it is necessary to have samples of various ways of perceiving, interpreting and managing workplace conflicts. Among the interviews, there should preferably be a few samples from those parts of the extant spectra of attitudes toward conflicts that are common in the general population. It is not, however, important that our sample be representative in the usual sense, since our aim is not to discover how common various types of attitudes are.

We will not go beyond the above discussion of how our methodology and sampling might have influenced the nature of our results, since – as should be clear at this point – our aim is not to study the statistical distribution of different kinds of meaning-making in the population. We wish to claim, however, that the variation we have in terms of ego development stage, age, sex, educational level and occupation – though neither ideal nor representative – suffices for our purposes, which are to develop instruments for elucidating and describing significant differences in how individuals perceive, interpret and handle workplace conflicts.

## Treatment and analysis of the interviews

The interviews were numbered in the two series, A and B; men were assigned odd and women even numbers. The first phase of processing was to transcribe the audiotaped interviews and to edit the e-mail interviews to obtain orderly files for each respondent. This was obviously quite time-consuming. After having listened through the recordings, 33 of the 40 audiotaped interviews were transcribed.<sup>5</sup> During transcription, every paragraph was numbered to facilitate the making of working notes and identification of the correct section of a given interview. When editing the e-mail interviews it was sufficient in most cases to only include the participant's responses, thus not the interviewer's message/questions, since the response message usually included a copy of the interview questions, thereby avoiding redundant text. In a few cases, however, it was necessary to include the message containing the questions in order to get a complete picture of the course of the interview.

Prior to analysis, we developed an analysis form based on our preliminary theoretical framework. The form included 10 pages of questions to be answered for every interview (see Appendix VI). By way of experiment, we also constructed a scale on which the researcher would attempt to rate

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<sup>5</sup> The remaining 7 interviews were transcribed after this version of the report was completed.

the character of the interview for specific questions (see further Coding Sheets 2 and 3 in Appendix VI). The purpose of the analysis form was not to obtain scientifically valid, quantitative interview data to be used for, e.g., correlational analysis. This analysis is far too dependent on the researcher's own interpretations and judgements to allow such quantification to meet even the minimal requirements of scientific validity and reliability. The purpose of the form was instead to keep the researcher from being drawn into the flow of the story and to help him/her systematically search the interview for certain themes and variables. The questions in the form were particularly important for helping the researcher to perceive the elements *not* found in the story. Work with the interview analysis also showed that this approach was of crucial importance for elucidating the characteristic and varying structures of meaning hidden in the material.

Every interview was read several times, and a sub-set of them (approx. 20) was read 5-10 times by both researchers. For each reading, attention was directed toward a specific theme. We diligently made marginal notes related to the themes, so that we could later return to the relevant sections with ease. About half of the interviews were analyzed completely using the analysis form, where we noted, for every question, the numbers of the paragraphs judged as relevant to just that question. The remaining interviews were read and compared as wholes with the more formally analyzed interviews. They were also used as sources for characteristic excerpts.

Starting from this work, which is an amalgamation of systematic analysis, intuitive searching and hermeneutic interpretation, the typology presented in Chapter 2 was eventually crystallized. During this process, we naturally discovered weaknesses in and problems with the analysis form used, which is why the form in its present state can be considered a worn-out instrument. But with the conceptual apparatus developed during the course of the project, we are equipped to – in future projects – conduct considerably more differentiated and precise interview analyses than those carried out within the framework of the present project.

## General observations

Before delving into the research results directly related to the project's aim, we will report several general observations from the interviews.

One initial important observation is that the conflict stories told by our participants seldom correspond to the definitions of conflicts found in academic textbooks on conflict management. At the core of many of these definitions is the notion that two or more parties have incompatible goals. This type of definition leads our thoughts to conflicts in which two parties have two different agendas and end up battling over who will get their own way. According to this scenario, the parties are definite as to their goals and viewpoints, they agree that a conflict exists, and they know what this conflict is about. In most of the cases in our material, the situation is different. Many of our participants tell of workplace situations that they have experienced as very frustrating themselves, and an important component of this frustration has been that others

involved have refused to discuss the problems afflicting the participant. Here, the conflict doesn't consist of clearly defined issues such as allocation of resources, who should get what position or disagreement over policy questions. The problem is not reducible to a certain issue, but is instead a matter of unbearable conditions and poorly functioning relationships. One party often has the upper hand and denies that there is a conflict at all. In such conflicts, the core problems to be solved are not purely factual matters. In our material, most of the core problems are related to communication, often that the counterpart stubbornly blocks all attempts to talk about the perceived problem.<sup>6</sup> It would be a project in itself to take stock of and analyze all of the strategies used to avoid admitting that there is a common problem that must be worked through.

The observation that obstructed communication is the primary problem in many conflicts – as opposed to incompatible goals and viewpoints – leads us naturally to a second observation, that well-developed skills in understanding causes of conflicts and great social competence are not at all a guarantee for constructive conflict solutions. We have several cases in which interviewees have demonstrated unusually well-developed skills relevant to conflict management. Some of them, despite great inventiveness and intelligent insights into the nature of conflicts, have failed to constructively affect the course of the conflict. Others have managed, through great effort on their part, to maintain relatively good relationships with coworkers, but have not been able to solve the basic conflict, which has continued to taint relationships among other people. Thus, an additional observation is that there are, in many cases, limits to what conflict management skills at the individual level can accomplish, particularly when important parties to the conflict are unwilling to communicate about the central problems. People can simply find themselves quite powerless in a conflict, despite good intentions, exceptional social skills, great emotional intelligence and sharp-wittedness in analyzing causal relations. In consequence, in the face of a difficult conflict, it is often important to consider whether one is wasting time, energy and commitment on a situation that is actually fairly hopeless. Sometimes the better decision is to retreat and direct one's resources elsewhere – toward a place where the conditions are more favorable.

A third observation from our material is that, although a great propensity to reflect upon various conflict aspects is no guarantee for constructive solutions to a workplace conflict, a thorough understanding of the underlying causes does imply considerably less risk that individuals will suffer negative emotional consequences from their experience. People who carefully consider how others, themselves and workplaces function seldom become bitter and cynical, and usually have a good ability to learn from and develop through conflict experiences – even if such experiences were painful.

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<sup>6</sup> In accord with our basic tenet we must point out that this is *our* way of constructing the causes of the conflicts – an interpretation that seems reasonable and well founded within the framework of the perspective we are using. From other perspectives the core problems might be described in other terms and with other emphases.



## 2. What do people think about during a conflict?

### Introduction

Throughout the course of our research, we have looked for a way to illustrate the great differences in how individuals perceive, interpret and manage their own experiences of conflicts. We have asked ourselves if it is possible to describe the many separate elements of a conflict experience – elements that one person might actively reflect upon, but that might be absent from another person's perception and thoughts. Our idea was to create an integrated overview that systematically describes various elements of individuals' "conflict cognition." Such an overview could be used to identify important differences in how individuals perceive, react to and manage conflict experiences. It could also be used as an instrument to illustrate for the individual the possibilities of using conflict experiences to enhance personal development. The method we chose involves framing elements that can occur as objects of reflection as *questions* that a person can pose to him-/herself and seek answers to. We believe that this is a powerful way to approach the role of reflection in individuals' ways of dealing with conflicts, partly because the nature of perception and reflection seem to be describable in terms of the questions one usually and spontaneously poses to oneself, and partly because we – by basing our overview on typical questions – use a model to describe cognition that is intelligible and practicable for a wider audience.

It is crucial to point out that when we talk about the questions a person actively reflects upon in connection with a conflict experience, we are using the word "reflect" in a strict sense. According to our definition and use of the concept, in order to "reflect" upon a phenomenon (e.g., reasons for a counterpart's behavior, one's own feelings, or the informal roles at one's workplace), one must construct the phenomenon as a clear mental gestalt, ask oneself a question about the phenomenon and seek an answer to this question. If we accept this use of the concept "reflect," we must also establish that many people go about their daily lives without reflecting at all. A person could even experience an intense and lengthy conflict without actually reflecting upon what is happening and why.<sup>7</sup>

A central part of our research has been to investigate the range of variation in what different individuals reflect upon. Through an interactive process of reading the interviews in light of a preliminary theoretical framework, comparing them with one another, and recording and organizing separate observations, we have arrived at a typology of questions that can occur in individuals' perception, interpretation and management of workplace conflicts. This typology is presented in Table 2.1.

The table is constructed by arranging the questions into four main themes (*The Conflict, The Other, The Self, and The Setting*), with altogether twenty sub-themes, and by further grouping them according to four question types (*What? What do I feel about it? Why? and What can I do?*). The question types largely follow a sequence from simpler to more sophisticated issues.

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<sup>7</sup> It will later become clear – especially in Chapter 5 – how a non-reflective person can orient him-/herself in life.

	WHAT?	WHAT DO I FEEL ABOUT IT?	WHY?	WHAT CAN I DO?
<b>THE CONFLICT</b>				
<b>A. Events</b>	What has happened?	How are the events important to me?	Why did it happen?	How can I influence the course of events?
<b>B. The conflict issues</b>	What is the conflict about?	Do I feel that the issues brought up are important?	Are there deeper needs and interests underlying the presented problems?	Can I do anything to bring out underlying needs and interests?
<b>THE OTHER</b>				
<b>C. Behaviour</b>	What has my counterpart actually done?	What do I dislike in my counterpart's behavior?	What are my counterpart's motives for his/her behavior?	How can I change my own attitudes in order to influence the behaviour of my counterpart?
<b>D. Interpretations, opinions, issues, etc.</b>	How does my counterpart view the situation? Which issues are important for my counterpart?	What do I think about the way my counterpart perceives the situation?	Are there important reasons for the way the counterpart sees the situation?	What can I do to help my counterpart reevaluate his/her outlook on the situation?
<b>E. Emotions</b>	What does my counterpart feel in connection with the conflict?	What do I think about my counterpart having the feelings he/she has?	Are there important reasons for my counterpart feeling the way he/she does?	What can I do to enable a constructive change in my counterpart's feelings?
<b>F. Personality traits</b>	What kind of person is my counterpart?	What sides of my counterpart do I like/dislike?	Are there important underlying reasons for why my counterpart is the way he/she is?	What can I do to reinforce my counterpart's positive sides and reduce the importance of his/her negative sides?
<b>THE SELF</b>				
<b>G. Behaviour</b>	How have I acted during the conflict?	What do I think about the way I acted?	Why did I behave as I did during the conflict?	What can I do to change my attitude?
<b>H. Issues</b>	What issues, concerns, interests and goals were/are important to me?	Do I think that what seemed important to me is really what I want to regard as important?	Are there important underlying reasons why I feel that certain issues are important to me?	What can I do to reevaluate what I perceive as important goals and needs so that they better correspond to my deepest convictions, feelings and values?
<b>I. Emotions</b>	What were my emotions during the conflict?	Were/are my emotions appropriate and were/are they good for me?	Why did I feel the way I did?	What can I do to change my emotional state?
<b>J. Interpretations</b>	What interpretations did I make during the conflict?	Were my interpretations well-founded?	Are there important reasons for my making the specific interpretations I made?	How can I test whether my interpretations are appropriate?
<b>K. Value judgments</b>	What value judgments did I make during the conflict?	Did I pass good value judgments?	Are there any important reasons why I felt as I did?	What can I do to change my thoughts?
<b>L. Values</b>	What values and norms played a role for me during the conflict?	Do I feel that the values and norms that have guided my actions are really those I wish to stand for?	Are there important reasons for my having the norms and values I have?	What can I do to develop my system of norms and values?

<b>M. Personality traits</b>	Which of my personality traits are relevant in this context?	Are there any aspects of my personality that I would like to change?	Are there important reasons for my having the personality traits I have?	How can I change the aspects of my personality that I wish to change?
<b>N. Perspective</b>	What kind of perspective do I use when observing the course of the conflict?	Do I think the perspective I normally use is appropriate?	Why is my perspective as it is?	What can I do to develop my own perspective and be more aware of how it shapes my interpretations?
<b>THE SCENE</b>				
<b>O. General setting</b>	What external circumstances are of importance in understanding the nature of the conflict?	Are there any circumstances I feel are undesirable?	Are there any reasons why the external circumstances are as they are?	What can I do to influence the external circumstances?
<b>P. Informal roles</b>	Are there any informal roles at my workplace?	Are there any informal roles that I find unsmooth?	What are the reasons for the present informal role structure?	What can I do to change these unsmooth informal roles?
<b>Q. Relationships</b>	What is the nature of the relationships I have with my colleagues?	What do I feel about the present state of my relationships with my colleagues?	Why do certain relationships have the qualities they have?	What can I do to improve my relationships with my colleagues?
<b>R. The work team</b>	How does the work team function as a whole, in relation to our work assignments?	What do I feel about the way the work team functions?	Are there important reasons why the work team functions as it does?	What can I do to help the work team function better as a whole?
<b>S. Organizational culture</b>	What organizational culture dominates my workplace??	What do I feel about our organizational culture?	Are there important reasons why the organizational culture has become what it is?	What can I do to improve the current organizational culture?
<b>T. Function</b>	What overall goals and purposes are served by my workplace?	Do I think these are good goals?	Are there important reasons for formulating the goals in this way and for possible shortcomings in reaching them?	What can I do to help develop the goals and improve our ability to reach them?
<b>Other questions</b>				
	What can I learn about myself through the conflict experience?			
	What can I learn about how other people and groups function through the conflict?			
	How could the conflict have been prevented?			

Table 2.1 Questions for reflection when facing a workplace conflict

Questions of the type "What?" primarily concern perception, i.e., noticing a certain theme and thereby making it accessible to conscious thought. Questions of the type "What do I feel about it?" go one step further and imply that the person is somehow evaluating and trying to take a position on aspects of the theme. Questions of the type "Why?" imply that the person is looking for the underlying causes of various phenomena. Finally, questions of the type "What can I do?" imply that the person is seeking ways to take action and improve the situation.

There is, naturally, nothing given about this particular arrangement, but we have found that it works well for creating a clearer picture of what a person is reflecting upon. In the following sections, we will take a closer look at and explain the different parts of the table. In doing so we proceed in the order indicated in the far left column, where every sub-theme is assigned a letter. When possible we provide interview excerpts as examples.<sup>8</sup> The reader should keep in mind, however, that there are problems associated with using quotations as illustrations, since the most important features of a person's perception and interpretation are revealed by the questions he/she *doesn't* reflect upon. Therefore, in Chapter 5, we present six portraits of individuals who perceive, interpret and manage workplace conflicts in different ways.

For the reader who finds Table 2.1 difficult to grasp, we hope that the "conflict mandala" presented in Chapter 3 will provide some consolation through its comprehensive graphical representation of the various dimensions.

## The Conflict

### *A. Events*

It might seem strange to include the question "What has happened?" in this context. But it is clear that some people go through dramatic personal experiences without organizing these experiences into a coherent story for themselves. Characteristic of these individuals is that they either have difficulty telling the interviewer what has happened at all – other than in fragmented and vague sweeping statements – or the stories are extremely chaotic and hard to follow. In the latter case, the person might plunge into separate events, feelings and circumstances without placing them in a wider context. Such stories move back and forth in time, mixing subjective impressions with external circumstances. We feel that this represents more than a difficulty with framing a story for someone else; it is also an expression of a person's difficulty with creating, for him-/herself, an overview of what has happened. It is probably the case that the episodes and circumstances coming to mind are those that are somehow emotionally charged for the individual. These mental images, however, are adrift and lack distinct relationships to other particulars or to an overall context.

- 1. What has happened?**
- 2. How are the events important to me?**
- 3. Why did it happen?**
- 4. How can I influence the course of events?**

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the B series consists of e-mail interviews, and excerpts from this series are sometimes of a different format than the regular interviews. Lines beginning with ">" are quoted, by the interviewer, from a previous round of answers. Excerpts from interviews that were conducted in Swedish have been translated to English.

But most people can give a fairly orderly overview of important events and conditions – some of which are viewed as more significant than others – and from these stories it is clear that they see the conflict experience as a chronological occurrence. We can view this as the result of a person asking him-/herself the question "What has happened?" and constructing a story as a response.

The next question, "How are the events important to me?," involves taking a conscious position on the events. This implies being able both to discern, for oneself, what in the course of events was of personal significance and to express an opinion on the occurrence of these events. Naturally, an individual who does not consider this question does *experience* certain aspects of the events as important, but fails to work out for him-/herself what was important and to form an opinion on various aspects. The ability to sift out, for oneself, the important aspects of the course of events is a prerequisite of emotionally processing and integrating what has happened in a differentiated manner.

The third question, "Why did it happen?," is quite broad. It deals with whether an individual asks him-/herself at all why important conflict events occurred. A great proportion of our interviews show clearly that many people never seriously reflect upon this question. A common pattern is that the individual tells at great length about the workplace, what has happened and how he/she has reacted both emotionally and in terms of actions, and that it is only after the interviewer poses a direct question that the interviewee discusses the reasons for the conflict. In such cases, it is clear from the wording that the person has never actually thought about this before, and that he/she must – during the interview situation – search for an answer, which, when found, is often rather brief. Even when relatively prompt answers to this question occur, one gets the feeling that the interviewee's conceptions of underlying causes of the conflict are rather superficial, and that they play an extremely peripheral role in his/her conflict experience. The interviewees' experiences and reactions relate – in a very straightforward way – to the concrete conflict events and are, thus, not influenced by a nuanced picture of important causal relations.

The fourth question, "How can I influence the course of events?," implies that one perceives oneself as a person who can act to constructively affect the course of events. In order to do this in a well-considered manner, one must have a conception of what is happening (Question 1), an opinion about the negative aspects of the course of events (Question 2), and some ideas about the causal relations underlying the events (Question 3) if one is to form an opinion on how to intervene and change them. One must also view the course of the conflict as a variable as opposed to a given fact. Moreover, one must have a personal opinion on what is happening that is so clear and well rooted that one feels authorized (by oneself) to, in a well-considered manner, intervene to change the course of the conflict and move it in a desired direction.

### *B. The conflict issues*

The second sub-theme to the main theme *The Conflict* deals with what an individual perceives the core conflict issues to be. These need not be well-defined standpoints at odds with one another, but could simply be that someone's attitude is felt to be an obstacle to a tolerable work situation. The question "What is the conflict about?" implies that one is working out for oneself what seems to be the core theme of the conflict situation as such. What are the issues and problems that cause conflicts among us? If people do not formulate an answer to this question for themselves, they

will not be able to reflect upon how important these themes are or upon the alternatives for handling them. It is not uncommon that people actually have no clear understanding of the basic conflict issues. If this is the case, then they act based on their feelings and beliefs, but lack an essential tool for looking at and evaluating whether the issues at stake are important – whether the issues driven by various parties ("the presented problems") are actually of importance for those involved (perhaps there are other underlying interests and needs).

Formulating an idea as to what the conflict is about is a prerequisite of the second question, "Do I feel that the issues brought up are important?," which deals with assessing and prioritizing among the themes raised by the various parties in the conflict. More often than not, active consideration of the conflict issues leads to changed outlooks on what is essential as opposed to what is of less importance.

The third question, "Are there deeper needs and interests underlying the presented problems?," implies that one is reflecting upon why the present conflict issues exist and why they generate conflict. Perhaps there are deeper underlying reasons – tied both to the situation as such and to those involved – why certain issues appear to be important. In the conflict management literature, it is often stressed (see, e.g., Fisher & Ury, 1981) that attention should be focused on underlying needs and interests as opposed to the concrete standpoints of those involved in the conflict. For example, a need for appreciation and recognition might underlie demands for higher salaries. If one doesn't consider this why-question, one can easily become deadlocked in the positions taken by those involved and fail to see opportunities to break up the blockades. Thus, the third question is a prerequisite of posing the fourth, "Can I do anything to bring out underlying needs and interests?," and thereby of helping to transform conceptions of the actual core conflict issues.

Joan was one of the few interviewees who reflected a great deal upon what needs might underlie the "presented problems:"

Now for my theory about why this conflict goes on and on: neither A. nor the nursing staff feels deeply seen or cared for by the others. I think A. yearns to be cared about but it is the most dangerous thing in the world to her and so she tries to keep herself safe by compartmentalizing her life, never sharing anything that goes on in her private life, and working to the point of exhaustion. [...] Interestingly, the rest of the nursing staff are yearning to be cared about ("nurtured") by her as if she were their mother! There is one nurse who keeps talking about the lack of nurturing on this unit! So I think the staffing/safety issue is really about much deeper issues." #B14

It is not certain, of course, that Joan is correct, but the fact that she considers the possibility of important underlying needs and interests provides an opportunity to search for suitable ways to bring out more fundamental dimensions.

**1. What is the conflict about?**

**2. Do I feel that the issues brought up are important?**

**3. Are there deeper needs and interests underlying the presented problems?**

**4. Can I do anything to bring out underlying needs and interests?**

## The Other

### *C. Behavior*

The question "What has my counterpart done?" implies that one is reflecting more closely upon what exactly the counterpart did that is relevant to the conflict. As many conflict consultants can testify, it is extremely common that people involved in conflicts fail to clarify for themselves what their counterpart has actually said and done. The picture of the counterpart is often imbued with sweeping generalizations about what that person is like, presumptions about what he/she is trying to gain, unreflective interpretations of the meaning of various episodes, etc. The question implies that one is trying to sort out what has actually happened and to articulate it as specifically as possible. If one fails to ask oneself this question and to search for an answer, one tends to react to the counterpart's behavior based on an extremely undifferentiated conception of what the counterpart has done and of his/her current behavior.

- 1. What has my counterpart actually done?**
- 2. What do I dislike in my counterpart's behavior?**
- 3. What are my counterpart's motives for his/her behavior?**
- 4. How can I change my own attitudes in order to influence the behaviour of my counterpart?**

The second question of this sub-theme, "What do I dislike in my counterpart's behavior?," deals primarily with working out for oneself what aspects of the counterpart's behavior cause one to react negatively. Furthermore, it can be important to consider whether there are sides to the counterpart's behavior that have been positive and to closely examine whether one's own negative reactions are justified.

The third question, "What are my counterpart's motives for his/her behavior?," is far-reaching. The question can be broken down into two steps. The first deals with considering, at all, the idea that there is probably some reason for the counterpart acting as he/she does. Many never consider this and are therefore inclined to react to the situation based only on the reactions the counterpart's behavior causes in them. To the extent that one can imagine the counterpart to have a number of underlying reasons – in the form of his/her own interpretations, needs, motives, reaction patterns, etc. – one's own immediate emotional reactions to the counterpart's behavior tend to be tempered somewhat. The second step in this question consists of considering the counterpart's possible reasons for his/her attitude. The chances of such reflections leading to relevant conclusions are, naturally, dependent on how much information one has on the counterpart as well as on how one tends to construe other people (see Chapter 4).

The fourth question, "What can I do to reinforce those sides of my counterpart I like and reduce the importance of those sides I dislike?," implies that one is reflecting upon how one can act to constructively affect the counterpart's attitude. This can involve, for example, strategies aimed at reinforcing the positive sides one sees in the counterpart or adjusting one's own attitude so as to reduce the energy and space given to the negative aspects of his/her behavior. To accomplish this, one must see the counterpart's behavior as a variable affected by different factors (including one's own attitude) and not as an unchangeable constant.

*D. Interpretations, opinions and perspectives*

Our interviews show that the degree of insight into how the situation appears from the counterpart's point of view varies considerably among individuals. It seems that some never ask themselves how the counterpart interprets the situation or consider what is important to him/her. Others have variously detailed conceptions of what the counterpart probably feels, thinks, and desires. If one fails to reflect upon how the counterpart experiences the situation, one's own interpretations and reactions are not informed by an understanding of the background to the counterpart's attitude. Instead, one tends to react directly – with opinions and actions – to what the counterpart does, often greatly influenced by how the counterpart's attitude affects oneself.

The first question, "How does my counterpart view the situation?," implies that one is trying to imagine how the counterpart interprets what is happening and what values and goals are important to him/her. Every individual lives in his/her own story of what has happened, what the situation is like now, what values and interests are at stake, etc. Every individual's own special situation is different, and the circumstances that appear important to one person can be invisible or unimportant to another (see Stone et al., 1999). Thus, asking how the situation appears to the other can give a new understanding of why the counterpart acts in a certain way and can also evoke new variables useful in leading the situation along a more constructive path. Rather than reacting directly to what the counterpart does, one can react based on an understanding of the background to his/her behavior. Naturally, trying to enter into other people's experience of a phenomenon always implies great problems of interpretation. The chances of simply being wrong are great and one's insight into roles can have different degrees of depth. In Chapter 4, we will return to the question of how the picture of the counterpart can be constructed and also provide a number of examples in the form of interview excerpts.

The second question, "What do I think about the way my counterpart perceives the situation?," implies that one is evaluating the counterpart's interpretations. One might, for example, decide that the counterpart's interpretations of certain events form a destructive pattern and that this is not good.

The third question, "Are there important reasons for the way the counterpart sees the situation?," implies that one is searching for underlying causes for the counterpart experiencing the situation in a certain way. This can be related to having insight into, e.g., the counterpart's current situation in a workplace where areas of responsibility and loyalties are at odds.

The fourth question, "What can I do to help my counterpart reevaluate his/her outlook on the situation?," implies that one is actively searching for opportunities to help the counterpart reevaluate his/her interpretations. There are many different ways to accomplish this. One can, for example, start an open discussion on how people interpret separate events or be careful to avoid living up to a false image of oneself that the counterpart might embrace.

**1. How does my counterpart view the situation? Which issues are important for my counterpart?**

**2. What do I think about the way my counterpart perceives the situation?**

**3. Are there important reasons for the way the counterpart sees the situation?**

**4. What can I do to help my counterpart reevaluate his/her outlook on the situation?**

The excerpt below provides a simple and clear example of how one of the interviewees spontaneously tries to enter into the counterpart's situation and, moreover, to use this insight to modify her own attitude in a constructive way:

- >Of course I understand that it must have been difficult and
- >threatening for Monika when a new smart stand-in came, who was also
- >younger and showed off. She must have felt really
- >questioned in her role, which she was too.

*Did you also think along these lines during the conflict, or did you mostly see things this way afterwards?*

Yes, I thought this way then too and tried to tone myself down and adapt, but without selling my soul and lowering my self-esteem too much. #B56

The following excerpt is from a person who in effect never asked himself what might have induced the counterpart to act in a certain way. The interviewee had been instructed to complete a work assignment that was well under his competence level:

- > *Why did he decide it was more important to design web pages on contract*
- > *than doing basic research?*

I don't know. I guess the money seemed important. #B11

From other answers to the interviewer's questions we can infer that the institution in question had received a drastic funding cutback, which might have been an important reason for the institution head's behavior. As outsiders we cannot know the actual circumstances, but in the interview, the interviewee's disinterest in the background to his counterpart's behavior is striking. Owing to this, the interviewee lacks important information that might have meant both greater possibilities to affect the course of the conflict by suggesting other solutions and less frustration with the counterpart's behavior.

### *E. Emotions*

Experience shows that it often makes a great difference if those involved are aware of one another's emotions in connection with the conflict. Emotions are "fundamental facts" that don't disappear just because someone else thinks they are unjustified. What's more, emotions are largely universal. We all know what it means to feel frustration, anger, disappointment, joy, satisfaction, etc. This implies that if we can perceive the feelings of others – without immediately making value judgements on them – we also have good chances to feel empathy for the counterpart's situation.

The first question, "What does my counterpart feel in connection with the conflict?," implies consciously perceiving what the counterpart is feeling. If this isn't obvious, one may need to ask one's way to a more adequate picture. Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* (Rosenberg, 1999) gives quite insightful and concrete suggestions for ways to proceed.

- 1. What does my counterpart feel in connection with the conflict?**
- 2. What do I think about my counterpart having the feelings he/she has?**
- 3. Are there important reasons for my counterpart feeling the way he/she does?**
- 4. What can I do to enable a constructive change in my counterpart's feelings?**



The second question, "What do I think about my counterpart having the feelings he/she has?," implies a conscious and active consideration of what one thinks about the counterpart's specific emotional experience in connection with the conflict. This might lead to the discovery that one actually doesn't wish for the counterpart to feel frustration and anger, which is a step on the way to being prepared to change the situation for the better.

The third question, "Are there important reasons for my counterpart feeling the way he/she does?," encourages one to search for underlying causes of the counterpart's feelings. Certain feelings are quite often tied to how one interprets a situation. It is possible, for example, to feel threatened, angry, or that one has been terribly wronged because one interprets a given act as purposefully insulting, as a sign of thoughtlessness, or as evidence of egotism, while there are in actuality completely different reasons underlying the act in question. Misunderstanding and incorrect interpretations are often important components of the course of a conflict. Another important source of various feelings is a person's hopes and values. These are not always articulated, but a dashed hope or frustration with the fact that reality doesn't correspond to one's ideals can generate extremely strong and deep feelings. By identifying the background to the feelings one perceives the counterpart to have, one can often find opportunities to change the prerequisites of the conflict's future course.

The fourth question, "What can I do to enable a constructive change in my counterpart's feelings?," implies operationalization of the insights one has gained through posing the previous three questions. Here one sees the counterpart's feelings as a variable dependent on a number of factors that can be changed and reflects upon the possibilities to act so that the conditions for the counterpart's feelings can undergo a positive transformation. This can be accomplished directly or indirectly. The direct approach implies that one invites the counterpart to articulate his/her feelings and facilitates this by listening carefully without dismissing, diagnosing or judging what is said. This act *per se* often elicits a change in the counterpart's feelings, especially if he/she hasn't been fully aware of what emotions are involved. If there are important reasons underlying the counterpart's feelings, then an articulation of these feelings is only the first step in a process of working through the situation. The indirect approach implies that one – through symbolic acts, attitude changes, listening and the like – tries to convey a message that the counterpart can receive on an emotional level.

#### *F. Personality traits*

It isn't self-evident that people reflect upon the first question of this sub-theme, "What kind of person is my counterpart?" Many are so busy thinking about what has happened, with what the counterpart has done, and what they feel and think about this, that they fail to back up and consider the counterpart as a person. Illustrating this with interview excerpts is, of course, difficult, but in the following case we see fairly clearly that the interviewee has no picture of the type of person her counterpart is:

*How would you describe the woman that came? How would you describe her as a person?*

Well, she was a young person maybe 25. I guess I was 50 then, about. She was, well, hungry for the job, and ... she was, we thought she was bad, really, I wasn't the only one who had disputes with her.

[...]

*Could you describe her a bit more?*

Well, what should I say, she came from a folk high school. She had very little money, it seemed to us, she didn't have a car. She didn't come to work on time and such. And ... I ... We thought she was a very unfriendly person. I don't know ... she had two kids. I guess she probably had problems of her own. #A38

The interviewee's answers are vague and searching, and we can assume that she has no conception of who the counterpart is as a person that might play a crucial role in her experience and interpretation of the conflict. In Chapter 4 we will delve more deeply into various kinds of conceptions of other people and into what these differences mean for conflict experiences. At present, however, will limit ourselves to saying that some individuals hardly reflect upon other people's character traits, attitudes, motives, value system and perspective, while others have variously detailed pictures of and ideas on such matters.

The second question, "What sides of my counterpart do I like/dislike?," is important as it can allow one to choose to bear in mind the counterpart's positive sides, thereby partly decreasing one's own antipathy (to the extent that it exists) and partly paving the way for a more constructive relationship with the other. Strong emotional dissociation often leads to efforts to limit contact with the counterpart, which often aggravates the course of the conflict.

The third question, "Are there important underlying reasons for why my counterpart is the way he/she is?," implies that one isn't content with merely attributing certain traits to the counterpart, but is also searching for underlying causes of such traits. This can give a deeper understanding of why the counterpart behaves in a certain way; it might even lead to sympathy for the predicament in which the counterpart finds him-/herself. We will return to this question in Chapter 4.

A differentiated picture of the counterpart as a person can give an opportunity to begin reflecting upon the fourth question, "What can I do to reinforce my counterpart's positive sides and reduce the importance of his/her negative sides?" In order to think along such lines at all, one must see the counterpart as complex and changeable, or at least see the role the counterpart plays in one's own life as changeable.

## The Self

### *Introduction*

Although people involved in conflicts normally spend more time reflecting upon the counterpart than upon themselves, the main theme "The Self" has been divided into more sub-themes than has the main theme "The Other." This is because the potential for access to in-depth information is greater for one's own inner processes than for those of others. We could, in principle, divide

- 1. What kind of person is my counterpart?**
- 2. What sides of my counterpart do I like/dislike?**
- 3. Are there important underlying reasons for why my counterpart is the way he/she is?**
- 4. What can I do to reinforce my counterpart's positive sides and reduce the importance of his/her negative sides?**

"The Other" into as many sub-themes as "The Self," but such a fine-grained division of reflections about the counterpart would probably be perceived as unrealistic.

### *G. Behavior*

One normally knows how one has behaved during the course of a conflict. It isn't at all certain, however, that one has tried to observe one's own actions from the perspective of others. Posing the question "How have I acted during the conflict?" implies an attempt to view the course of the conflict as a whole and to – within the framework of the whole – formulate precisely what one has and hasn't done. In this way, one can possibly perceive aspects of one's own attitude of which one has previously been unaware. For example, one's own attitude and actions may have had consequences – for others and for the very course of the conflict – that one has never previously considered. It is even more important to reflect upon the question of how one is currently acting, i.e., to direct some attention to how one actually reacts and acts in ongoing interactions. If one's actions in a situation aren't consciously chosen, one tends to follow relatively "automatic" patterns of reaction and behavior. Experiments in social psychology show that a large part of our behavior consists of "automatic" reactions, i.e., we have certain "behavior programs" that can be triggered by certain situation-dependent factors, such that we fail to consciously perceive both the signals evoking the reactions and the fact that our own behavior is a reaction to a set of circumstances (see Bargh, 1997). For example, it is not uncommon that we spontaneously dislike certain specific features of other people's attitudes and react to these with negative body language that creates a greater distance between us and the other. This can occur without our being fully aware of the change in our own behavior.

- 1. How have I acted during the conflict?**
- 2. What do I think about the way I acted?**
- 3. Why did I behave as I did during the conflict?**
- 4. What can I do to change my attitude?**

It is often quite difficult to sort out for oneself the degree to which one's own actions have contributed to a conflict. Once aware of this difficulty, however, one is inclined to do something to clarify one's own role, as has, e.g., Gun in the following excerpt:

I was already attending the organizational psychology course then so I knew that I could use my teachers to mirror the situation a bit, and mostly it felt important for me to what's my role in this, and what's the system's fault, 'cause I felt terribly excluded when I came in that way and these people I'd met before and shown my nice side, they almost wouldn't speak to me. #A8

Regardless of whether one is aware of one's own actions, they can have consequences one doesn't perceive, simply because one hasn't seen them in the larger context of the course of the conflict. Thus, there are always discoveries to be made when beginning to ask questions about one's own behavior.

The following excerpt from Marianne's interview shows, among other things, how it can be when viewing one's own attitude as a contributing factor in the course of a conflict:

And at first I like didn't understand what was happening. 'Cause when you get a mental punch from someone you actually like a lot you're really so surprised at first. And then you get angry, and then it got to be that I couldn't be in the same room, as soon as she came near I got completely, well, my

whole body started shaking and tingling, awfully unpleasant. And I think that others sitting in the same room as us could like feel the atmosphere, how it changed when we were in the same room. And it certainly wasn't easy for her either, 'cause I didn't know how I should act, so one moment I would bite first like before I got bitten, and the other I'd be like a puppy wagging its tail just to get patted. So she probably didn't know how she should act either. #A34

The first question must be answered before one can seriously begin to reflect upon the second, "What do I think about the way I acted?" This involves consciously deciding whether one has actually behaved in the way one deems best.

The third question, "Why did I behave as I did during the conflict?," leads us into the vast area of self-knowledge and to a number of the questions treated in the following sections. Causes of one's own behavior can be found in the external situation, the internal situation (e.g., stress, circumstances of private life, frame of mind), personality traits, various psychological motives, interpretations, opinions, the value system, cultural norms, etc. There are not infrequently important factors underlying one's own behavior that are not directly related to the conflict situation. If one wishes to change one's own attitude in certain respects, insight into underlying causes can facilitate a more effective strategy for change.

The fourth question, "What can I do to change my attitude?," implies that one is using instincts – derived from reflections upon the previous questions – to search for methods to change undesired behavior patterns in oneself. Habitual behaviors are often difficult to change because of their automatic nature. Thus, in order to deal with them, one must often devise various tricks and techniques, e.g., asking others to give reminders, praying regularly that the behavior in question will change, or focusing on a signal that can heighten one's awareness in situations that usually trigger the unwanted behavior.

#### *H. One's own conflict issues*

This sub-theme overlaps to some extent with the second sub-theme of the main theme "The Conflict," but it can be worthwhile to look more closely at one's own experience of which problems and issues have been important. Much of the literature on conflict management is based on the notion that conflicts arise when people have incompatible goals. In practice, however, goals are often not so clear, and conflicts frequently arise when one or more parties behave in a way that makes life unbearable for others. Thus, it's not surprising that many of our interviewees did not spontaneously talk about their conflicts in terms of their own goals or the central conflict issues. They instead more often describe a series of events and circumstances they have experienced as highly frustrating. This might mean that it's actually quite important to consciously consider what issues, circumstances and goals one feels are important.

Without a clear idea about what is important for oneself in the work situation, one tends to react fairly automatically, without

- 1. What issues, concerns, interests and goals were/ are important to me?**
- 2. Do I think that what seemed important to me is really what I want to regard as important?**
- 3. Are there important underlying reasons why I feel that certain issues are important to me?**
- 4. What can I do to re-evaluate what I perceive as important goals and needs so that they better correspond to my deepest convictions, feelings and values?**

considering a way to begin to realize a situation one actually desires and would enjoy being in.

The first question of this sub-theme is therefore "What issues, concerns, interests and goals were/are important to me?" The question implies that one is looking inside oneself for what one feels are the most important conflict issues. In the conflict management literature, investigators often work with the concept "presented problem," comparing it with the underlying general interests and universal human needs that matter in the conflict. These are important distinctions, but many individuals who have become involved in a conflict even fail to formulate for themselves a clear picture of a "presented problem." Thus, the first step is to try to work out what one experiences as the important problems and issues in the conflict. One can then continue digging for deeper and more general interests and needs that might underlie the concrete issues of the day.<sup>9</sup>

The second question, "Do I think that what seemed important to me is really what I *want* to regard as important?," implies a critical evaluation of whether the goals and problem formulations one has been engaged in thus far actually correspond to what one wishes to prioritize. When consciously reflecting upon one's own priorities – as opposed to simply reacting to concrete situations – one is more inclined to take into account long-term goals and interests. As a result, one can be willing to, e.g., overlook certain sources of irritation or make an extra effort to repair a frustrating relationship, because a long-term overall goal can create the motivation needed to endure certain disagreeable circumstances.

The third question, "Are there important underlying reasons why I feel that certain issues are important to me?," invites consideration of why one's priorities are as they are. Perhaps one tends to be oversensitive to tactless comments, perhaps one has a great need for acknowledgement and recognition beyond that which others can be expected to understand and deliver, perhaps one's priorities are overly steered by conventional ideas about how things should be. This question implies a reinterpretation of one's own conception of what is important – transforming it from a taken-for-granted constant to one of many variables in a conflict situation. As concerns solving a perceived conflict situation, reevaluation of what one feels is important can be as crucial as changing the external circumstances.

The fourth question, "What can I do to reevaluate what I perceive as important goals and needs so that they better correspond to my deepest convictions, feelings and values?," implies an active reflection upon what one can do to transform one's own conceptions of what constitutes important goals and issues (see Chapter 4).

### *I. Emotions*

Emotions are what make conflicts important and intense experiences for us, but it's not certain that we can distinguish what we really feel from what the feelings mean. If emotions aren't articulated and allowed to appear as clear mental gestalts, it's difficult to relate to them. One is then at the mercy of one's own emotions, which guide one's experience. Naturally, emotions during conflicts are primarily negative: frustration, worry, anger, contempt, shame, degradation,

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<sup>9</sup> See the discussion in Chapter 4 as well.

dejection, stress, etc., etc. Emotions are often transient – if one waits they eventually fade and are replaced by other emotions. It's unnecessary to discuss here the circumstances under which this doesn't occur, but suffice it to say that negative experiences sometimes lead to long-standing negative emotions.

People who never ask themselves what they felt and are feeling during the course of a conflict probably don't experience emotions less intensely, but they fail to express them in words or pictures. In many interviews, we see indirectly that the interviewee is quite frustrated as a result of the conflict events, but these feelings are either never expressed in words or expressed in vague terms such as "it was tough." Our impression is that some of these people suffer greatly from being engulfed in negative emotions that aren't expressed in words and that therefore cannot be accessed and worked through constructively.

It isn't often possible to capture in an excerpt what failing to articulate one's feelings means. The following passage, however, illustrates part of what we are referring to:

*You must have felt pretty pressured when you went to the occupational health service?*

Yes, but I didn't have the strength to go to work.

*How did you feel then?*

How did I feel, I don't know how I felt! ...

*Did it upset you or something?*

[silence, she becomes upset, interviewer's note]

*What's the worst thing you remember?*

Well, I don't know, I thought it was horrible that she went and talked behind my back and then wouldn't admit it and that the boss didn't care about it and fire her. She'd had so many warnings, but she's still around. #A26

The first question, "What were my emotions during the conflict?," implies that one is formulating for oneself a nuanced picture of the emotions elicited by the conflict. This also includes positioning these emotions in relation to other aspects of the course of the conflict and the circumstances. In this way, emotions are brought up to consciousness, which is a prerequisite of cognitive processing. Since strong emotions often dominate the immediate experience so completely that there is no room for objective reflection upon what is happening, such reflection must often wait until the storm of feelings is over – until the acute situation has subsided.

The second question, "Were/are my emotions appropriate and were/are they good for me?," implies that one is forming an opinion on one's own emotions, considering whether they were appropriate and whether one feels that the emotions one has/had are right and proper. Sometimes the conclusion is that one's emotions were on the mark: the disappointment, anger, or fear one felt was totally appropriate and showed that one's contact with the events was quite authentic. On other occasions one might conclude that one's emotional reactions were disproportionate to the events occurring in one's situation, and that these reactions perhaps received fuel from completely different sources (see the excerpt below for an example). Thus, in the latter case, one might conclude that there is reason to deal with one's own feelings and moods.

- 1. What were my emotions during the conflict?**
- 2. Were/are my emotions appropriate and were/are they good for me?**
- 3. Why did I feel the way I did?**
- 4. What can I do to change my emotional state?**

The third question, "Why did I feel the way I did?," leads one to search for various factors contributing to the emotions that were evoked, which can result in the discovery of circumstances crucial to how one feels.

The excerpt below illustrates how someone can realize that an emotional reaction has sources other than the counterpart's behavior. Joan has just told about an incident where she refused to obey her boss' order that she should receive special training in the use of a certain piece of equipment. Joan felt that this order was terribly insulting.

I knew I was taking a tremendous risk, that in effect I was refusing an order, being insubordinate to my supervisor, saying no. I realized that our relationship was not one of mutuality, of professionals collaborating together, but of a parent-child relationship and it had to change. I also realized that my reaction to her was so intense, that I was reacting as if she had abused me the way my family abused me and the truth was she had not, that she wasn't skilled in how to give me feedback but she wasn't abusive. #B14

If one finally concludes that one's feelings are not desirable, then the fourth question remains, "What can I do to change my emotional state?" This represents one of the most sophisticated mental competencies. It requires that one can observe one's own emotions, form an opinion on them, and actually deal with them in a way that leads to their transformation. Below is an example of a person who is actively managing her feelings.

*This is obviously very frustrating. How do you deal with your frustration, both immediately and afterwards?*

I scream, what else? I work out of my home, so I can do that! When I was married, I also extraverted it all to my compassionate listener husband! I also fuss and fume while I muck the horses' stalls before dinner time. By the time they walk into their clean stalls, feed bins full, buckets clean and full, I feel cleansed too. It's my daily therapy for whatever is producing rough edges. #B54

This woman isn't consumed and controlled by her emotions. Instead, she realizes that she has them, has decided what to do about them and developed her own methods for venting them, thereby achieving the state of mind she desires. The following is an additional example:

I tried to make the most of ... tried to actively enjoy all the support I got, and for a time I talked with a woman who'd had a stroke a few years back and had had a hard time recovering and she's still not so well. She told me that when things were at rock bottom she'd had a plus and minus book and every day she wrote down plus and minus things. So I did the same thing and the small pleasant things disappear so easily in all the big gloomy things, so it was a really great idea. And if you look in the book it puts things in perspective. #A34

Some, though very few, people are able to observe and work through their emotions in the moment, thereby affecting the course of the conflict while it's occurring. Our interview with Kathy illustrates this:

First my reaction is to deny and defend. Do I feel like I am being attacked? Yes. Then I calm down, and my thoughts head toward understanding as I try to explain what is obvious to me. Have you tried to explain metaphor to a fundamentalist? Or clouds to a sightless person? It feels like that. I explain. She is blank. I explain that to me, my impatience has nothing to do with anyone else; no one needs to change a thing. The only one who has anything to do about that is me. If others are hurt, I shall apologise. And when I go to them to do so, it is nothing. Nothing at all. They don't know what I am talking about. It is all in Anne's world.

*This is a very beautiful section, but its economy in formulation means I'm not completely sure I understood each element.*

*Do you mean like this:*

- 1. You get criticized by Anne.*
- 2. Your spontaneous reaction is to deny blame, and to defend yourself.*
- 3. You notice that you feel attacked.*
- 4. You deal with this feeling of being attacked, and therefore calm down.*
- 5. You start trying to understand the meaning-making behind the critical words from Anne.*
- 6. You try to explain to Anne why you did what you did.*
- 7. You see that your explanation doesn't get through to Anne.*
- 8. You get impatient because your efforts don't give the desired result, in the form of mutual understanding.*
- 9. You notice your impatience, and deal with it by telling yourself that everything is OK, and that your impatience is entirely your own responsibility, and that if others feel hurt, you'll simply go an apologise.*
- 10. You go to the people to whom Anne seem to have implied that you behaved negatively, and apologise.*
- 11. These people don't understand what you are talking about, they don't feel that you have been rude.*

*Did I get it right?*

Yes, you have it exactly right. Good listening skills. #B58

## *J. Interpretations*

Most of us form conceptions about why things happen and particularly about why other people behave as they do. This is especially pronounced when others act in a way that we find frustrating. The assumptions a person makes about others' intentions and the causal relations underlying events are always based on this particular person's own conception of what is happening and what is important. We all have our own story, in which the specific circumstances, concerns and roles of importance to us constitute the foreground of the story and therefore the platform for our interpretations of causal relations and the motives of others. We don't always consider the fact that other people's stories have completely different ingredients, of which we are probably unaware. Naturally, interpretations of causal

relations and others' intentions can be made consciously or unconsciously. "Unconscious interpretations" are suppositions held by a person who is unaware that he/she has made an assumption and that this assumption is perhaps not well founded. Such interpretations can have great importance during a conflict and can be extremely resistant to change. For example, if a person is convinced that a colleague is determined to see him/her leave the workplace, this conviction can be so strong that nothing the colleague says or does can make the person in question change his/her interpretation.

The first question, "What interpretations did I make during the conflict?," presupposes that one is aware that interpretations are just that – interpretations. The question implies that one is reflecting

**1. What interpretations did I make during the conflict?**

**2. Were my interpretations well-founded?**

**3. Are there important reasons for my making the specific interpretations I made?**

**4. How can I test whether my interpretations are appropriate?**



upon the picture one has created of, e.g., the counterpart's motives or the reason for certain events, and distinguishing assumptions about hidden causal relations from what one can know with reasonable certainty.

We use an excerpt from the interview with Marianne to illustrate how a person can express an understanding that his/her view is subjective:

*This about her backbiting and claiming that [certain colleagues] think such and such, what's it about, what do you think makes her ... ?*

I don't know, sometimes it feels like that's exactly what I'm sitting and doing with her too really.

*How so?*

Talk ... about ... though I try not to ... I try to say that this is my picture of what's happening. But everything I say of course is seen through my eyes, and if you saw it from another perspective it would probably seem very different ... Right, sure it would. #A34

If Marianne hadn't been aware that her interpretation is a subjective view, she would perhaps have run a slander campaign against her boss. Had this been the case, however, she wouldn't have thought of it as slander, since she would never have considered that her interpretation might be colored by her own emotions, opinions and biased access to information.

The second question, "Were my interpretations well-founded?," implies that one is examining whether one's own interpretations are reasonable. This includes asking oneself whether there are alternative interpretations and, if so, what factors speak for one or the other being most reasonable.

The third question, "Are there important reasons for my making the specific interpretations I made?," is more introspective and concerns asking oneself whether there are particular patterns in the interpretations one tends to make and what reasons might underlie tendencies to interpret things in a certain way. For example, one might discover – as did one of our study participants – that previous experience of telephone harassment and anonymous threats can result in an exaggerated tendency to interpret the attitudes of one's current colleagues as possible signs of a potential for violence.

The fourth question, "How can I test whether my interpretations are appropriate?," implies that one is actively taking the initiative to test the plausibility of one's own interpretations. To do this, of course, one must be aware that one has made interpretations and be prepared to question them and subject them to examination. A simple way to test one's interpretations – which for some reason occurs infrequently – is to tell a counterpart in the conflict about them and ask for comments. If this is impossible – e.g., because the counterpart would find one's interpretations highly insulting or because he/she generally refuses to discuss the problem – one can test these interpretations by obtaining more information and by speaking with others who are familiar with the situation, but who seem to be relatively impartial observers.

The following excerpt from the interview with Suzie illustrates a few aspects of interpretations:

*Can you describe to me what kind of person he is?*

He seems to be as insecure as are most folks. I find it odd that he speaks "baby talk" when talking to his wife. He seems like a nice person most of the time. However, I once heard him say some very bad things about a guy who got a promotion when he thought he should have gotten it.

To tell you the truth I sense an anger that I suspect (from watching television) could develop into the profile for the folks who walk into their office one morning and shoot everybody.

Knowing and thinking this, why would I even try and approach someone like this? I'm not sure, but I do sometimes have a fear from the angry words, and angry words while striking the keyboard. That's why I chose to send an email. I did not want the situation to lead to loud voices. #B50

Suzie interprets her counterpart's attitude as an indication that he might resort to violence. She seems to be vaguely aware that this is an interpretation that isn't necessarily correct, but she doesn't appear to actively reflect upon its validity. This excerpt also shows how important interpretations can be for a person's attitude. Suzie is actually afraid of what the counterpart might be capable of and therefore avoids direct contact with him. In this case, her interpretation (whether reasonable or ungrounded) contributes to the course of the conflict in that the parties don't communicate directly with each other.

### *K. Value judgments*

By "value judgments" we mean the feeling of either liking or disliking something or someone. Thus, we are dealing with what emotional attitude one has toward something/someone rather than the details of one's interpretations. Recent research on the brain indicates that sensory impressions are processed in parallel by the "emotional brain" (the amygdala) and the "thinking brain" (the neocortex) (Goleman, 1985).<sup>10</sup> Processing in the emotional brain is considerably faster than that in the neocortex and gives experiences their emotional meaning. The process as such isn't accessible for conscious experience, only its results in the form of emotions, moods and value judgments. This implies that our brain constantly generates emotions and value judgments that become part of our experience. The question is, to what extent do we notice and relate to these products?

- 1. What value judgments did I make during the conflict?**
- 2. Did I pass good value judgments?**
- 3. Are there any important reasons why I felt as I did?**
- 4. What can I do to change my thoughts?**

A person who is completely unaware that attitudes, value judgments and opinions are generated through a spontaneous process tends to be steered by these products. One's opinions and feelings are central to one's experience. That which one feels is experienced as a mental constant – a part of who one is. Such poorly considered value judgments are often highly resistant to other types of challenges. If someone else questions whether one's value judgment is well founded, this is experienced as an attack against one's own self (which it is in a certain sense, as here the self *is* the value judgment, among other things). The tendency then is to react defensively, using various reactions to defend one's value judgment, e.g., rationalizations (i.e., verbal arguments supporting the correctness of what one thinks), counterattacks, diversion, dissociation, etc.

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<sup>10</sup> We aren't qualified to judge the validity of Goleman's results or of his interpretation of other research. However, his interpretation is supported by a series of psychology experiments conducted by John Bargh and colleagues (for an overview, see Bargh, 1997). Bargh summarizes his findings as follows: "[...] everything one encounters is preconsciously screened and classified as either good or bad, within a fraction of a second after encountering it" (Bargh, 1997, p. 22f.).

The first step in consciously relating to one's own thinking is to notice the value judgments one's brain has produced during the conflict. The question "What value judgments did I make during the conflict?" implies reflection upon what one thought and a more precise examination of what aroused this approval vs. disapproval as well as the more exact qualities of these value judgments. One theme of particular importance is the value judgements placed on oneself as a consequence of the conflict events. For example, an inability to assert one's own needs can lead to strong negative judgements about oneself. Noticing the judgments one passes on oneself is often an important step toward restoring healthy self-esteem:

If I can't get any farther with this then I'll have to try something else, if for no other reason than to satisfy myself that he can't come along and tramp on me. I'm not gonna go around here like a big zero, like something the cat brought in for the rest of my life no I've gotta move on. And it also feels like a, ... even if it is a little slap in the face for him, I got a very, very good letter of recommendation from where I was while I was away. And this also shows that the problem wasn't with me. And that's really felt very good, that I can actually do an excellent job at other places. #A30

The second question, "Did I pass good value judgments?," implies an examination of whether the spontaneous thoughts one has had are well founded and whether they are in accord with those values and norms one wishes to live by. Spontaneous dislike, for example, can arise when a certain colleague looks or acts like a schoolteacher one detested. If one discovers mechanisms such as this at work in oneself, one might wish to control these spontaneous thoughts so that one's own peculiarities don't "spoil" relationships with others. Spontaneous thoughts can also be products of intuition, i.e., one has picked up signs and signals through channels that aren't accessible by commonsense or conscious reflection, but that are nonetheless quite accurate. Many of our interviewees reported feeling an inexplicable uneasiness at their very first contact with a new workplace, but could not rationally explain this reaction for themselves. Some of them have later regretted not listening to their intuition and declining the job. Our point here is not that one should disregard all spontaneous thoughts, but that it can be advantageous to actively take a stand on them, either by using common sense or deciding to trust one's intuition.

In order to do something about such reaction patterns, it might be necessary to ask the third question, "Are there any important reasons why I felt as I did?," and thereby look for the sources of one's spontaneous thoughts. If one can find such reasons, it is generally easier to discern those circumstances that one believes aren't involved and to thereby, according to one's own understanding, react more appropriately in relation to others.

The fourth question, "What can I do to change my thoughts?," represents the most advanced capacity in this sub-theme. It involves deciding that one actually doesn't wish to think in a certain way and proceeding by actively managing one's own thoughts so that they can somehow be transformed. A good example of what this can mean in practice is found in the following excerpt:

One coping strategy. I want to like Jane. So I look for something to like about her. Right in the very moment I am so furious. It absolutely works. If I concentrate on her generosity, then in that moment I like her. However, (big HOWEVER) I have never been successful when she is in my face about it. This only works in situations where she is just being generally dense or disruptive. Second coping strategy: try to understand what is going on for her. If I can understand, I relax and find compassion again. It would go something like this. 'Shit she is being obnoxious. Look at how she screeches out over three aisles of desks to ask Barry if he can help her with the thingee there. Why does she do that? [...] I remember she still goes to her ex-husband's house at Christmas and he cooks for her and takes

care of her. Does she miss that in her life? Is a woman only a real woman who has a man to care for her? How fortunate I am to have one who cares for me. I know how she must feel' And presto. I am out of the antagonism, just like that. It's work and it works. #B58

Such a high degree of self-awareness and ability to change one's own thoughts through direct intervention is, however, extremely uncommon. A more common approach involves increased understanding of the underlying reasons for why the counterpart behaves as he/she does (i.e., themes C3, D3, E3 and F3, dealt with above). One example of this is taken from the interview with Joan:

I guess I also try to hold her in compassion. I'm understanding more and more how she must have come from a very critical and shaming family, perhaps where there was a lot of raging and screaming, and that inside she is very scared and tried to do everything right so she won't be criticized. Sometimes I can grasp what it must be like to be her to live in such a rigid way, to be so driven and perfectionistic and I can have compassion for her, even as I stand and just watch her. And I also surrender her to do her life as she needs to. #B14

### *L. Values*

This section deals with the general values and norms to which a person feels an obligation. These constitute what is sometimes an almost invisible, though still crucial, foundation for the person's perceptions, interpretations, opinions and actions. If one is completely unaware that one has definite values and norms, then one cannot see them as variables in the conflict, but is instead inclined to judge others without reflection. For example, a person working at a hospital might view good patient care as a highly prioritized value and a conflict might be based on the fact that, according to this person, others don't properly live up to this value.

The first question, "What values and norms played a role for me during the conflict?," deals with clarifying what values/norms have been important for oneself in the context of the conflict. It is a prerequisite of the subsequent questions, since the answer must be established if one is to proceed and examine these values/ norms.

The second question, "Do I feel that the values and norms that have guided my actions are really those I wish to stand for?," implies a scrutinizing of the values/norms one has represented in order to determine whether they actually correspond to what one wishes to stand for given one's deepest convictions and feelings. If one examines the half-conscious or unconscious values/norms one has acted on in everyday life in light of a more well-considered life philosophy, it isn't at all certain that one will find them valid and desirable.

The third question, "Are there important reasons for my having the norms and values I have?," is aimed at discovering the underlying reasons for why one has developed a certain system of values and norms. Various aspects of one's personal background – the religious, social and

- 1. What values and norms played a role for me during the conflict?**
- 2. Do I feel that the values and norms that have guided my actions are really those I wish to stand for?**
- 3. Are there important reasons for my having the norms and values I have?**
- 4. What can I do to develop my system of norms and values?**

cultural environment in which one grew up or experiences from one's education and previous occupations – might have helped to form certain norms and values. Awareness of how one's own background has marked one's system of values and norms can contribute to greater tolerance for the fact that other people have different values/norms. It can also enable one to revise values/norms that one has accepted without close consideration, but that perhaps do not accord with what one actually wishes to stand for.

The fourth question, "What can I do to develop my system of norms and values?," implies that one is taking responsibility for further development of one's own norms/values by reflecting upon how one can tangibly transform them. This can sometimes be as simple as sitting down with pen and paper and writing down things one feels are important, then ranking the items in order of priority:

*What, ultimately, makes work meaningful for you?*

Doing something that leads to development, either for an individual, a group of individuals or for the entire organization. But many years ago I did an exercise for myself, to really penetrate things I was good at and things that excited me and then I prioritized them. What turned out topping the list was actually – making people happy. Oh I'm so idealistic! If other people feel good, then I feel good too. Then came all forms of development, writing, developing new ideas, having enriching discussions, writing funny melodies for anniversaries, singing, being with children, with people. #B56

A classic means of trying to change one's own value system is through prayer, which can serve as a regular reminder of fundamental values and of the importance of realizing them in everyday life. If one realizes that one's own system of values and norms is the result of a culture-specific socialization process, a natural conclusion is that it might be a good idea to consciously expose oneself to other systems, compare different values and norms, and in this way form a wider frame of reference for the transformation of one's own values and norms.

### *M. Personality traits*

Conflicts always offer an opportunity to take a good look in the mirror and see oneself as a person. This can be desirable for many reasons. One reason is to reflect upon how one – through one's personality – has contributed to the conflict events, both negatively and positively. Another is that the key to resolution of a frustrating situation isn't always found in the outside world – in a counterpart or external circumstances that should be changed. Instead, the most fruitful and satisfying alternative is sometimes to change oneself. A third reason has nothing to do with the conflict. If personal development is an important goal in a person's life, then conflict experiences provide good opportunities to gain self-insight and often give the necessary impetus to active efforts for transformation.<sup>11</sup>

Relatively few of our interviewees discussed spontaneously how

- 1. Which of my personality traits are relevant in this context?**
- 2. Are there any aspects of my personality that I would like to change?**
- 3. Are there important reasons for my having the personality traits I have?**
- 4. How can I change the aspects of my personality that I wish to change?**

<sup>11</sup> See also Jordan, 1998a.

their own personality affected the conflict story.

The first question in this sub-theme, "Which of my personality traits are relevant in this context?," deals with formulating for oneself what aspects of one's own personality might have played a role during the conflict. This could involve personality traits that have influenced how one has acted or not acted or traits that one knows cause others to react in various ways. As in the case of Lisa, conflict experiences can also be used to increase self-knowledge:

If anything, I learned I am not easy sometimes to get along with and close off people when I get scared or frustrated. I have always been this way, but never really fully analyzed why and realized that maybe this was why my parents were aggravated with me. In the same respect, I found someone, when I am myself (even when around my parents, who disapproved), who likes me for who I am or being myself, which is my boss Jim. I gained an understanding that I am not what my parents perceived me as; a person with a chip on her shoulder. #B48

The second question, "Are there any aspects of my personality that I would like to change?," implies that one is viewing one's own personality as an object of conscious consideration, i.e., one sees it as a variable toward which people might have different feelings, and as something one can imagine wishing to change. This is hardly a matter of course, as most people probably take the basic aspects of their personalities for granted, and therefore view all criticism of their own personalities traits as attacks on their basic identity.

The third question, "Are there important reasons for my having the personality traits I have?," is aimed at discovering the underlying reason for why one has developed certain personality traits. Naturally, personalities are far too complex to allow final answers to this question, but sometimes the search itself can help one to identify important key experiences, unconscious basic assumptions ("scripts," see, e.g., Berne, 1974), and other factors that can be reinterpreted or transcended in other ways. In the excerpt below, Inge states that he is more inclined than most to react to the informal roles in a work team. He also has ideas as to why this is the case:

I think the whole thing comes down to the fact that I was bullied in school and that makes it... The worst thing with the bullying isn't really the fact of being bullied but that you're not accepted, so a great need to be accepted, have an identity within a group and plus that you don't want to end up on the bottom. [laugh]

*Do you think this makes you extra alert to those kinds of constellations?*

If you've been bullied? Uh ... I don't know, it depends on the person who's been bullied and how he or she has chosen to handle the situation. I chose to ...well chose ... it turned out that I isolated myself and then started to read a lot and then I took on an intellectualizing attitude to it all, plus when you end up outside the group, another way to handle it, that's to question the group right, so that I don't want to be there anyway, "they look sour," said the fox. [...] I feel like a great need to define the various people in a group, who is what and like who's a friend and who's an enemy and quickly establish my position so that it's established. #A9

The fourth question, "How can I change the aspects of my personality that I wish to change?," represents the full development of a flexible relation to one's own personality, through actively searching for ways to change traits one wishes to change.

Doris was one of the people we interviewed who had reflected upon how her own personality played a role in the course of the conflict. She had been subjected to severe harassment by her

immediate supervisor. In the interview, she gives a detailed account of her personal background and how it has affected her. We have chosen a few central excerpts from this story:

I think part of what last year was about was learning to stand up for myself for the first time in my life - to meet conflict regarding myself head on and deal with it. I can deal with conflict with others, but when it comes to my own, I had a difficult time, especially with "authority figures." [...] As a small child, my father was in the military. He was abroad for several years, and I didn't even know him. We lived with my grandparents. I had a happy life on a farm. I had a swing set, lots of cousins, lots of farm animals to play with. When my father returned, we started moving all over the place. My father was a military man, and ruled the roost. I was scared of him. [...] When I was young, to my sensitive, anxiety prone self, love was withdrawn if I didn't do as was expected - still is but I deal with it better. [...] I have, for the most part, been scared of every person I ever worked for. I would have done anything to have pleased them - scared of withdrawal of love all over again? Perhaps. I succeeded in keeping bosses happy all of these years by figuring out what made them happy and making sure they had it. [...] John has been such a challenge - one that I took personal in the beginning, but have learned from. [...] I believe our larger problems started when I was offered the two properties, but the problems actually began prior to that. I didn't stand up to him, and I allowed him to "mess with my head" [John's expression]. I think I may have had "doormat" tattooed across my head - eager to please, willing to stand in 98 degree weather in a business suit and pantyhose because John thought I should. I just look at it now as a learning experience. #B42

Doris certainly doesn't express directly in words that she has strategies for working through her tendency to be too accommodating to others, but her self-insight probably implies that this is a topic of constant interest whenever she is confronted with situations approximating the boundaries of her integrity.

### *N. Perspective*

One of the most difficult tasks in the search for self-insight is to try to picture the perspectives one uses when perceiving, interpreting and reacting to events and circumstances. With 'perspective' we mean a system of ideas, beliefs, values, patterns of interpretation, concepts, etc. that together create a conception of the world, a discourse or a kind of personal or collective paradigm. All experiences are interpreted with the help of the concepts and structures of meaning supplied by one's own perspective. This implies that a certain perspective makes certain interpretations possible, likely and meaningful, whereas other interpretations are impossible, unlikely or meaningless. Thus, one's personal perspective constitutes an important filter, but also implies an active interpretative process, the result of which varies across individuals even if the information is the same at the outset. An individual's perspective is formed through a number of different processes, including socialization into a certain culture and language, education within a certain field, life experiences of various kinds, personality type, membership in groups characterized by particular discourses and value systems, etc., etc.

- 1. What kind of perspective do I use when observing the course of the conflict?**
- 2. Do I think the perspective I normally use is appropriate?**
- 3. Why is my perspective as it is?**
- 4. What can I do to develop my own perspective and be more aware of how it shapes my interpretations?**

During conflicts, insight into the nature of one's own perspective can be important, since differences in perspective can imply that one person finds certain issues crucial and certain

behaviors irritating, while another person notices completely different aspects. For example, a person trained in accounting might have an entirely different attitude toward the importance of careful documentation than does an innovative entrepreneur.

The first question in this sub-theme, "What kind of perspective do I use when observing the course of the conflict?," encourages the individual to search for characteristic aspects of his/her own perspective. Very few of our interviewees spontaneously mentioned particular features of their own perspective as an explanation for why they feel that certain issues are more important than others or why they have the feelings they do about certain events. Of course the question is especially important when the parties involved in the conflict have different basic perspectives due to their different, e.g., nationalities, social class affiliations, professions, or personality types.

The second question, "Do I think the perspective I normally use is appropriate?," encourages examination of whether the perspective one habitually uses is appropriate to the situation at hand. In this way, it is possible to realize that one's own perspective represents a limited way of looking at the situation and that completely different interpretations are possible. At this point the idea of considering and comparing the perspectives of others presents itself immediately.

The third question, "Why is my perspective as it is?," implies that one is searching for the roots of one's own perspective in order to gain insight into why one sees things in a particular way. This can lead to greater dissociation from one's own favorite perspective and perhaps to curiosity about and openness to alternative perspectives.

The fourth question, "What can I do to develop my own perspective and be more aware of how it shapes my interpretations?," deals with ways to purposefully transform one's own perspective, or at least heighten one's awareness of how it continuously affects one's interpretations. The simplest, and in many ways most effective, strategy for exposing and changing the feature of one's own perspective is to listen actively to the interpretations and feedback of others. Naturally, more long-range strategies for transforming one's perspective might involve attending training programs and classes that strengthen new areas of knowledge and experience, or changing jobs.

## The Setting

### *O. External circumstances*

Our interview material reveals great differences in how interviewees begin their case stories. As mentioned above, there were many who seemed to have trouble organizing their experiences into a coherent picture of what had happened. Even among those who provided a clear and intelligible picture of the conflict, many plunge straight into the critical incidents without giving any background description of the workplace organization, culture, financial limits, etc. It seems reasonable to conclude that, in many cases, the individuals haven't actively considered whether the conflict is also related to various kinds of external circumstances. The first question, "What external circumstances are of importance in understanding the nature of the conflict?," concerns asking oneself whether there is something in the workplace's organizational structure, history, work strain, financial conditions, etc., that plays a crucial role in the conflict's origin or character.



If these kinds of factors aren't taken into account when one perceives and reacts to a conflict situation, one is probably more inclined to put the blame for what has happened on the people involved. Below is a simple example of how it can be when a person is aware that external frameworks play a role in the conflict's origin and course. Marianne is employed at the offices of an association:

Well you see the board and its chairperson are appointed at the annual meeting, and people on an elected board like this it's common that there isn't the know-how about being an employer that you might want, and things were fine during the 60s and 70s when the organization had lots of money, but now the money's short and they're afraid, they're afraid they'll be held personally responsible if the organization is running at a loss. Then like in this case they can only see the expenses. #A34

- 1. What external circumstances are of importance in understanding the nature of the conflict?**
- 2. Are there any circumstances I feel are undesirable?**
- 3. Are there any reasons why the external circumstances are as they are?**
- 4. What can I do to influence the external circumstances?**

Marianne has a difficult relationship with her boss, but she doesn't see these problems only in terms of her boss' personality. Instead she sees that both the type of organization and its history are factors that have helped the conflict to emerge. It's not certain that this insight makes it easier for Marianne to find solutions to concrete conflict issues, but it probably affects the degree of personal responsibility she attributes to her boss. This can, in turn, be important both for Marianne's attitude toward her boss and for her feelings about her conflict experiences.

The second question, "Are there any circumstances I feel are undesirable?," implies that one has begun to view the external conditions as variables, in the sense of evaluating and forming opinions on factors such as organizational structure, distribution of responsibility, work strain and budget limits. Here one is searching for a connection between the external structure and the process, on the one hand, and the individual conflict incidents, on the other. By considering what one actually thinks about the framework of the workplace, one positions oneself more as a subject than as a cog in the machinery.

The third question, "Are there any reasons why the external circumstances are as they are?," implies that one is going beyond statements of fact and wondering whether there are important underlying causes worth considering. Here, for example, we might find crucial changes in the relationship between the organization and the surrounding world that also imply necessary changes in the workplace itself. Such situations can have significant conflict potential, especially when people fail to see the necessity of the changes. External circumstances can also be dictated by factors that are no longer relevant, which can mean that tradition alone stands in the way of change. Reflection upon the reasons for the current circumstances can, in any case, lead to greater chances of identifying key factors for constructive change.

The fourth question, "What can I do to influence the external circumstances?," implies that one is actively searching for strategies to mold these circumstances, e.g., by striving toward organizational change, a redefinition of managerial principals and criteria, or an examination of the organization's history and traditions. In cases where workplace conflicts have their roots in organizational circumstances rather than in personal behavior and attitudes, this is sometimes the only possible solution.

The interview presented in Chapter 6 provides good examples of the theme "External circumstances."

### *P. Informal roles*

This section highlights the informal role structure often found at workplaces, especially when formal roles are unclear or when an individual doesn't fulfil his/her formal role in a satisfactory manner. Perhaps most common is the presence of an informal leader to whom all or most people turn for direction and advice, but there are other types of informal roles as well. The scapegoat is naturally an extremely negative form of informal role. Other roles can be, e.g., the secretary who has worked at the company from time immemorial, and who serves as so strict a guard of things being run "correctly" that even the boss is afraid of her/him. Most of our interviewees do not seem to have considered the state of informal roles and the importance such roles have for how their workplace functions. For others, unsound informal roles are at the center of attention, and the heart of the conflict comprises a struggle to change the allocation of roles.

- 1. Are there any informal roles at my workplace?**
- 2. Are there any informal roles that I find unsound?**
- 3. What are the reasons for the present informal role structure?**
- 4. What can I do to change these unsound informal roles?**

The first question, "Are there any informal roles at my workplace?," implies consideration of whether informal roles have any significance for how the workplace functions. It isn't certain that such roles are important for the conflict, especially when the formal role structure is clear and explicit. Informal roles are of most significance in work teams with several members and unclear formal roles, or with members who don't live up to their formal roles. A person who has noticed the informal role structure can express him-/herself as follows:

There was a great deal of uneasiness in the group, worry and deep anxiety, you noticed at meetings, the men sat there and strutted their stuff, somebody could say some rigmarole with big words, and then somebody else would return the same at once. And the guy who ignored newcomers he was the informal boss so you had to take what he said, but when the man who was a bit bullied, when he said things that were pretty smart they just disappeared, they were waved aside. I wasn't the only one who was vulnerable. Others were too. #A10

The step to the second question, "Are there any informal roles that I find unsound?," is relatively short, since perception of the existence of informal roles often almost automatically leads to opinions on them. It can be important, however, to clarify for oneself the reasons why one dislikes the informal roles observed as well as to reflect upon what a sound role structure might be like.

The third question, "What are the reasons for the present informal role structure?," encourages one to consider the reason for the emergence of informal roles. Perhaps the explanation lies in an unclear organizational structure, in weak leadership among management, or in the personal ambitions and character traits of individuals.

The fourth question, "What can I do to change these unsound informal roles?," is quite important, since it implies that one is trying to identify strategies to change the informal roles at the workplace. This is not generally easy, as those involved tend to deny their informal roles. One must often begin by observing how one has been shepherded into an informal role others have chosen, and then find ways to smoothly wriggle out of it and instead form one's own role in a more constructive manner.

### *Q. Relationships*

Under this heading we take up a relatively subtle phenomenon, namely perceiving interpersonal relationships as *gestalts per se*, with their own qualities that cannot be reduced to individuals and their behavior. A relationship can be warm or cold, frustrating, marked by distrust or confidence, relaxed or tense, close or distant, etc., etc. Unspoken rules are developed in every relationship, as are role allocations and feelings that, once developed, have a certain permanence and stability. Many interviewees' conflict stories focus on what the counterpart has said and done, but don't deal with what is characteristic of the relationship between the counterpart and the interviewee.

The first question, "What is the nature of the relationships I have with my colleagues?," implies that one perceives one's relationships to others involved in the conflict as just that – relationships. Here we find the counterpart with his/her traits and behavior, oneself with one's own traits and behavior, and well as the nature of the relationship that has developed between the counterpart and oneself. Thinking about relationships in this way can open new opportunities for change by allowing the individual to realize that the relationship has perhaps developed in an unfortunate, though not given, direction.

A short excerpt can provide an illustration:

I feel like I've never been treated like an adult who is capable and knowledgeable but it's always the parent who's talking, and then I've responded just like an obstinate child, but then I've tried to work on myself. #A34

For Marianne, the problematic relationship she has with her boss isn't just a question of her own or the counterpart's personality traits. Marianne perceives the special relationship that has developed between them as a separate phenomenon with its own characteristics. The nature of the relationship affects how she reacts and acts. By seeing this, she has a chance to examine how the relationship functions and perhaps to see what could be done to change the present dynamics.

The second question, "What do I feel about the present state of my relationships with my colleagues?," implies that one is actively examining one's own feelings about the fact that the relationship is as it is. Perhaps one appreciates certain aspects of the relationship, while others are perceived as extremely frustrating. By observing the various dimensions of the relationship and clarifying for oneself in a more nuanced way what one feels about them, it is possible to keep in

- 1. What is the nature of the relationships I have with my colleagues?**
- 2. What do I feel about the present state of my relationships with my colleagues?**
- 3. Why do certain relationships have the qualities they have?**
- 4. What can I do to improve my relationships with my colleagues?**

mind the positive and try to change the negative. In this case, the focus is more on how the relationship is constituted and less on individuals' personality traits and behavior.

The third question, "Why do certain relationships have the qualities they have?," implies that one is considering the underlying reasons for the form a relationship has taken. Perhaps through such reflection one can more exactly identify past events that have created a certain atmosphere or a certain picture of the other; or perhaps one can see that the organizational positions held by those involved entail a strain on the relationship that isn't primarily related to the individuals. One can also look for explanations in one's own or others' perspectives, personalities, preferences or other factors. Such an examination can reveal leverage points allowing one to constructively change extant patterns.

The excerpt below shows how a person can express his/her thoughts on why a relationship has special features:

I believe in the psychological model that says that our different parts fit into one another... for example that she also likes me because she's from the upper middle class and I'm from the working class, so I don't threaten her, but still I had certain parts too, I think I had certain parts in common with her, that we had certain traits that she saw, I really think so. I think she was a very lonely person, had a real hard time making both men and women friends, so that she had difficulty with relationships in general, you see, it seems to me. [...] I think she made everybody break down and cry and run away except me. But then she broke down and started to cry in front of me. And I've thought about this afterwards that it wasn't just by chance, like. #A58

The fourth question, "What can I do to improve my relationships with my colleagues?," involves actively searching for ways to transform one's relationships. This often requires a preparedness to take an initiative that one knows will be met with resistance. Below we present a longer excerpt from the interview with Joan as an illustration of how a relationship can be transformed through active intervention.

So after a sleepless night I went in for a confrontation with her. She had written me up for disciplinary action in preparation to fire me. She had been utterly baffled by my refusal of her order and thus had reacted in an authoritarian way. But I had done my homework. I asked her what her feelings were about me and she told me that when I got angry at her she got scared. then she cried! I told her that the way she gave me feedback made me feel like a bad little girl and I wanted to be on an equal footing with her.

I asked her if she would be willing to tell me immediately when she came in in the morning if she needed to talk to me, give me negative feedback, and then we would go in her office, close the door and discuss it like adults. I actually demonstrated all this to her including the tone of voice I wanted to use. She listened! Then I asked if she would be willing to withdraw the disciplinary action if I set up an inservice on the equipment for the entire staff to attend.

The upshot of this was extraordinary: I set up the inservice, everyone came, it went great. But more than that, she lived up to the agreement about giving feedback more respectfully and I did too (no more verbal explosions from me). Ever since then our relationship has been one of mutual respect and collaborative. She is my biggest fan and gives me virtually anything I want on that unit, not playing favorites, but because she respects me. It was one of the scariest things I ever did but one of the best. #B14

It is, of course, unusual that a single open conversation should have such radical effects on a relationship, even if one is as clever as Joan. It is more common that relationships are transformed through purposeful and persistent work – work in which one avoids living up to the counterpart's negative pictures of oneself and uses one's insight into the counterpart's personality to mold one's own attitude so that the other no longer *wants* to maintain negative patterns of interaction.

### *R. The work team*

This sub-theme deals with observing how well the workplace functions as a system intended to produce certain results in an efficient and qualitatively satisfactory way. If one is unaware of this dimension, one can hardly consider how a certain organizational structure helps to create problems nor can one search for solutions in the form of organizational change. Instead one tends to focus on what individuals do and don't do as well as what they should do. In this case, the larger context is not a variable contributing to the course of events, but rather something that is taken for granted. In the meantime, the blame is put on specific individuals and incidents.

The first question, "How does the work team function as a whole, in relation to our work assignments?," encourages the individual to look beyond particulars, e.g., frustration with a person's attitude, and instead see the workplace as a whole. This, of course, requires that one have an idea of what the work team's function is and that one compare how the team actually works with how one thinks it should work.

The second question, "What do I feel about the way the work team functions?," implies that one is forming an opinion on the state of things. This requires that an individual have his/her own set of values and norms that can be used as landmarks against which he/she can evaluate how the work team functions.

The third question, "Are there important reasons why the work team functions as it does?," is aimed at finding underlying causes for possible shortfalls in how the work team functions. Posing this question is often quite important, since one otherwise tends to place the entire blame for the poor conditions on specific individuals. Problems are sometimes generated by insufficient organization, poor allocation of resources in relation to work assignments, or lack of necessary competence. Reflection upon this question can lead to a more modulated picture of the reasons for concrete conflicts, which can, in turn, bring about a shift in attention toward problems more relevant than those one might focus on spontaneously.

The fourth question, "What can I do to help the work team function better as a whole?," brings up the topic of personal responsibility for the whole, and requires that one abandon the position as a victim of external circumstances and instead seek ways to become a force for change. This isn't always possible, but conscious consideration of the opportunities for and obstacles to change can

- 1. How does the work team function as a whole, in relation to our work assignments?**
- 2. What do I feel about the way the work team functions?**
- 3. Are there important reasons why the work team functions as it does?**
- 4. What can I do to help the work team function better as a whole?**

still pave the way for one to take active responsibility for one's own choices in difficult situations. It is possible to take the initiative to improve the quality of the work being done without posing this question, but in this case efforts are often focused on details rather than on the work team as a system. If the organization isn't appropriate to the work to be accomplished, then the problems cannot be solved merely by getting individuals to change their attitudes.

### *S. Organizational culture*

The previous sub-theme focused on the workplace as a system in relation to the purpose the work team should serve. This sub-theme focuses on the organizational culture, i.e., the atmosphere, style and implicit norms characterizing how people interrelate at the workplace. The organizational culture might be cold and impersonal, rough, hostile, warm, open, tolerant, intolerant, formal, etc. It might also be marked by various kinds of informal groupings, e.g., men vs. women, manual vs. white-collar workers, locals vs. newcomers, Swedes vs. immigrants, or simply those who are suited to the prevailing style vs. those who are not.

The first question, "What organizational culture dominates my workplace?," involves making the organizational culture a conscious object of reflection by simply working out for oneself the characteristics of the social style.

The second question, "What do I feel about our organizational culture?," implies that one is taking a position on the predominant social style, perhaps by clarifying for oneself which concrete components of the work atmosphere, jargon and attitude one finds destructive and unacceptable.

In the following excerpt, Gun reveals her observations on the informal culture that pervades her new workplace and she takes a position on it:

So after only two weeks had gone by I'd managed to break two unspoken codes and they are: You shall not protest, especially not if you're going to pursue it. If you do it should be coffee-break talk with the rest of us, so criticism doesn't pay, that's pretty much the system and I thought it was a terrible period really. #A8

Here is another example of a person who sees the organizational culture as an important factor:

Well, the worst part, that was probably the lack of comradeship there. [...] And I guess the worst was that as soon as somebody got up and left the lunchroom or coffee-room then the crap started to fly, I think that was the worst part. #A12

The third question, "Are there important reasons why the organizational culture has become what it is?," can be important in understanding the motives for or background of the current social style. It could be that a negative atmosphere serves an important purpose in that it creates group cohesiveness among those who share a negative attitude toward others, or in that it constitutes a

- 1. What organizational culture dominates my workplace?**
- 2. What do I feel about our organizational culture?**
- 3. Are there important reasons why the organizational culture has become what it is?**
- 4. What can I do to improve the current organizational culture?**

kind of support for the group members' self-esteem. Insight into such underlying contexts can provide greater chances to work toward a constructive change by developing alternative ways to satisfy those needs that are currently satisfied in a destructive fashion.

The fourth question, "What can I do to improve the current organizational culture?," implies that one is considering the possibility of making an effort to influence this culture. If this seems impossible, one can still reflect upon how to behave in order to avoid both playing along in a game one doesn't wish to be a part of and being excluded and bullied because one openly challenges the dominant style.

From the interview with Jane (presented in its entirety in Chapter 6), we have found an excerpt illustrating an active attempt to influence a company's organizational culture:

On one occasion, I asked the group to be cautious and thoughtful about jokes they mailed around the group. Some very inappropriate things were being mailed around, for example, a photograph of a naked man on top of a fat naked woman. On multiple other occasions, lunch table conversation centered around which woman in the office would look best naked mud wrestling. Other times, the discussion was about, if we were on a deserted island, who would we kill and eat first. In their defense, Michael actually initiated most of these discussions. I said, "We are part of a larger, more conservative company, and I would like you to consider what jokes and conversations you take part in. I don't want you to get into trouble." #B30

In this case, however, Jane's attempt didn't have a great impact since her boss, Michael, was one of the driving forces behind the jargon that pervaded the workplace.

### *T. Goals and functions*

Conceptions of the overall goals and purposes served by the workplace can vary greatly even within a given workplace. For example, one might see the workplace's purpose primarily in terms of generating one's own monthly salary, in terms of profitability or meeting certain quantitative results with an acceptable level of quality, or in terms of producing goods or services important to the buyers' well-being. Since there are so many different ways to construe the meaning of the workplace in a larger context, it can be important to consider one's own opinions.

The first question, "What overall goals and purposes are served by my workplace?" deals with articulating one's conception of the specific goals and purposes of one's own workplace. Many people have never posed this question directly, but have instead taken their concrete work assignments for granted, trying to complete them as best they can. However, a conception of the overall purpose of the workplace is an important prerequisite for developing and changing specific routines and other circumstances so that the workplace can function well and in a goal-oriented way. The roots of workplace conflicts are not infrequently found when certain individuals have ideas about how goals can better be

- 1. What overall goals and purposes are served by my workplace?**
- 2. Do I think these are good goals?**
- 3. Are there important reasons for formulating the goals in this way and for possible shortcomings in reaching them?**
- 4. What can I do to help develop the goals and improve our ability to reach them?**

reached while others either have another picture of what the goal is/should be or lack any picture of a higher purpose, but instead safeguard stability and tradition.

The second question, "Do I think these are good goals?," encourages the individual to compare routine-like conceptions of the workplace's goals with his/her own conception of what is meaningful and worth working toward (see the introduction to the interview with Jane, in Chapter 6). This question can result in clarifying for oneself which values and goals one wishes to set one's inner compass on, which can, in turn, lead to deeper feelings of meaningfulness in one's work. A clear conception of goals and values also provides better terms for making choices during a conflict, e.g., by knowing more clearly which values one is prepared to fight for and which aren't worth a confrontation.

The third question is "Are there important reasons for formulating the goals in this way and for possible shortcomings in reaching them?" Perhaps there are evident circumstances obstructing development of the organization's goals, e.g., lack of time for considering and continually evaluating the goals and the relation between them and daily work activities.

The fourth question, "What can I do to help develop the goals and improve our ability to reach them?," encourages the individual to take responsibility for doing his/her part to work toward the goals and values he/she finds important.

## Final comments

### *The development of awareness during conflicts*

The common pattern in all of the themes dealt with above is the following: first, straightforward experiences are organized into clear perceptual gestalts, which then are gradually transformed from constants to variables that one can influence in various ways. Before becoming actively aware of certain elements of one's experience, one can neither turn them over in one's thoughts nor decide to try to influence them. This increased awareness – described here as the posing of more and more questions – brings with it a gradually increasing number of instruments with which one can exert an influence on one's surrounding and oneself. This is an important component in what is called "empowerment," i.e., individuals and groups acquiring an increased ability to take their destiny in their own hands.

Naturally, increased awareness doesn't automatically mean that one can change external circumstances – something that becomes clear in many of our interviews (see, e.g., the chapter on Jane). This increased awareness, however, does imply improved access to tools for active change. It also implies more opportunities to actively choose how one wishes to manage frustrating situations. Increased awareness of oneself and one's inner processes implies, in particular, greater chances to constructively meet with deadlocked external situations, in that one's own feelings and patterns of interpretation are transformed from given experiential constants to variables that can be changed – or at least reevaluated.



*Is it realistic to expect that everyone can become so "extremely aware"?*

When the reader has come this far, perhaps he or she will heave a sigh of exhaustion, wondering whether the authors actually mean that normal people should *think* so much and so deeply about everyday events. This exposition, however, wasn't intended to define the goals for what every individual should consider during a conflict situation. Instead, we wish to illustrate the potential of using conscious reflection as an instrument for handling conflict experiences. It is then, of course, up to each individual to decide what is reasonable, meaningful and possible in a given situation. In dealing with their conflicts, the majority of our interviewees used active reflection only to a limited extent. Of the eighty questions for self-consideration described here, only a relatively small number are usually spontaneously posed by those involved in a conflict. In many situations, however, a large proportion of the questions are irrelevant. But we still believe that our model can be a stimulating starting point for working with increased awareness. By becoming familiar with the questions one *can* pose to oneself during daily life, one has better chances of actively choosing the kinds of questions one wishes to consider more often – questions that one feels might improve life in various ways.

Many people lack interest in, and perhaps the individual prerequisites of, developing their ability to reflect in the sense that reflection is outlined here. This is also an important fact to be aware of.

In the next chapter – which is short – we present an instrument intended to give a better overview of various dimensions of awareness during conflicts – a "conflict mandala."

### 3. The conflict awareness mandala – Mapping consciousness in conflicts

#### A map of awareness in workplace conflicts

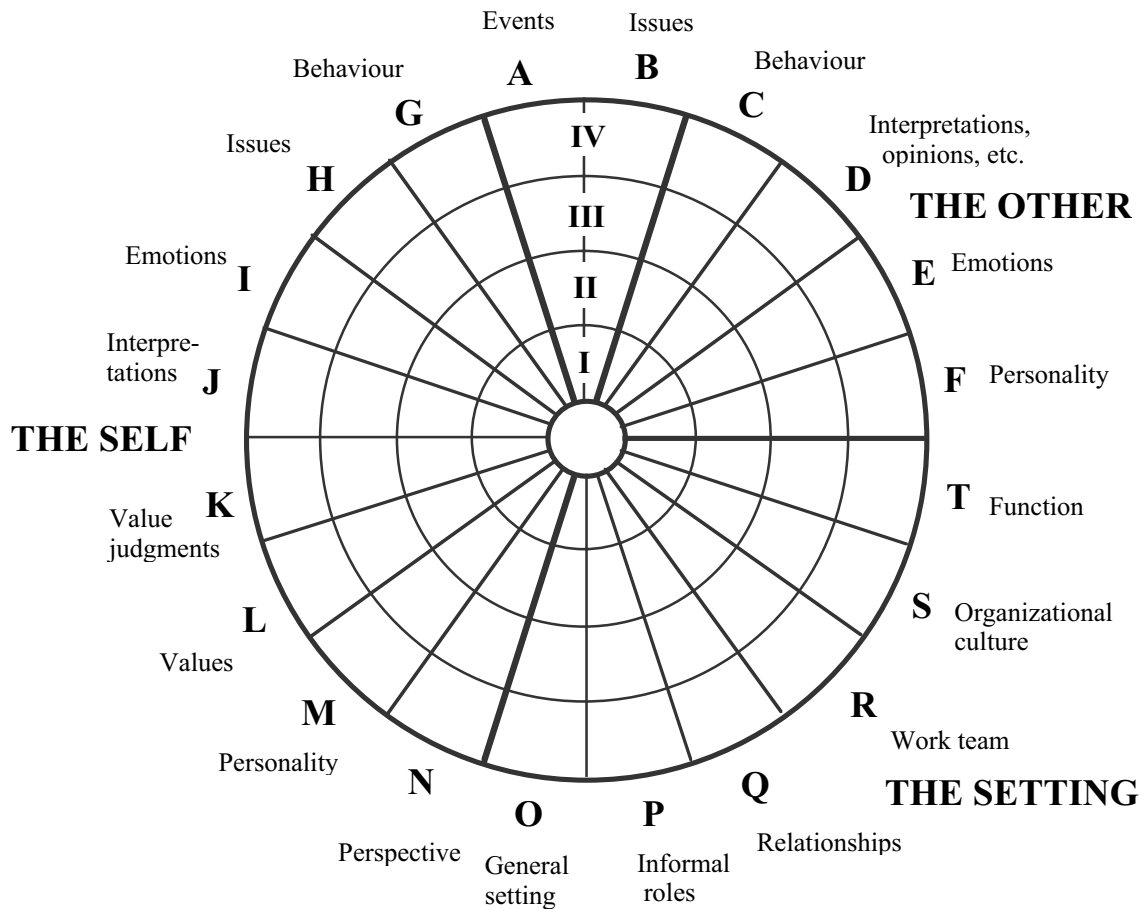
In chapter 2 we presented in considerable detail the specific questions an individual may reflect on during a workplace conflict. Since the typology involves many different issues and levels we have looked for a way to present a graphical overview that summarizes all the particular items of the typology. In figure 3.1 we present an instrument that can be used to represent an individual's level of consciousness in relation to conflict experiences. We call this chart the "conflict awareness mandala." The chart is composed of five concentric circles, divided into 20 sectors. Each sector corresponds to one of the subthemes of table 2.1. The innermost circle represents the direct experiences that are always present in the awareness of a waking person. The four rings outside the hub corresponds to the four types of questions that can be asked for each subtheme. The simplest type of questions are placed in the first ring, while the more sophisticated questions are placed further out. Each cell in the mandala corresponds accordingly to one of the questions in table 2.1. The sectors/ subthemes are grouped into the four main themes in table 2.1: *The Conflict*, *The Other*, *The Self* and *The Setting*. These main themes are demarcated in the chart by thicker lines. *The Self* and *The Other* have been placed opposing each other, whereas *The Conflict* and *The Setting* have been placed in-between them. As has been explained in chapter 2 we have chosen to discern more subthemes in *The Self* than in *The Other* because the individual potentially has greater access to the finer details of his or her own interior than to the inner experience of other people. The specific order of the subthemes within the main themes does not follow any particular principle.

The mandala can be used to give a general outline of the scope of an individual's consciousness in a conflict situation. This is done by colouring the cells that correspond to questions the individual spontaneously and actively reflects on. In figure 3.2 and 3.3 we give two examples of charts mapping the elements that play a role in two rather different persons' reflections about their workplace conflict experiences. The first person reflects on very few aspects of the conflict, the other persons involved, the workplace and his self, whereas the second reflects on many different questions, in particular regarding the course of events, the counterpart and the workplace setting.

As we have mentioned in chapter 2, there are many individuals who do not actively use reflection as an instrument of orientation in daily life. These persons handle daily events as they transpire, reacting spontaneously without really thinking about what happens and why. However, even persons who do reflect on the meaning of their experience can differ widely in their depth of awareness. This is mirrored in the four rings. Ring 1 represents perception, i.e. the act of becoming aware of various themes and perceiving that specific phenomena have a meaning. The individual who *only* asks the types of questions in ring 1 does not *do* anything with that which has been observed. For example, a person can be aware that the vague role assignments in a firm contributes to the emergence of conflicts, but this is only an insight that flickers briefly in the person's mind without leading to any further consequences in terms of forming opinions,

inquiring for further insight or taking action. In ring 2, the questions penetrate further into the development of distinct opinions about the appropriateness of the role distribution, in ring 3 one inquires into underlying reasons behind the vague role definitions, and in ring 4 one searches for ways of actively influencing the way the roles are defined. Many individuals mainly dwell at ring 1, with a few excursions into ring 2. These persons are aware of the significance of many circumstances and factors that contribute to the nature of the workplace conflict, but these insights do not develop beyond being rather superficial observations, with little consequence for how the individual feels, thinks and acts in relation to the conflict.

### THE CONFLICT



- Ring I: Questions of "What?"
- Ring II: Questions of "What do I feel about it?"
- Ring III: Questions of "Why?"
- Ring IV: Questions of "What can I do?"

Figure 3.1 The conflict awareness mandala

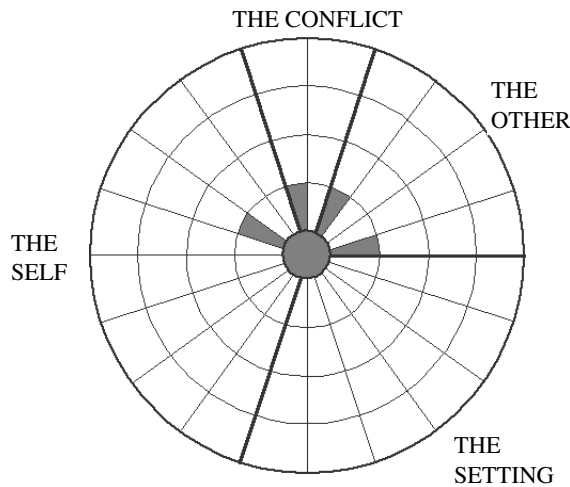


Figure 3.2

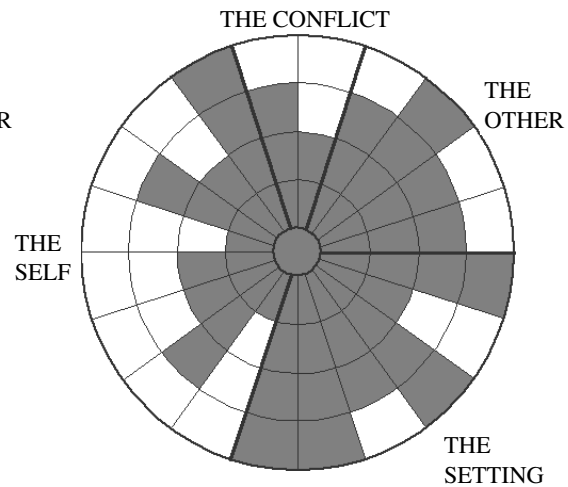


Figure 3.3

The mandala can also be used for discerning differences in individual orientation. A person who is oriented towards relationships will probably have many coloured cells in the “northeast” parts of the mandala, but maybe fewer in the “west” and “southeast” parts (see figure 3.4). The characteristics of an extraverted and structurally oriented individual may show up as an emphasis on the “southeast” and “north” parts of the mandala (figure 3.5). An actively introverted person might have many coloured cells in the “west” parts of the mandala, but maybe not as many in the “northeast” and “southeast” parts.

The purpose of the mandala is primarily to visualize the basic principle involved: that the levels of consciousness of individuals may vary significantly. The conflict awareness mandala can be a starting point for increased self-knowledge and personal development, since it can be used for visualizing characteristic patterns of awareness. We do not intend the mandala to be an instrument for measuring and categorizing individuals. In practice this is seldom desirable, and can be ethically dubious. It is also difficult to formulate precise criteria for how to judge if a particular formulation in an interview is proof that an individual normally reflects on a particular question. However, we believe that the conflict awareness mandala can be used as a pedagogical instrument for visualizing the great potential for development that each of us have in terms of expanded consciousness in relation to the external and interior worlds. An expanded consciousness can lead to both an increased ability to deal constructively with conflicts, and to a reduced propensity to get caught in negative emotions as a consequence of conflict experiences.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The general principle of the conflict awareness mandala can be adapted to other fields of experience by replacing some of the themes and questions in our version with those relevant for the particular field one has in mind. Some examples might be spouse relationships, the relationship of the teacher to his class, the relationship of healthcare professionals to their clients, political activists, management in organizations, negotiators or international diplomacy. The choice of themes to include would have to be adapted in each case, but the basic principles of the mandala can be retained.

This mandala shows a person who reflects a lot on how other people think, feel and perceive things, and who also actively adapts her own behaviour on the basis of her understanding of the other. However, she is not as conscious of her own internal processes, or of how the structures of the workplace contributes to form the conflict events.

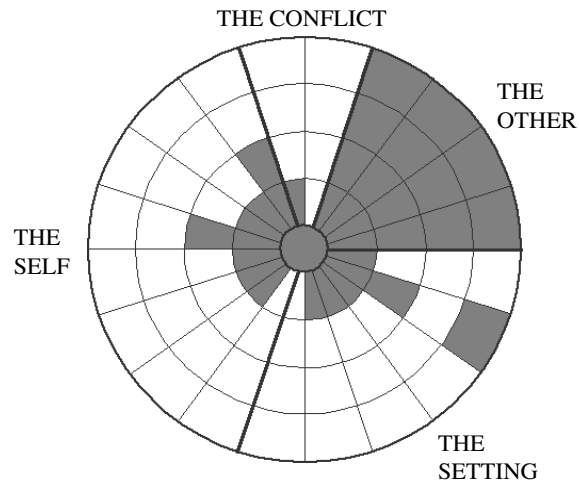


Figure 3.4

This mandala shows a person who has a very well developed ability to reflect on how the workplace functions. She also intervenes actively in order to influence the development of the workplace in a constructive direction. However, she does not reflect very much about why she and others experience the situation in a particular way.

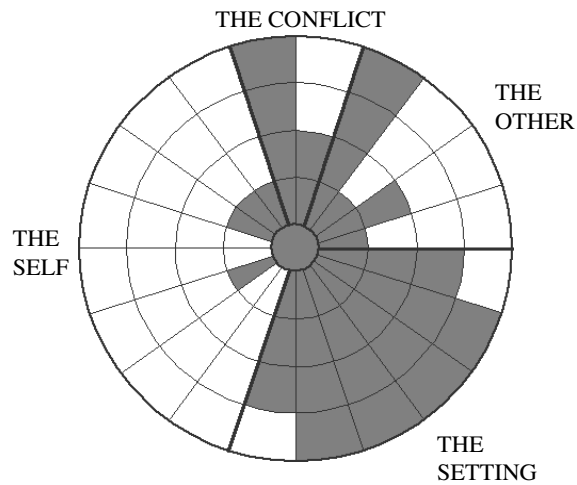


Figure 3.5

This mandala shows a person who is very much aware of what is going on within herself. She actively works on herself in order to further her own development as a person. However, she directs less attention to the structures of the workplace and to the inner experience of other people.

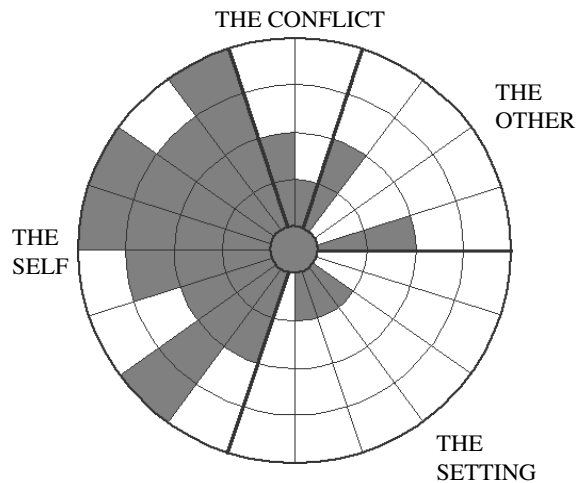


Figure 3.6

In chapter 5 we present a number of stylized portraits of how persons with different levels of awareness perceive, interpret and handle workplace conflicts. In these portraits we use the conflict awareness mandala as a device for illustrating the scope of a person's field of vision in workplace conflicts.

### The conflict awareness mandala as a self-diagnostic instrument

The use of the conflict awareness mandala to illustrate different persons' scope of awareness in conflicts in chapters 5 and 6 is based on analyses of transcribed interviews (see further next section). However, the mandala can also be used for self-diagnostic purposes, i.e. in order to inquire into one's own scope of awareness in conflict situations. In order to do this, one needs to review a particular experience with a conflict in one's own recent past. The exercise is, of course, only meaningful to the extent that one is determined to be sincere in one's assessments of oneself. In Appendix VII you will find a version of the conflict awareness mandala that can be printed or photocopied in order to make a self-portrait. We suggest that the reader who wants to try this out engages another person as an assistant and proceeds in the following way: First take some time to reflect on the conflict experience you have had. Ask then your assistant to read aloud all the questions in table 2.1, one at a time. For each item you review the experience you had at the time and ask yourself if this was a question you really reflected on in the course of your conflict experience. Depending on the result of your review, you answer "yes" or "no" to your assistant. When your response is "yes," your assistant colors the corresponding cell in the conflict awareness mandala with a colored pencil.

This procedure does, of course, not yield results that are comparable between different individuals, since the self-assessment is not based on any controllable criteria. We believe, however, that the exercise can be useful in providing a valuable opportunity to reflect on one's own way of perceiving, interpreting and handling conflict experiences. The procedure as such is probably more valuable than the resulting chart, but the colored mandala can also be used as a starting-point for further meditations.

### The conflict awareness mandala as a coding instrument

As has been pointed out earlier, the purpose of the conflict awareness mandala is pedagogical rather than scientific. The mandala conveys the principle that there is a broad range of variance in the extent to which a person reflects on the different aspects of a conflict experience. It can also illustrate variations in the orientation of the perceptions and the interpretations. However, with the observation of some caveats, the typology underlying the mandala can also be used as a coding system for analyzing interviews. In the framework of the research project reported here, we have experimented with such analyses with a limited number of interviews. We have not incorporated a regular coding of a larger number of interviews for two reasons: 1. our purpose was not to analyze in detail single individuals, but rather to develop a general typology capable of representing the scope of variations; 2. it is not possible to develop the coding procedure so that an acceptable level of validity is reached. Interrater reliability would inevitably be rather low because of the difficulties in standardizing the coding criteria. The main difficulty is to judge how

precise and detailed statements are needed in order to conclude that a person has demonstrated that he or she reflects on a certain type of questions.

Let us take an example, a brief interview excerpt, in order to illustrate the coding procedure and its problems. We use letters for themes and numbers for depth:

And at first I like didn't understand what was happening. 'Cause when you get a mental punch from someone you actually like a lot you're really so surprised at first [I1]. And then you get angry, and then it got to be that I couldn't be in the same room, as soon as she came near I got completely, well, my whole body started shaking and tingling, awfully unpleasant [I1]. And I think that others sitting in the same room as us could like feel the atmosphere, how it changed when we were in the same room [S1]. And it certainly wasn't easy for her either [E1, E2], 'cause I didn't know how I should act, so one moment I would bite first like before I got bitten, and the other I'd be like a puppy wagging its tail just to get patted [G1]. So she probably didn't know how she should act either [D1]. #A34

The first two codings are rather straightforward, Marianne articulates clearly what she felt during a particular phase of the conflict. The third coding, S1, is more doubtful. The theme S, Workplace culture, is meant to refer to the general interaction culture in the workplace. Marianne is here commenting on the atmosphere in a particular situation. The fourth coding, E1, refers to a formulation where Marianne says something about the inner experience of the counterpart. Judging from this brief statement, we cannot know to what extent Marianne really reflects on what it is like to be her counterpart. We also do not know if her awareness that it probably was difficult for her counterpart to deal with these situations actually influenced how Marianne felt, thought and acted. A person can make a statement like "it was probably not easy for her" more because she wants to appear like a reasonable person than because she actually cared for the feelings of the counterpart. The fifth coding, E2, is very doubtful, and should perhaps not be made. Marianne's statement can be interpreted as meaning that she deplores that "it wasn't easy " for her counterpart. The sixth coding, G1, is on the other hand very clear, as is the seventh, D1 where Marianne imagines the confusion he counterpart probably felt in relation to Marianne's demeanour.

This example illustrates that the conflict awareness mandala can be used for coding interview transcriptions, but also that there is a large measure of arbitrariness in the actual coding assessments in single instances. The coding might be a useful instrument for identifying themes in the text, but the results cannot be summarized into a "test result" with reasonable requirements for validity and reliability.

In chapter 6 we present a whole interview from our interview series. In presenting and analyzing this interview we have, on a trial basis, used the questions in table 2.1 as a coding typology for scoring single elements in the interview.

## 4. The depth of reflection

### The scope and depth of the visual field

In the two previous chapters, we presented a model that can provide an overview of what aspects of a conflict are apparent vs. invisible to an individual. The Conflict Awareness Mandala gives an image of the individual's potential visual field, showing what is visible at a certain point in time for a specific individual. We might say that the Conflict Awareness Mandala provides an image of the *scope* of a person's visual field. Using more theoretical terms, one could say that the various cells of the Conflict Awareness Mandala represent aspects of a workplace conflict that the individual has available for conscious reflection. The Conflict Awareness Mandala, however, is not sufficient to give a penetrating image of all relevant aspects of a person's perception and interpretation of conflicts. We also need to discuss the visual field's *depth*, i.e., not simply ask what themes are visible, but also look at the way in which the individual understands these themes. Again, using more theoretical terms, this deals with how those objects appearing in consciousness are construed by the individual. The third ring of the Conflict Awareness Mandala (the "Why" questions) represents a first step in elucidating the depth of the conceptions, but the Conflict Awareness Mandala is too blunt an instrument to allow us to penetrate this issue further. In this chapter we will more closely analyze differences in: (1) how different individuals conceive of other people, (2) the types of goals and concerns different individuals view as relevant to their working life, as well as (3) what types of learning and development – through conflict experiences – can be discerned in the material.<sup>13</sup>

### The image of the counterpart

One of the most important components of how individuals perceive, interpret and manage workplace conflicts is the type of conceptions they have of other people, especially of counterparts in the conflict (see themes C-F of the Conflict Awareness Mandala). In more scholarly terms, we might say that individuals can construct other people (i.e., counterparts, others involved, and even themselves) in a number of ways.

In our interviews, the interviewee's image of what type of person the counterpart is often appears indirectly. Relatively few spontaneously paint a portrait of the counterpart. At some point in the interview, we have usually asked the interviewee to describe what kind of person the counterpart is. Answers to this question are quite variable in terms of scope, depth and character. Some give very short answers, while others provide comprehensive and exhaustive descriptions. Based both on the responses to this direct question and on the stories as a whole, it is obvious that the range of variation is quite large concerning the extent to which individuals think about the counterpart as a person and how thoroughly they have reflected upon the counterpart's personality, motives and experiences.

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<sup>13</sup> In a subsequent revision of this preliminary report, we also hope to discuss differences both in how individuals construct causal relations and in the nature of the initiatives taken to influence the course of the conflict.



As our analysis work progressed, we found it fruitful to group the images of the counterpart into three different main types, depending on the perspective from which the interviewee viewed the counterpart. We call these main types *the first-person perspective*, *the second-person perspective*, and *the third-person perspective*.<sup>14</sup> In the following sections, we will explain what we mean when using these designations and provide different examples from the interviews. Then we will discuss the consequences of these perspectives for how an individual manages conflict experiences.

### *The first-person perspective*

A first-person perspective on the counterpart implies starting from one's own subjective impressions and opinions when forming an image of the other person. Thus, the image of the counterpart is based on how one is affected by the other and on one's feelings and thoughts in response to this. The first-person perspective makes no effort to go beyond one's own subjective viewpoint, but is instead based on how the other seems in one's own experience or self-perspective.

The descriptions are sometimes strongly colored by the interviewee's own opinions, as in the following excerpts:

Benny: Great guy. A creator, in the true Nietzschean sense. Builder and the supporter of teams, guided through enthusiasm.

John: Reasonably competent as an associate director, but lacking the vision to be a director. Alpha male type, player of games. Liar.

Carl: Hatchet man. Skulking nebbish politician type. Big liar. #B11

*This other woman who worked in the cafeteria, can you describe her?*

... Yes, I can, I don't know what to say about her ... She wasn't human, she came from an entirely different planet, she's the most awful person, I'm not the only one who thinks so.

*In what way is she so awful?*

It's like well, I can't explain, but as soon as she sees somebody then her mouth is up here and says one thing to your face and another behind your back and no, ugh! #A26

We wish to point out in particular the consequences of not perceiving value judgements on others as one's own, but instead experiencing them as fixed characteristics inherent in the other. An individual with such a perspective might feel that another person (or an entire group, e.g., Jews, the upper classes, Turks, communists, etc.) *is* awful, evil, false, lazy, etc. When one attributes such fixed characteristics – which are actually value judgements – to others, the logical consequence is that these people should be condemned, rejected and kept under control or as far away as possible. Thus, one common behavior during conflicts – breaking contact with the counterpart – can originate, at least partly, from the nature of the images one has construed of others.

The first-person images, however, are usually not so strongly permeated by personal opinions, but instead give an impression of being very superficial, and consist primarily of isolated

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<sup>14</sup> Naturally, these designations originate from grammatical terminology, where the first person is "I/we," the second person "you," and the third person "he/she/it/they."

adjectives and nouns characterizing the counterpart's typical behavior and basic personality traits. No efforts are made to look for underlying motives, mechanisms, personality systems, etc. Below are several different examples of this type of counterpart description:

*Would you like to describe the main characters involved to me? What kind of persons are they?*

Charles: demanding, chauvinist, womanizer, inflexible. Mary: wanted to be a boss, two-faced, demanding. Eve: flirt, lazy, too many personal phone calls (and nobody complained), thin, petite, claimed she was a doctor (yeah and I am a shrink). Amy: Nurse, set her own hours, moody, busy body, negative. #B6

*Could you describe Lucy?*

Lucy is a back stabbing crack whore from hell. She is self serving and self centered. She will play the friendly co worker but spread lies about others or divulge things said in confidence. She works hard and is a good waitress when my mother is around, but she is lazy and rude when my mother is not ... Lucy has never done anything but waitress, she never finished high school and has no other training. She has acts superior to others and also lacks communication skills. #B52

*Could you describe him a bit more? What kind of person is he?*

I describe him as being a "momma's boy" and probably still lives with his mother, however I do not know about his mother's health and this may be necessary. He is somewhat effeminate. He is controlling, manipulative and immature. (FYI-I don't believe that my assessment is projection or transference.) #B5

*Could you also describe X in the same way?*

Ugly was what I first thought mostly but then you get used to people's looks. Tries to get under people's skin with psychobabble. Speaks openly about sex and other problems. I don't know if you can have a lower-than-normal IQ in certain areas but sometimes I think she's slow. #B28

Characteristic of the first-person perspective is that the individual stops at superficial descriptions of others' attitudes – as in the excerpt below, taken from a description of what the interviewee's boss is like as a person:

>>The third is her disposition to divide the world into superior,  
>> peer, subordinate and to interact differently with each group.  
> *Could you tell me a bit more about the differences in the way she related  
> to these three categories?*

Cindy acts endearingly towards superiors. She finds subversive way to attack peers. She openly belittles and yells at subordinates. #B15

In the interview, this person had very few thoughts about the underlying motives for Cindy's behavior.

One reason for our choosing to use the concepts first-person and third-person perspective is that we wish to find words for a hard-to-capture quality of people's experiences of social interactions. It seems as though one group of people live their entire lives in the first-person position, while others are able to step outside their own viewpoint and observe what is happening without the resultant perception being entirely steered by their own interests, feelings and opinions. For those familiar with computer games, perhaps an analogy comparing "first person shooters" to a certain type of strategic game would be illustrative. In the first type of game, the player moves about in a virtual world, solving problems and defending him-/herself from attacking monsters. The player sees everything from his/her own viewpoint and is obliged to react quickly to things appearing in

the visual field. Enemies pop up suddenly and attack and the player must be on guard. In the other type of computer game, the player sees much of the virtual world from above, including a figure that represents the player him-/herself. The person in front of the computer screen can see him-/herself in the game, see his/her position in relation to others, and even survey a larger area than the game figure can. A similar difference in perspectives can be found in real life. Those living with a first-person perspective have few and vague conceptions of what underlies concrete and visible phenomena in the surrounding world. All attention is focused on what is happening in one's immediate environment – especially on the actions of others. Factors such as why others do what they do and how the playing board looks as a whole are not included in this conceptual world. Such people do not shift perspectives and see things through the eyes of others, or from above, nor are they aware that such an ability is possible and desirable. Instead, their attention is filled with their own goals and these goals are affected by surrounding events. The goals of such a person might well be unselfish, e.g., helping others, but only the immediately visible is relevant to how he/she chooses to proceed in relation to them.

### *The second-person perspective*

The second-person perspective implies trying to imagine how the counterpart feels, thinks and interprets things, i.e., trying to come as close as possible to the counterpart's own experience. In everyday language we call this the power of insight or ability to walk in someone else's shoes. To form a realistic image of the counterpart's experience, one must (for the moment) disregard one's own emotional reactions and opinions in relation to the other, and instead try to imagine how it would feel to be that person in a certain situation or in general. Such images can, of course, be variously sophisticated. A simple variant is to imagine how one would feel if placed in the other's position. A more sophisticated version of the second-person perspective involves entering into that person's typical way of interpreting, thinking and feeling – based on a sort of internal model of his/her overall functioning.<sup>15</sup>

A few of the interviewees spontaneously related how they believed the counterpart understood the situation. We posed direct questions to the remainder. It was obvious in many cases that the interviewee had never considered how the counterpart might experience things. In some of these cases, despite the direct question, the interviewees could not provide a clear answer:

*Why do you think she yelled at you?*

I wish I knew, she was very two-faced (moody). #B6

*Your colleague, X, does she have any idea you're on the verge of quitting? If she does, what does she think about it?*

I told her. Not that it affects her much. She can't help it if she slipped in on a banana peel. #B28

For others, though they might not have expressed their image of the other's experience in words, it was not difficult to do so in response to a question. Naturally, we don't know how great a role an intuitive understanding of the counterpart's experience has played in the individual's reactions and interpretations. It is probably the case, however, that a general ability to take the second-person perspective implies at least a basic awareness that other people's different interpretations,

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<sup>15</sup> This internal model needn't be analytic in nature, i.e., describable in words, but is more frequently intuitive.

priorities and emotions can be of importance in the course of a conflict. A good example is provided by these two excerpts, taken from different parts of the same interview:

*What do you think is important to Karen, in life and in her job?*

I really don't know. People definitely are not important. I would think her family are important. Survival is also important to her. Staying on top. I also think that money is important. I realise that she is separated and so would think that carving a career is important for the financial element.

*If I had been interviewing Karen, how do you think she would have described her actions and reasons?*

Good question, firstly I think that she would be surprised that anything was awry. This is the normal way she handles things. She perhaps would just dismiss the whole thing as a joke. Secondly, if she did recognise that there was a problem, she would probably have perceived me as awkward to work with and this is how she dealt with it. #B20

The following excerpt provides a good example of a quite everyday expression of a second-person perspective – but one that, on the whole, is probably important for the conflict experience:

*How do you think the situation looked from Lena's side, and the others', when they stopped talking to you?*

I think it was a mixture: that they felt "finally something's happening," at the same time as they probably felt I was a real source of irritation in an environment that was already stressful. #B12

In the following, somewhat longer excerpt, the interviewee uses a second-person perspective even though the person she is speaking about treated her in a very hurtful manner. Despite her own dissociation from the counterpart's behavior, she sees that there must be some internal logic in his way of experiencing the situation and herself that explains his attitude.

*How do you think he felt? Can you imagine his, how he viewed the situation in relation to you three?*

Well, I really think that if I felt so sick, and if I was having anxiety attacks then his situation was a thousand times worse. That he lives with that anxiety every day, and how that feels is something I can't even imagine. It's something early, I mean this is psychology, some early horrors during his childhood or something that ... [...] The fact that I couldn't understand his behavior at all, so I think he's been feeling real bad the whole time, he even talked about it sometimes. His worst time was summer, 'cause then he didn't have any place to spread this anxiety he has so he used to say that vacations were hell.

*How do you think he viewed you as colleagues then? Were you his enemies in this process, or how do you think he saw you?*

[...] as long as you can like use people to your own end then it's okay, but then when you don't need them any more you can cast them aside and there are always new ones who ...

[...] I also know that he sees himself as a great leader and patron of the arts and promoter of cultural diversity, that's like his view of himself, that he's really a thoroughbred with high-minded motives and all. But what he does, that's usually the exact opposite of these kinds of ideals. #A22

When the second-person perspective is well developed and an integrated part of a person's way of thinking about and interpreting things in everyday life, the consequence is that other people's conceptions and systems of interpretation become obvious factors for understanding problems that arise among people. In this way, we also see a shift in how the reasons for problems are conceptualized – from seeing other people's negative traits as causes to seeing the heart of the problem as people's disparate viewpoints and interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Kathy provides an example of this in an excerpt from her interview:

*Do you feel that Anne's opinions about you are entirely unfounded?*

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 6, where this is illustrated with an entire interview.

I never feel any opinion is entirely unfounded. There is no doubt something in my behaviour which clicks with something in her beliefs that generates this. And vice versa, certainly. Something in her behaviour clicks with something in my beliefs to create this too. However, I think the error occurs when either of us imposes our beliefs on the other one. I see her as ineffectual, she may see herself as friendly. I see her as un-supportive, she may see herself as providing challenges. She sees me as rude and inconsiderate when I look at my watch in meetings, I see myself as punctual. #B58

### *The third-person perspective*

Like the second-person perspective, the third-person perspective implies an attempt to conceptualize the other without allowing this conception to become overly influenced by one's own emotions and opinions.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the second-person perspective, however, the third-person perspective implies seeing the other from the outside and trying to form an image of how he/she functions as a person. Thus, whether the counterpart would agree with this description is less crucial, instead this perspective represents an attempt to characterize the counterpart's personality, motives, attitude, etc. as well as possible based on one's own understanding of how he/she functions.

People who form third-person images of others in a marked manner usually do so because they realize that it is in their own interest to understand the counterpart as well as possible. They also realize that their understanding of the counterpart can become distorted if they allow their own antipathy to color their image of him/her to too great an extent.

A consequence of the third-person perspective is that the images of the counterpart are often quite complex, as the individual also wants to see the counterpart's positive sides. Constructing a complex image of a person whose attitude is perceived as very frustrating requires that one is not subject to one's own opinions, i.e., being unaware that one's opinions are one's own value judgements. Thus, one must be able to perceive one's own feelings for another person as subjective, thereby distinguishing one's opinions of the person from one's image of his/her personality as such. The boundaries between a pure third-person perspective and the first-person perspective are not always so clear, but the distinction allows us to more easily discern various nuances, as in the following example:

Yes, and then this woman came back and it turned out that she was a very colorful woman and very special in her way and quite competent too, but she was really very frustrated 'cause she hadn't achieved what she wanted, that is to be the boss, and in her youth she really wanted to be an actress and she socialized with those types of people in Stockholm, and her life hadn't really turned out as she'd thought, so she just had to take her frustration out on others. And this was a real despotic person so she made notes about people, she really had them pegged and everybody was afraid of her, from the boss on down. #A60

There is, of course, nothing stopping the simultaneous use of the second- and third-person perspectives. Below is a simple example of this:

>>When the night-shift came  
>>they seemed to be treated like some sort of pest – the nurses

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<sup>17</sup> In psychology this is called "decentering," i.e., taking a perspective for which one's own subjective experience is not the center but seeing the other from the outside.

>>gave the impression of being very warm and kind. You weren't  
 >>supposed to talk with them, I noticed that clearly in the looks my work-  
 >>mates exchanged when these nurses talked with each other.  
 >*Was there anything concrete about the nurses that irritated your co-workers? Like something  
 >they did that your co-workers thought was out of line?*

They were informative and instructive and tried to tell a little about a certain person's condition and why he or she should, for example, have a certain ointment, why you should stop a certain night-medication and so. I think my co-workers thought they knew the "old folks" like the back of their hands and didn't need any information at all. I think it was actually a matter of them feeling inferior to the nurses. #B12

This interviewee was trying both to imagine how her colleagues experienced a certain situation and to provide an explanation for this experience using arguments of psychological causality.

A second-person perspective can also be used without using a third-person perspective. In the example below, we see a kind of intermediate level between a first- and second-person perspective, as well as a stated disinterest in using a third-person perspective:

*What would you say is her main aspirations and goals in life and at work? What concerns are important to her?*

Money, money, money and attention. She always seemed very concerned about making people think that she was a happy friendly person. I could see through it, I knew what she portrayed to other people was not the way she truly was -even before I began to have troubles with her. [...]

*Have you asked yourself what makes her tick? Why she is this way?*

To be honest, I was never that interested in her to try to find out. I just quickly realized what kind of person she was. #B34

### *The depth of the image of the counterpart*

In this section, we will explore more closely how the image of the counterpart is constructed. The previous section intimated that images of the counterpart formed from a first-person perspective are often more superficial than those based on a second- or third-person perspective. This, however, isn't always the case, since the depth – or complexity – of the images can vary considerably within a given type of perspective. We believe we have identified three main types of constructions. The first implies that individuals are seen in terms of a number of fixed traits. Examples of such traits are: demanding, professional, manipulative, arrogant, lazy, unpredictable, honest, false, stubborn, irrational, self-centered, stingy, loud, perfectionistic, etc. Of course, anyone can use adjectives such as these to describe another person, but there is a relatively large group whose (verbalized) images of other people don't extend beyond attributing traits of this kind to them. For this group, further questions concerning the counterpart as a person don't add depth to the characterizations, only more examples of how these personality traits are expressed in concrete situations. The two interview excerpts (B11 and B6) presented at the beginning of this chapter are of this type. These could, however, be seen as extremes. Images of the counterpart that are based on a collection of fixed traits can sound quite different:

Well, the problem with M. as a leader is that he doesn't know what he should think, he can't manage it, he agrees with the last person he talked to. The one who said something smart last. He's very

ambivalent, and he's very emotional by nature. He's one of those in the organization who has a lot of alternatives for action and a hard time making decisions, you know. Do you know what I mean? #A11

Naturally, we all use the notion of traits when creating images of other people, and based on single utterances it is impossible to judge whether an individual sees others *only* in terms of a collection of fixed traits. This is not a question of particular features of how a counterpart is described, but deals with the underlying and fundamental way in which others are construed. We believe that differences in this regard have sweeping consequences for how one relates to conflicts.

The second type of image of the counterpart contains relatively simple ideas about underlying connections. We call this "linear psychology causality," which means that the interviewee has explained some aspect of the counterpart's typical attitude or personality in terms of a single underlying factor. In its most basic form, this can sound as follows:

*What do you think this is due to?*

Well now, imagine if I knew that, I don't think he dared to make his own decisions. He was afraid of making decisions I think. #A4

Most men, or most bosses with no inner strength, they're afraid of competition, they're afraid they'll fail, end up in the backwater. #A60

*If you try to make a summary of what you think are the main causes that this conflict arose, what would have to be mentioned?*

Probably the fact that Cathrine felt somehow threatened by me. Possibly she thought I had manipulated Ken into giving me that job. Maybe she thought I wanted her out of there and that by me being so close to Ken I could do it. I really don't know. #B34

The third type of image of the counterpart – complex psychological causality – is based on what, in cognitive development theory, is called "systematic thought" (see, e.g., Richards & Commons, 1984). People whose images of the counterpart make use of complex psychological causality have an idea that specific attitudes and behaviors are generated by a personality system, a value system, a conceptual world or something similar. Thus, this is not a question of a single cause-effect relation, but a more complex causal relation, rooted in a comprehensive image of a personality system. Having such an image of another person often leads to feelings of deeper understanding for how this person acts and functions, even if the behavior *per se* causes frustration. Below we provide two examples, one short and one quite long.

And so I think she has some kind of inferiority-, in her environment, 'cause she's from the upper middle class and lots of her relatives have done well while she hasn't and hasn't really wanted to I don't think, but she's had the same demands on her, that's what I think. #A58

Maria's explanation is that her counterpart is marked by a background that has caused her to place certain demands on herself. The second excerpt is from the interview with Jane (which is presented in its entirety in Chapter 6). We include this long excerpt here to show how it can be when someone truly reflects upon how other people are constituted. Jane sees many different dimensions and elements as important in creating an image of Becky:

Describe Becky. What a complex question. Becky is a very petite, energetic woman, who attended and graduated from Cal Tech before too many women went to school there. If you have any familiarity with Cal Tech or any US Ivy League college, you understand that the atmosphere is very competitive, and it becomes a sink or swim environment. Although she majored in architecture, it did not take her long to move into the this industry, where she has worked happily for many years.

She is incredibly bright in a dual-hemisphere way, as I like to say. This means she can pull and use either side of her brain equally well. She may not be as good as someone more focused in artistic or mathematical endeavors, but I never saw such a weakness.

Becky has one child who is moving towards four years old, and another on the way in approximately five months. She is the second wife to her husband, who travels regularly. They seem happy together. I would not be happy in the same situation.

Someone else once described her as a "soft manager who is more focused on making everyone happy on the surface than solving the problem." I think this is pretty appropriate. She once described herself as the most non-confrontational person she knows, aside from K. (who I believe I mentioned earlier in my story). She once told me she'd rather do anything than confront, but was willing to do so if necessary.

(As an interesting side note here, Becky was not present when Michael and I discussed my leaving nor have I heard from her since or at all.)

I think it is very important to Becky to be very needed in her job. She is one of the original employees and so is very knowledgeable about the company and its products. She likes to do and be many things at once. Becky is very focused on adding value and being a team player, as well as trying to encourage an open, group atmosphere. She once said the most important thing to her was upholding the company's values. She regularly takes work home, works much more than eight hours a day, never takes a lunch break, is one of the first in the office in the morning (although generally left promptly at 5:00 to pick up her child from day care), and even comes in sick, or at least works from home when sick.

Becky likes everything to be all-right.

Feel free to ask for more details here, but I didn't want to tire you on the first question. I've spent a great deal of time analyzing Becky -- mostly to try to figure out how and why things happened as they did over the course of our working together, but also to try to figure out how to interact with her. #B30

In addition to the complexity and richness of this image, it is also apparent that Jane is eager to create an image of Becky that is as fair as possible, i.e., she doesn't allow her own irritation to color the image of Becky to any great extent.

### *Further consequences of the image of the counterpart*

One very important conclusion from our research project is that the nature of the image an individual creates of the counterpart seems to have a great influence on the individual's emotions, with respect both to his/her attitude toward the counterpart and to how his/her own emotional state is affected by the conflict experiences. Simply put, the more ideas one has about the underlying reasons for the counterpart's attitude, the less the degree of antagonistic attitudes on one's own part. A great proportion of people never ask themselves why the counterpart acts as he/she does, but are content with labeling behavior, often in highly subjective and negative terms.



When no consideration is given to the possible reasons why the counterpart behaves in a certain way (reasons related to external circumstances or internal structures and processes), one is more inclined to place the blame on the person as such. The frustration felt as a consequence of the conflict's blockages and unbearable situations is directly converted to hostility toward the counterpart, without being tempered by an understanding that the counterpart is also a victim of circumstances that limit his/her chances to be "good." One might say that people in this group orient themselves using their spontaneous opinions rather than through consideration of causal relations. Consequently, their value judgements take a prominent position in their perception, interpretation and management of conflict situations. On the other hand, an individual with a detailed conception of *why* the counterpart behaves in a certain way (e.g., an understanding that the counterpart's behavior is affected by weak self-esteem, a value system formed by a certain family background and a vulnerable position as a middle-level executive during difficult financial times) cannot place the entire blame on The other. "The blame" for the frustrating conditions is distributed across a whole chain, or a whole network of underlying causes and circumstances. Such a person doesn't necessarily feel less frustration with the negative effects of the conflict, but is less likely to form highly antagonistic attitudes toward the counterpart. To put it more drastically: *People who see underlying reasons for other people's behavior don't have any enemies.*<sup>18</sup> They can even show signs of sympathy for the counterpart, despite the fact that he/she makes life difficult in various ways. Such sympathy, of course, develops gradually, when the worst feelings of frustration and anger have subsided and when there is more mental room for reflection upon the background of the events.

The construction of the counterpart also has great importance for conflict behavior. A person who sees various causes, circumstances and processes behind the counterpart's behavior has – at least in principle – access to a number of different variables useable to achieve a change in the counterpart's attitude. Simply put, there is more hope of changing the frustrating behaviors of the counterpart if one can image that they have a number of underlying causes. By clearing away or mitigating these causes, behavior can also be changed. On the other hand, it is quite likely that a person who construes others primarily in terms of fixed traits will react to a frustrating conflict situation by trying to avoid the counterpart as much as possible or trying to either control or get rid of him/her. One simply can't imagine that the counterpart could possibly change.

### *One example*

When one fails to ask oneself about the counterpart's experiences, the result can be that one's own reactions aggravate the conflict. One relatively clear example is found in the interview with Jonathan. He works for a small company where the caretaker (who is also responsible for computer operation) has subjected him to a long series of passive-aggressive actions. Jonathan reports:

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<sup>18</sup> The meaningfulness of the figure of the "enemy" is primarily related to the degree to which one views people or collectives as monolithic subjects, fully free to choose their own actions. If they are instead seen as interwoven in a complex network of circumstances and processes, one no longer views them as uniform subjects and the roots of their behavior are associated with the entire network. Thus, one cannot assign to them sole responsibility for their choices and actions, and it is more difficult to blame individuals or collectives.

On one occasion a client came by the office to pick up a set of plans, what happen is that Greg did not page me in my office as he should have, he just hit the intercom and slammed the telephone down. If I had not seen the client pull up, I would not have known he was here. Note: none of the owners where in the building at the time. I than greeted the client and returned his plans, when he left I turned to Greg and said "Do you ever think that you will get tired of being a pussy and a coward." He said nothing. #B5

Jonathan is understandably furious about Greg's behavior, but he seems to assume that Greg also sees himself as a cowardly little bastard. Jonathan, however, also has some ideas about how Greg functions:

- > Greg's behavior toward me includes, no eye contact, refusing to speak.
- > There is no indication of team work or cooperation. According to a
- > coworker his agenda is to "run me off."

*Do you have any thoughts about why he wants to "run you off"?*

I believe that Greg is threatened by my computer literacy. He is a big fish in a little pond. He actively needs to manipulate and control those around him to some degree. Getting rid of me would make him "Undisputed Lord of the Computers." btw, I don't want his job. #B5

Jonathan's image of Greg exemplifies the use of linear psychological causality (Greg is threatened by Jonathan's computer skills) from a first-person perspective, i.e., he doesn't try to create an overall image of Greg's personality, but merely seeks a plausible explanation for Greg's irritating behavior toward him. Nor does Jonathan take advantage of his insight that Greg perhaps feels threatened by, e.g., directly or indirectly showing respect for Greg's role as computer expert. Several passages of the interview indicate that Jonathan's idea of a solution to the conflict is that Greg should admit to being exactly the "cowardly little bastard" Jonathan thinks he is, apologize and promise to stop:

*What would be a good or ideal way (i.e. procedure) to resolve, or at least handle, the conflict?*

An explanation from Greg on what he hopes to accomplish with this behavior.

*What would be an ideal outcome of such a process?*

An apology and lets get back to business. #B5

Greg's image of himself, Jonathan and the situation is probably quite different. Thus, Jonathan's comments to him will only strengthen the conflict, not result in a solution.

### *The emotional consequences of images of the counterpart*

An additional – interesting and important – consequence of a more intricate conception of the counterpart as a person is that individuals with such conceptions don't feel as offended by the treatment to which they've been subjected. By seeing the underlying reasons for the counterpart's attitude and actions, one is simply less inclined to be affected by his/her disparaging behavior. We can see one line of such a discussion in the following excerpt:

What she did to me, I don't think it was probably ever meant to be personal. No I think she'd worked so much and so intensively for so many years and then she got these problems with her head or whatever it was and she was afraid and nervous about it, she didn't know what it was. And sometimes she'd just be sitting there and fall asleep when she was driving and sometimes talked about tumors and so of course she was worried.

And then it was like she was going to work off, so to speak, some anxiety and take on more work assignments and to get even more she had to take things from us and then we started, I, like I did, and then she could lay, project all her shit onto me, that's how it was I think. #A20

Many of the interviewees who had long felt poorly as a consequence of conflict experiences belonged to the group who hadn't used reflection to develop a thorough understanding of the underlying reasons for other people's actions. We feel that this is an important observation – one that should be investigated further.

## Constructions of what is important

This section deals with differences in what are experienced as important topics in a conflict situation. The subject is broad and complex, for several reasons, and here we will only address a few general aspects. There are three important angles on this theme. The first concerns what the individual generally experiences as important to feeling satisfied with his/her working life. Such goals and values often play crucial roles in causing the conflict, e.g., when an individual is for some reason kept from realizing them. The second angle concerns what the individual experiences as being at stake in the acute conflict situation, i.e., his/her own interests, goals and values. As we will see below, these can be construed in very different ways, all with unique consequences for the course of the conflict. The third angle concerns the fact that frustrating relationships and events during a conflict can take up so much of the visual field that there is little room for considering one's goals, values and interests, as in the following excerpt:

*What did you feel was the conflict in this situation?*

The conflict was naturally that she always had that, what should I say, you felt this power over you, something pushing down all the time, you had no free rein. You were always in somebody else's hands more or less.

*Did you have your own goals you wanted to push through?*

Well, what should I say, because the situation was so difficult, you never thought like that, you just thought about getting out, that's how it was. No room was allowed for anything else. #A60

It turned out to be difficult to construct a simple typology of what individuals consider important in their working lives. One aspect of differences in conceptions is the breadth of individuals' frames of reference. Some people think primarily that their own everyday situation should be tolerable, while others feel it's important that the work they do be meaningful in a broader perspective. Let's listen to a few different voices and look more closely at the differences in the conceptions expressed.

The first example contains two short excerpts from the same interview:

*What's important to you in your work? How would you like things to be so you could feel satisfied?*

One wish would be to reverse time and find a girl to work with other than X, one with the right qualifications. I want a job where you have time for work assignments intended for one person not for at least two. This is intolerable.

[...]

*If you think about the ideal job for you, what would it contain? For you to feel satisfied with what you're doing, what aspect of such a job would be most important?*

I'd like to do something similar to what I'm doing today. I like having responsibility but not for things I can't control. #B28

In this response, Lena's own concrete work situation is in focus. Her ideal job is one in which she has just the right amount of responsibility and work assignments. The fact that she brings this up is partly a consequence of an extended frustrating work situation including a far too great workload. But she doesn't express any further ideas about what is important. Denise's answer is, in some respects, similar to Lena's:

*Can you also say something about what is generally important to you in your work in order to feel satisfied?*

The feeling that I can be trusted and also having good relationships with your co-workers. #B34

Like Lena, Denise thinks primarily about her own everyday work situation, in this case about having a positive atmosphere among herself and her colleagues.

Many express, in various ways, the importance of feeling they are doing a good job – a job that others appreciate:

*I can think of several different reasons why one wants to do a job well. How would you formulate \*why\* it was important for you to do your job well?*

Because I always put the patient in first place and it was important to always ensure their satisfaction. #B6

*Could you also say something about what is generally important to you in a workplace?*

*What kinds of experiences would make you feel satisfied with your job?*

I want to feel that my work has value and I want others to appreciate what I am doing or trying to do. #B52

In all of these excerpts, the interviewees themselves seem to be the center of conceptions of what is important, i.e., that they themselves do a good job, in their own and others' eyes. In the next excerpt we see a small shift in perspective:

*What concerns are important to yourself in your present situation? Which are your most important goals?*

My most important goal is to keep the department viable and productive.

*Could you say something about what you think is generally important for you to be satisfied in your workplace?*

I think general satisfaction for anybody in any job (and I am no different) is to be treated fairly and be appreciated. #B38

Lydia's orientation is to help see to it that things run as they should at the workplace as a whole. Thus, her goals don't only refer to her own concrete work situation, but also to ensuring that the entire work team performs and serves its purpose. From the rest of her answer, however, we see that she, like the previous interviewees cited, views the feeling of doing a good job – as mirrored in the respect and appreciation of others – as the primary source of satisfaction. Note also that she believes this is true of all people.

Another interesting theme concerns the extent to which an individual is greatly dependent on the judgements of others for feeling satisfaction, or whether satisfaction arises when one has lived up

to one's own values and norms regarding what is a good work effort. In the excerpt below, Suzie seems to vacillate a bit between just these positions:

*What is in general most important to you in your job, in order to feel satisfied?*

To feel satisfied in my job ... I am going to have to give this some additional thought to refine this first answer. Because on one level, I'd like my boss to say I did a good job and here the extra money to prove it! But on another level, I just want to know that I've done the right things or made the right decision to complete a task. This company and this position requires that everybody does multiple task (approx. 5 + ) per day. It's a lot of pressure. I don't always do or say the "right" thing, but I do put forth the effort. Sometimes I feel satisfied sometimes I don't. #B50

In the excerpts above, that which is "valuable" is very concrete and immediate – something one can see directly in daily work. Others have a similar attitude, but what they value is more abstract:

*What was/is important for you in your work?*

I want to do something that matters to people, that improves people's lives, that gives them power. For a time, science was it. Now it isn't. #B11

It is not readily apparent in this isolated excerpt, but rather in the interview as a whole, that Ed is primarily focused on his own work situation, even if he construes his work as serving mankind. Mikael, cited below, instead stresses the importance of living up to fundamental standards:

And what this is ultimately about, is that I want a workplace marked by insight into what we're there for, that we have, at least professionally, as I see it, sound ethical and moral values and that we have respect for people. Why do I say "at least professionally," well because people can think what they want at home, I can't do anything about that. #A5

There is also a group of people who construe their goals primarily in terms of their own situation, but who assign their concrete work situation secondary importance in relation to more existential concerns:

*What concerns have been most important to you in relation to the frictions with T.?*

My own growth. It would have been easy to sit and pity myself (which I did for a while, believe me) and stay there. But I didn't and the decision to move on has reflected itself throughout my personal life. I have shed a lot of stuff that I didn't need. #B20

Jill has a kind of overall goal – to develop as a person. It is important that her work allow her to learn, acquire new skills and grow. Given this starting point, even a calm workplace can be perceived as extremely frustrating, as everyday routines don't offer challenges.

Joan, cited below, believes that what is important is putting the welfare of others in focus. Her satisfaction lies primarily in helping others to develop and gain self-insight. Despite her involvement in a conflict, the tone of her statement is marked by a sense of appreciation of and joy at being able to give to others.

What is generally important to me at work? The most important thing to me at work is to share what I know about eating disorders and help the patients to grow, to transform. I enjoy that so much, when I can challenge them to really think, to go deep inside and when they grab ahold of the idea of transformation it is so exciting. I also like to have fun there. I enjoy teaching and sharing anything I've learned with the staff as well as patients. #B14

Most of the people we've cited thus far don't seem to have given too much thought to working out for themselves what is important to their feelings of satisfaction with the work situation. Only a few of our interviewees have actively and carefully considered what they actually think is important. Unsurprisingly, these people can convey a full and varied image of what is important to them. Below are two examples of this:

*What do you think is of overall importance to your feeling content with your job, and feeling deeper satisfaction?*

That I get to do something meaningful, that there's a challenge there that arouses my curiosity, that I can influence my own work situation, that I can see the results of my work, that I have positive contact with the people I work with, that things around me are in order, someone at work who gives me constructive feedback, and if I work in an organization – that there are clear concrete goals to work after, good leadership to be responsible for the whole and a good spirit of community.

[...]

If you dig down a layer, what does "doing something meaningful" mean? What, ultimately, makes work meaningful for you?

Doing something that leads to development, either for an individual, a group of individuals or for the entire organization. But many years ago I did an exercise for myself, to really penetrate things I was good at and things that excited me and then I prioritized them. What turned out topping the list was actually – making people happy. Oh I'm so idealistic! If other people feel good, then I feel good too. Then came all forms of development, writing, developing new ideas, having enriching discussions, writing funny melodies for people who are celebrating something, singing, being with children, with people. #B56

*What issues are involved for you in this conflict? What kinds of concerns have a place in your awareness when you think about how to deal with the situation? You have already mentioned a number of concerns, but could you just make a list, summarizing the concerns you feel belong to such a list?*

My physical health and how I am affected by stress at work

Sleep patterns

Energy remaining when I get home from work

Financial security for me and mine, both in present and in retirement

Self-fulfillment. If I cannot find it here, do I at least have enough

(energy/time/inclination) left over to find it elsewhere

Homesickness. Is it increased or alleviated by having Americans around

Religious beliefs around right livelihood and compassion

Years of my life that are left and how I want to use them

Number of hours spent commuting per day and whether I can 'use' this time

Whether Ben goes to work out of the house full time

Whether we can have a second dog

Holidays

Whether I get support and recognition from people other than Jane

Whether work is fun enough

My physical work environment. #B58

Naturally, general conceptions about what is important in work have great significance for the way in which one becomes involved in conflicts. Some experience a conflict because their working conditions don't allow them to do a good job and thereby receive the appreciation of others and the self-respect they need to feel good. Others have life goals that demand a workplace with the capacity to offer the challenges and free rein necessary for them to realize their own potential. We could say that the former group simply want to be left alone to do their job in the best way they can, while the latter group frequently want to change the functioning of the

workplace, thereby meeting with resistance.<sup>19</sup> It is not uncommon that conflicts arise just when these two kinds of mentalities meet.

## Types of learning during conflicts

The ability to learn and develop through conflict experiences is a central topic in our study. We might say that learning during and after conflict experiences is subject to very different conditions depending on the breadth and depth of a person's visual field, as described in the Conflict Awareness Mandala. The Conflict Awareness Mandala provides an image of the aspects of a workplace conflict that are visible to the individual. That which is visible, i.e., part of the individual's perception and interpretation, should arguably be of great importance to the type of learning and development possible and likely for that individual. The more conflict dimensions visible to the individual, and the more questions he/she poses in connection with the conflict, the greater the potential for learning and development. Thus, it is particularly interesting to observe the degree to which participants feel that they have learned something through their conflict experiences and to identify the nature of the learning and development in question. Some of the interviewees introduced the subject spontaneously, and to the others we posed direct questions. In many of the interviews, the question was worded approximately as follows: "Is there anything about the conflict that you feel has been positive?" An analysis of the responses shows that different types of learning are associated with conflict experiences. To simplify things, we can say that the four main themes dealt with in Table 2.1 and in the Conflict Awareness Mandala are also four possible areas of learning and skill development:

1. Learning about what happens/can happen during conflicts and how one can manage the situation;
2. Learning about other people and how one can deal with them;
3. Learning about how organizations function and how one can change them;
4. Learning about oneself, how one functions and can develop.

These four areas can, in turn, be collapsed into two groups representing directions: Learning about the external world and how one can deal with it, and learning about the interior world.

Analysis of the differences represented in the interview responses shows, among other things, that it is frequently more interesting to consider the types of learning *not* appearing in an individual's reflections than to focus on describing and characterizing those reflections that are articulated. It is not surprising that people who are used to considerable reflection upon, e.g., organizational structures, informal roles, others' interpretations and their own personality traits also mention these dimensions when discussing what they have learned from the conflict. But what is the situation for those who normally don't consider more than a very few of the dimensions and questions brought up in the Conflict Awareness Mandala? What do they say when asked about what they've learned from their conflict experiences?

In the next section, we will discuss several common forms of learning, illustrate them using characteristic examples, and consider the meaning and origin of the differences.

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<sup>19</sup> See the portrait in Chapter 5 as well.

### *No learning*

One type of answer implies directly or indirectly that the interviewee has not reported any learning. Some reply that they can't see anything positive about the conflict itself, which we interpret as meaning that they don't feel they've learned anything of importance from their conflict experiences:

*Is there \*anything\* about this conflict you could say has been positive?*

No, nothing positive...just more conflicts. #B52

*Has anything positive come out of this conflict, do you feel you've learned anything during these events or something similar?*

No I guess I can't say I've learned anything, if anything what's happened is that things have been confirmed, that's what's happened, you see. And I think it's a shame that you meet so many cowards. #A36

*Has anything good come out of this as far as you're concerned?*

Well I got to meet you! [laughs] Well... No, nothing good's come out of it yet, but for me it's turned out that I like where I am and the people on top like me a lot, that's the main thing. Otherwise nothing good's come out of it, nothing. #A5

For others, we can infer more indirectly that they don't see learning as part of their experience, as their responses take entirely different directions:

*I'm fully aware of how painful these experiences have been for you, but I'd nevertheless like to ask if you can see any kind of positive aspects for yourself of having been through this conflict?*

It is said that which does not kill you strengthens you. I am sorely tested by the conflict and my wounds have yet to fully heal. There will be scars. #B15

*Because I'm thinking if there was something, if your boss could've acted differently for example, or if you feel you could've done something another way. If you've had thoughts like this afterwards?*

Yeah... I guess I've had them... I've well thought about that maybe I've really been at the same job too long. You shouldn't wear yourself out you know. And you shouldn't ... it's good to try new employers, or maybe something completely different [...], so you don't burn out. That's what I want to say. #A38

*What do you think you've learned?*

Well, I've learned, I'll tell you, that machines and things it's not so scary to work with them. I was really non-technical, I've never known anything about it, but I've learned that it's not such a big deal to grab a screwdriver and tinker a little, that's how I've learned a bit. #A12

There were also people who, when asked whether the conflict had positive sides, only mentioned concrete consequences of the course of the conflict, e.g., that they changed to a new job they liked better (see the excerpt from interview #A5, above). Bertil, in the following excerpt, had been relieved of his normal work assignments:

*Do you think that, in spite of your blood pressure, there's been anything positive about being in this situation? Have you like, can you tell me anything?*

Positive? Well, what's positive is that nobody else decides my work hours or vacation time, that's really a lot of freedom. And well I have freedom that not many can say they have, I guess that's the only thing really ... #A13



### *Disillusionment*

Another group reported learning from their conflict experiences, but learning was described only in negative, disillusioned, sometimes cynical terms. These people related that the conflict had taught them that the world isn't as good as they had thought. Some experienced this disillusionment as positive, i.e., it gave them a more realistic image of what can be expected of working life and fellow human beings. The following excerpts are examples of this:

*Is there any thing about this experience (the conflict) you can say is positive for you?*

Yes. I am harder, more bitter, and more cynical than before it occurred. I am less willing to trust. Although I still find office politics to be extremely distasteful, I will henceforth play them, and I will play them to win. I will give people the benefit of the doubt at first and will not initiate games, but if a game is imposed upon me, I will fight as fiercely as I can. Except for fairly easy and simple matters (such as participating in your research, for example) I will not do anything unless the primary motivation is purely selfish gain. All of these are positive directions of personal growth.

*Did you learn anything from it, e.g. about yourself?*

Yes, that I was a sucker and a fool, and I resolve to be otherwise.

#B11

Is there something about this conflict that I can say has been positive? No.

Did I learn something about myself through these experiences? Yes. I have an outdated, false sense and expectation of genuine goodness in people and a false belief of integrity among people in positions of power and authority. #B24

*Is there \*anything\* about this conflict you could say has been positive?*

It has given me the insight to not take for granted well run organization with people who walk the walk and talk the talk.

*Could you say that you have learnt anything about yourself through this experience?*

Never trust the smiling face in front of you. I used to give trust until there was reason to doubt. Now it has to be earned. #B38

This kind of disillusionment is embedded in a resigned and defensive attitude: one no longer has the basic expectation that it is normally possible to create something positive in collaboration with colleagues. The conflict is experienced as instructive in that one has now, finally, seen through to the reality of working life and thereby ridded oneself of false notions. We believe that the foundation of this type of learning is a construction of the surrounding world in which people and groups are assigned fixed traits. Thus, one fails to think in terms of underlying processes, conceptual worlds and other circumstances. This kind of learning is mostly about avoiding problems by being a realist and not about increasing one's ability to work constructively with others.

But, of course, disillusionment can also play a different role in a person's life, as in the case of Gudrun:

It's been very hard, it's been like being in mourning, but much deeper really so I lost hope, what does it matter, why am I alive just about, it ran so deep. [...] As far as hope's concerned I've ... maybe in this way you go so deep or you're forced to take such a journey that you learn to live for the moment, so you really cling to very small things, that I've had to learn and I'm pretty resigned when it comes to society and justice and things like that so it's ... [...] How should I put it my illusions about a fair and just society they disappeared and okay, that may be too, but I ... there are so many interesting issues,

like is there such a thing as group learning, can individuals learn, can groups learn? One research question after the other has emerged for me from this conflict.

[...]

I've learned a lot about myself and about how other people and I behave and are together. [...] I ended up in a sort of vacuum or you might say in the margins, where I still am in some ways, partly, it's a problem for me, but it's brought me to my studies, and this that I... This about understanding what's happening to you, then you have to look at yourself, so I started therapy, conversational therapy for four years and took a kind of journey with myself, and everything from that ... How did I end up here? Everything from that to ... what was my role in the conflict and ... and then of course also these thoughts about what would have been needed for another outcome. #A22

Gudrun's conflict experience also meant quite profound disappointment that affected her entire fundamental attitude toward life and society. This disillusionment, however, didn't lead to cynicism, but instead, because she worked through her crises, to new issues and lines of development in her life.

We believe that increased cynicism following conflict experiences is more likely in people who don't reflect upon the underlying reasons for the behavior of others. Such people are more inclined to react with dissociation and disillusionment, as they view frustrating experiences as lessons in how others are and in the realities of working life. By not considering the circumstances and processes behind frustrating experiences, many variables for potential change become invisible to them.

### *Unarticulated learning*

There were also those who felt they had learned a great deal through the conflict, but who had difficulty expressing these insights in words. They simply felt that they had gained experience that would be useful later in life, but were somehow unable to articulate any specific conclusions or lessons.

Uh, hard to say anything straight away, concrete, I think we keep learning our whole lives hopefully and ... I think I deal differently with conflicts today. #A9

*Is there, this might seem like a strange question, but do you think, has anything constructive come out of this conflict for you? Has anything good happened? Is there anything about this conflict that's been positive?*

Uh ... Well, in a way I think that ... it's hard ... hard to know. #A6

*Do you think you've learned anything positive, has anything good come out of your experience with this situation?*

... I've really learned a lot and I guess it's from my ... some thoughts kept me up, what can I learn from this? But then it's been, these are hard lessons or you know difficult situations, but ...

*If you found yourself in something similar today would you react differently?*

... Something similar, it depends, 'cause here I was responsible but couldn't take responsibility ... I don't know ... but I can see sort of this with getting in good with someone for example I guess there I've gotten a little more ... can play the game better. I guess I've learned ... I mean of course I've learned, but I have a hard time saying, it's hard to say what, well, express it concretely, but I really feel I've learned something, that I've gotten through while, well, it ended last summer. #A44

This sort of learning can certainly be quite meaningful, but it isn't accessible to conscious reflection and thereby doesn't contribute (at least not directly) to an increased ability to choose, in a well-considered manner, how one wishes to manage conflict situations.

### *Morals of the story*

Some of the interviewees related what they had learned from their conflict experiences in the form of what we might call "morals of the story." It seems as though these individuals believe that there are a number of sensible rules of conduct, which can be expressed briefly and are universally valid. These individuals can make statements such as the following:

*Did you learn something from this disagreeable job experience which you could have use for later?*

Never work for owners who have family working with them, and don't just be a boss be a leader. Treat everyone fairly. #B6

Sometimes others have to make their own mistakes, and take the consequences, because they don't learn any other way, but I don't want to be there taking the consequences with them because of their incompetence. ( I am usually the one who has to do the explaining to the auditors) I really like the saying "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part", but just the opposite seems to be true in my work setting. #B3

*Could you say that you have learnt anything about yourself through this conflict experience?*

Well, upon reflection yes. It's worth having a fight when matters count, the difficulty is that you're often unsure of what counts. I've learned something from this interview too, though I'm not too sure I've got it in words just yet. #B7

*Is there anything in this experience you can say was positive for you?*

I learned the importance of keeping in touch with my superiors. One should visit his superiors and get to know them as well as he can, even if one must create a reason for the visits. #B9

*Would you say you've learned anything from this?*

Well yes, I've learned it's just as well to be real straight from the outset.

*Uh huh. But then don't you risk being difficult?*

Yes, that's the thing, what to do? Maybe you should change jobs every six months and avoid getting too involved, I don't know ... #A20

*Can I ask you a strange question? For your part, has anything good come out of this conflict? Have you learned anything?*

If you're sitting at home then you've learned a lot, but when you're in the middle of the situation then it's hopeless.

*But I mean now, today? Can you see anything that's been constructive?*

No, well yes, there has been, I believe that every person is made of flesh and blood, that you shouldn't hurt someone because they acted in a certain way for some reason, that's what I've learned. #A4

We feel that this type of learning, i.e., collecting a growing set of rules for how one should behave in order to manage well in life, is a common consequence of limited consideration of the questions in rings III and IV of the Conflict Awareness Mandala. These questions elucidate underlying reasons for the events as well as one's own opportunities to change them. When underlying processes are invisible, i.e., not apparent gestalts in the visual field, one is likely to see the surrounding world as being full of people and occurrences with certain typical (and fixed)

characteristics that one must learn to deal with as well as possible. The "morals of the story" used as means to this end are often sensible and useful, but in their simplest form are only standard recipes that don't contribute to an improved ability to actually intervene constructively in social processes. Because the causal relations themselves are invisible, the cognitive tools are lacking for adapting one's attitudes to the current situation's specific circumstances, and one relies instead on tried and true rules of conduct.

### *Improved ability to adequately manage situations*

Some interviewees reported that conflict experiences somehow gave them insights into better ways to deal with social situations as well as practice in social competence:

*Is there anything about this conflict that you feel has been positive?*

I think it made me tone myself down a bit and not come on so strong with my ideas and opinions. It made me listen more to the people around me.

*Has this experience taught you anything about yourself?*

Just go half way even if you think you're right. Ulla thought she was right and so did I. Without the will to make up we'd still be enemies. What I wrote before about not joking in situations with people you don't know. My ambition has always been to try and lighten things up but I understand that that can irritate people even if that's not my intention. #B23

*Is there anything positive you can say about having had this experience with Peter?*

I feel I'm learning to use skills, interpersonal and introspective, that I want to become better at by having to confront issues a bit outside of my usual comfort zone. Some are the very skills I've avoided in the past.

*Do you think you've learned, has anything good come out of this conflict do you think, have you learned anything new, is there anything positive here?*

Well not really, other than realizing how people act sometimes and that you can be attacked through no fault of your own or deceit or the like. I guess I think a little more about what I say and such when I want to express my opinion. #A7

This can also involve better insight into one's own needs and thus improved ability to handle oneself in conflict situations:

*Could you say you have learned something about yourself through the experience with Daniel?*

Yes, I cannot hold everything; I must vent or go crazy (or have a panic attack). I've learned my "limits" of what I can and cannot do and what I will and will not do. #B36

### *Gaining strength through a conflict*

A number of the interviewees mention that their conflict experiences have given them strength in various respects. Asserting one's own integrity or interests in relation to others often leads to diminished fear of confrontation and increased trust in one's own ability to handle conflicts and other awkward social situations. The result is improved self-esteem, which is perhaps better placed under the heading "development" than under "learning." The following are a few examples of this:

*Is there something in this conflict experience you can say has been positive for you?*

Yes, it has caused me to examine my value system, examine my priorities, and consider what other choices I have. Knowing that I have been able to be successful in several different occupations, gives me a sense of freedom, and things are sometimes less stressful, when one realizes at any point, they can choose to end the conflict, by choosing to end the contact. I have made some independent decisions during this that have helped me to become more confident in myself. #B16

*From your answers above, I Guess that this conflict has also had some positive aspects for you. Would you care to summarize them?*

Yes, gaining courage was possibly the top of the list. #B20

*If you think a bit into the future, do you think you'll feel that there was anything positive about your conflict experience, anything you learned?*

I've noticed the past week/weeks that I actually do have something to say and that I actually can and dare to. But now I feel indifferent about what'll happen at work, like today when the boss came in to me and said that all the rooms are refurbished now except yours and X's so it's your turn next time. I don't need new furniture, it's okay like it is. #B28

*Have you learned anything positive from this?*

Sure I have, anyway when I look at it like that, I wouldn't want to have missed it, see.

*That experience?*

Yeah, I wouldn't want to change it. I've become stronger and clearer. I wasn't afraid before either, I'm not the type to be afraid, but I'm even less so now, you know. I dare to stand up even more for what I believe, I've become a stronger person. #A42

### *Increased self-knowledge*

For some people the workplace conflict served as a mirror, giving them new insights into their own personalities. Enduring the tough challenges of the conflict made it clearer and more visible for some how they function, which resulted in a more differentiated and realistic self-image. This, in turn, can imply adaptation of one's attitude to that which one knows one can manage. Here are two examples of people who have gained new insights into themselves through their conflict experiences:

*Did you learn anything about yourself through this experience?*

I learned that I wasn't as emotionally strong as I had thought I was. I also learned that you really shouldn't worry so much about what other people think. What's important is what you know about yourself and those that know you and care about you will be there and the rest really don't matter. #B34

*Is there \*anything\* in this conflict you can say was positive, or had positive consequences?*

Yes I have been able to stay in place and not leave. Very unusual for me.

*Did you learn anything about yourself through this experience?*

Yes, what I think other people think about me affects me greatly and worse than that is not being able to comprehend other peoples motivations when you have to work with them. #B19

### *Learning about how people function*

The conflict can also be used as an opportunity to learn more about how other people and groups do and can function. Such insights can, in turn, be used toward better orientation, e.g., noticing

destructive patterns earlier in the game and thereby having better chances to avoid ending up in unwanted situations:

*If you wound up in a similar situation now, would you act differently?*

Yes I think so, I'm not so sure, if I wound up in something similar then I guess I'd back out, actually, because I also think it's real difficult to change, people change very slowly and all. For example if I was after a job and I noticed that type there, I hope I'd see it earlier, 'cause I somehow felt this early on and if I'd had ... it's just like being butted over and over again ... But now I think I'd get out earlier, I think so. Just realizing that if there's a boss who's like that then there's not much you can do about it, yeah that's what I think, see. #A58

What I learned here was that not giving up can be worthwhile, showing that you care and want to uphold the relationship. I also learned to understand that other people have other ways of behaving during conflicts, Kerstin was actually my exact opposite and that's probably what was so hard. Kerstin wanted to escape and I wanted to fight. We were far apart on that scale. #B56

### *Transformative learning*

All of the forms of learning we have discussed thus far can be termed "horizontal learning," i.e., a question of conclusions and insights about the state of things, both external and internal. Through horizontal learning one becomes more knowledgeable, cleverer and more capable of orienting oneself in life in a conscious manner. There is, however, also a kind of learning we might call "transformative," in that it leads to more profound change in a person. This type of learning – or perhaps more appropriately, this type of development – implies not simply adding new insights and capacities to those one already has, but that the essence of one's personality is transformed. This can involve one's self-image, goal in life, basic attitude toward others, etc. Transformative learning can take many different forms, and below we give examples of some of them.

Stina doesn't specify exactly what her transformation is about, but it is obvious that the change is profound:

*You said, looking back, that it was good you weren't allowed to continue on the job.*

Yes, I'm able to say that now.

*In what way was it good?*

Because the life I've had after that period, when I so to speak emerged from my sick-leave and started looking at myself and have used the time to work on myself it's been absolutely the most valuable period in my life. And thanks to all this stuff they stirred up in me I've started to be able to see myself and look at what I need to change in how I relate to other people. What do I need to see, what do I need to repair and heal with the people closest to me and what is my part in all this. #A14

Through her conflict experience, Susanne, cited in the example below, has confronted and overcome her fear of making mistakes, which means that she can now be more straightforward and open than previously.

*Would you say you've learning something on a personal level from this situation, has it given, has it helped you in any way?*

Yes, I've definitely become straighter ... I have ... I understand now that I can be wrong sometimes too. That obscurity breeds lots of fantasies, that's why I'm more careful today and ask "have I understood you correctly" you see I'm even more careful, not to let ideas and suspicions take over, I've become more concrete. I'm not at all afraid of failure. I think I could subject myself to things that are at

least as scary, if they seemed meaningful and creative, I'm not afraid of ... what should I say ... I don't have a face to lose anymore, I've realized that things like that aren't important. I guess I've gained a lot of freedom. #A16

In Doris' case, the conflict showed her clearly her tendency to allow others to treat her like a "doormat". Her conflict experiences helped her to understand that she can actually choose not to enter the role of the victim.<sup>20</sup>

*Can you summarize what you have learned about yourself through this conflict experience?*

[...] I guess I could sum it up with another well used phrase - life is what you make it. I can continue to be the victim, whether in my personal life, or my professional life, but I no longer choose to play that role. I intend to be the person I was intended to be. I am very good advice giver to others, so I think I'll start taking my own advice! The day I stop learning and changing and growing will hopefully be the date that is put on a marker that I have passed on in this lifetime. #B42

Lisa, who had previously been very tentative in her relationships to colleagues, has experienced through the trails of the conflict that trusting relationships can endure strains:

So far I've been having a hard time coping, but have slowly been learning how to deal with certain people and feel I have grown alot.

*I always ask my interviewees if there is something about the conflict they can say has been positive. Could you say in what way you have grown?*

I have grown by allowing myself to trust another manager, getting close to someone or developing a deep friendship with someone, learning how I've reacted wrong in situations #B48

Through her conflict experience, Inger has developed her ability to stay in touch with herself and not be swept up in the emotional storms of the conflict escalation:

*Is there anything about this conflict that's been positive for you?*

I recognize cowardice and insecurity and fear when I see them. But I don't forget that it's basically about people and human behavior.

*Do you feel that the conflict has helped you learn something about yourself?*

I've learned that in a situation like this, you can stand on the sidelines and let everybody else turn red in the face from anger, but you can still stand there and observe the whole scenario and return to the security you have inside you.

*Do you mean that you have a certain degree of indulgence with people's inability to handle their interpersonal relationships in a positive manner?*

Absolutely! We all have such different backgrounds and different factors that have affected us. #B12

It is characteristic of people whose visual field includes much of the Conflict Awareness Mandala that their learning and development can involve both the external and the internal, and not least the very connection between who one is and the features of the current surrounding situation. Sally, for example, uses her frustrating conflict about the management of an organization both to deepen her insights into how organizations function and to look at her own behavior in various situations. We present rather extensive excerpts from different parts of the interview:

*Is there anything about this conflict you can say has been positive?*

Whew! This is probably not a good day to answer that one! Well, it has given me the most irreplaceable first-hand experience with transformation issues in an organizational context. This is a keen interest of mine, the evolutionary context of all things. [...] It's teaching me that there must be a

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<sup>20</sup> See as well the excerpt from the same interview in Chapter 2, section *M. Personality traits*.

point at which I will, in the future I suppose, be able to recognize earlier on when things are 'stuck' and likely to be unable to resolve. It's teaching me how threatening I can be to others, perhaps. It's teaching me patience and perseverance. It's teaching me that there can be points reached when opting out is the best resolution - or at least keeping that option in mind. I haven't quite reached that point here, yet. May be pretty close, after today.

[...]

I've become tremendously adept at examining for projections, and it serves me well over and over. So in this situation, I've examined where 'my stuff' might be projecting, I haven't found that to be the case, so this next lesson seems to be about "know when to invest, know when to divest." It's my own attitude about what I'm encountering that needs to change.

[...]

I guess I'm fortunate that my background has prepared me well for what life's been teaching in increasingly challenging arenas, re Ignatian 'indifference' or detachment. It's funny how the lessons are shifting focus. About a, well, maybe going on two years now, I had this kind of lesson in re one of the spiritual direction ministry training programs I was helping create and staff - unbelievable sick group dynamics within the team - it was the first lesson of its kind with knowing when to withdraw from a group effort, amazing, unexpected, unresolvable, and sad. Now these local civic efforts are teaching me how to detach, witness it, but not withdraw. #B54

Sally is setting about to find a balance – which works for her – between a number of different factors: her own visions and ambitions, her own personality and competence, and the understanding that there are sometimes many small opportunities to achieve positive changes in the midst of a frustrating situation. The latter insight doesn't lead to cynicism, but to the question of how and where she should focus her energy so that it will do some good.

### *Activating learning*

With respect to learning, perhaps the most important conclusion we can draw after analyzing our interviews is that most answers and comments are very brief and fragmented. This implies that most of our interviewees – and probably most people in general – take advantage of only a small fraction of the learning and development potential inherent in conflict experiences. Using instruments such as our Conflict Awareness Mandala, as well as the concepts and distinctions we have presented in this chapter, we feel that it should be possible to activate and intensify the potential for learning and personal development in individuals involved in conflicts. This naturally requires motivation on the individual's part to direct attention toward this potential as well as access to appropriate instruments and prompting. Our study material is primarily aimed at people who work professionally with conflicts (in the broadest sense) as well as at readers with considerable motivation and relatively good grounding in the area. During the next few years, however, we plan to develop more easily accessible instruments for supporting learning and processes of development, and we hope to receive help in this effort from interested consultants, teachers and therapists.



## 5. Perceiving, interpreting and handling workplace conflicts: Six portraits

### Introduction

In earlier chapters we have one by one described the elements that may be parts of a person's reflections in relation to a workplace conflict. In this chapter we will approach a more holistic image of how individuals can handle conflict experiences by presenting portraits of persons who perceive, interpret and handle workplace conflicts differently. These portraits are based on selected interviews but the characterizations have been stylized in order to be representative for common ways of handling conflict situations.<sup>21</sup> The portraits are intended to illustrate differences in how individuals perceive, interpret and handle workplace conflicts, which means that the portraits should be compared to each other. We have tried to eliminate as much as possible of the specific circumstances of the conflicts described in the interviews. Instead, we have emphasized the characteristic patterns of the individual's experience, reactions, reflections and behavior. We remind the reader that the portraits in this chapter are based on our interview series, which means that all the narratives we draw on were told by persons who perceived themselves as being in a disadvantaged position in the conflict. We have no interviews with people who have harassed others or with people who did not agree that there was a conflict even though other people would describe the situation as an intensive conflict.

Human beings are alike and different in so many ways that it is impossible to construct a typology that is representative of the spectrum of human possibilities. What we do here is presenting portraits that illustrate the kinds of differences that may exist between individuals. Each individual is unique, but there are also certain patterns that are relatively common. One purpose with the approach we present in this study is to offer concepts and perspectives that may help making characteristic forms of perception, interpretation and behavior more visible. This can be useful on an individual level, i.e. for the reader's own self-inquiry and development. It can also be helpful for achieving more insight into the modes of operation of other people. We hope that the reader will use each portrait as a starting-point for self-reflection as well as reflection on persons in the reader's social environment. One may ask oneself questions like: "In what ways am I similar and dissimilar to the person described here?"

Below, we present six portraits representing people with different degrees of awareness of the different dimensions of the conflict experience. The portraits are presented in order of an increasing scope of awareness. The first person is someone who scarcely reflects at all, whereas the last person is someone with an unusually high level of awareness. Each portrait is illustrated by a conflict awareness mandala which offers an approximate image of the scope of the person's awareness. We remind the reader once more that the conflict awareness mandala only depicts what kinds of questions a person reflects on. Many other aspects of how an individual makes sense of a conflict experience cannot be illustrated using the conflict awareness mandala, but must be described in other ways. The first two portraits demonstrate this. The persons described

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<sup>21</sup> However, the first portrait is not based on an interview, but on persons that occur in the stories told to us in several interviews.

are very different individuals, but both have conflict awareness mandalas that show them as not reflecting at all.

## John

John is primarily a doer. Talking and doing things is central to his experience rather than reflecting. He orients himself to a high degree through his immediate feeling: what feels good and pleasant or what feels annoying, boring or unpleasant. He has a short time horizon and does not organize his life in order to attain distant goals. His attention is captured by concrete, visible events and things. He never directs his attention to truly reflect on the feelings, opinions, thoughts and desires he has, he *is* what he spontaneously feels, thinks and wants. His image of what happens in his lifeworld is strongly formed by how the events impacts himself and his wants. He does not narrate his experience into coherent stories, but relates to each event in a piecemeal fashion. His way of talking about the conflict he has been involved in is therefore fragmented and consists of very brief statements where opinions about others are prominent ingredients. He does not like to, and sees little point in, talking about what has transpired. The conflict is acted out, not dealt with through talking or reflecting.

His way of leading his life is not influenced by any well-articulated beliefs about how one ought to live or be. His reactions are immediate and often opportunistic, i.e. functions of what is advantageous to himself. His attitudes towards other people are more governed by his direct likes and dislikes than by norms and rules that apply equal to everyone. He solves problems as they come up, does not plan much in advance and tries to avoid trouble. He is often impulsive and may be unreliable if he is not very keen on entertaining good relationships to certain persons. A central tenet of his morality is "Don't get caught." He does not care overly much what others think of him as long as their opinions don't affect his chances of getting what he wants.

His images of other people are undifferentiated and poorly articulated. He perceives people mostly through his likes and dislikes. If he at all characterizes other people, he describes them in terms of fixed traits or simply reports the opinion he has of them. He does not normally think about how others might perceive a situation. He is not even really aware that one *can* think about how others perceive a situation, what they feel and which wishes they might have.

When John gets involved in a conflict, his reactions are not tempered by any clear ideas about how a decent person ought to behave towards others. He acts out what he feels, except when he realizes that certain actions might have undesirable consequences for himself. He is unaware of the subjective nature of interpretations and therefore takes his own impression of events as the truth. If others call his version of the events in question, he might perceive them as liars. He does not examine his own assumptions about what has happened, and may therefore be fully convinced that someone is a thief and refuse to listen to any counterarguments. He seldom thinks about *why* things happen but is preoccupied with having opinions about them. When problems emerge, he is prone to blame others. His condemnations are often sweeping and simplistic.

Since his conceptions of other people's interiors are poorly developed, concern for their well-being is not a major issue for him. He can be quite manipulative, i.e. use others for his own

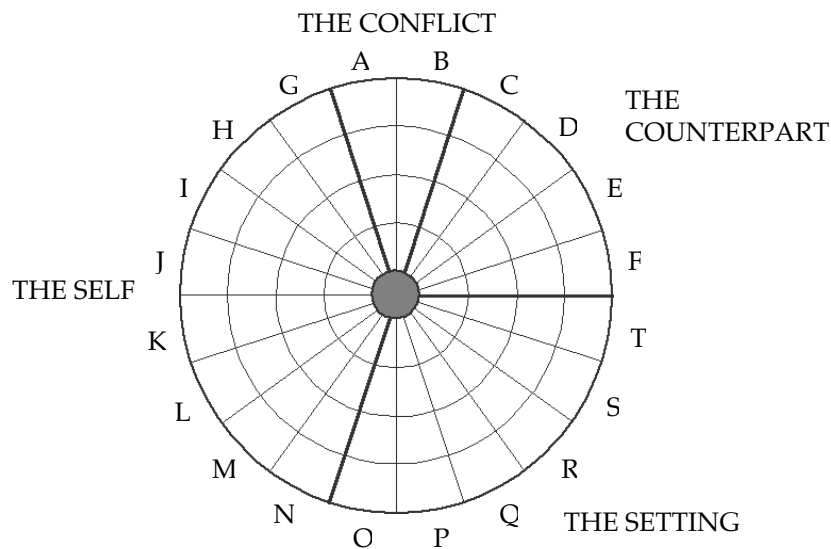
purposes. When acting, he does not calculate with the emotional consequences for others. These become apparent to him only through other people's visible reactions. Because others' interiors are almost invisible to him, he has few inhibitions about telling other people what he thinks about them. He may be brutal and abusive without considering the long-term consequences this might have on people and relationships.

When he is criticized he gets upset and angry and usually retaliates in kind. However, such incidents are mostly forgotten relatively quickly.

As a conflict party he is not easy to deal with, because he doesn't see the point in talking about the problems. He has his own opinion about who is to blame and what is to be done and feels that any further talk is just an effort to evade the truth.

John functions best in a workplace where he has concrete, well-defined tasks that can be resolved within a limited time frame. He needs either a clearcut reward system or a boss who actively oversees that the work is done properly. The organization should have distinct norms that regulate how the work is to be done and there should be mechanisms that guarantee that the norms are respected. John does not adapt his own behaviour to conform to abstract goals or to the optimal functioning of the workplace as a complex system. In order to function efficiently at workplaces that require mutual adaptation and coordination, John therefore needs an active manager.

When conflicts develop, John is poorly equipped to coordinate his own standpoints with those of others. He therefore needs a boss who intervenes, who gives clear directions about how the conflicts should be handled and who backs up his decisions with robust sanctions.



*Figure 5.1 Conflict Awareness Mandala for John*

## Helen

Helen's image of the conflict is not articulated into a coherent narrative. Her conflict experience is made up of fragments of events, feelings, assumptions and opinions which she cannot really express in words. When she is asked to describe what has happened she has great difficulties knowing where to start and what to say. Her statements are brief and vague. This is not only a difficulty in telling others what she has experienced, but reflects her inner lack of overview of the events, how the events related to each other and why they occurred. Her experiences are weakly articulated fragments that float around chaotically in her mind and cannot be reviewed, interpreted and worked through because they are not distinct gestalts.

Helen does not look for reasons behind the events. She has no distinct ideas about how the general conditions of her workplace has contributed to the emergence of the conflict, why others acted as they did or what the conflict really was about. Her attention is drawn to isolated incidents, but she cannot sort out clearly who said or did what when. Her main preoccupation is that it feels bad. She also has difficulties naming her own emotions. If she at all mentions her feelings, it is mostly in very vague terms, such as "it was tough." During the course of the conflict others have behaved in a way she felt hurt by and she has reacted by getting upset, getting problems with her sleep and by crying.

Her main focus in life is to arrange a tolerable and decent existence for herself and her closest family. She does not have any long-term goals, but has distinct ideas about what a daily existence should look like in terms of work and home in order to be satisfying.

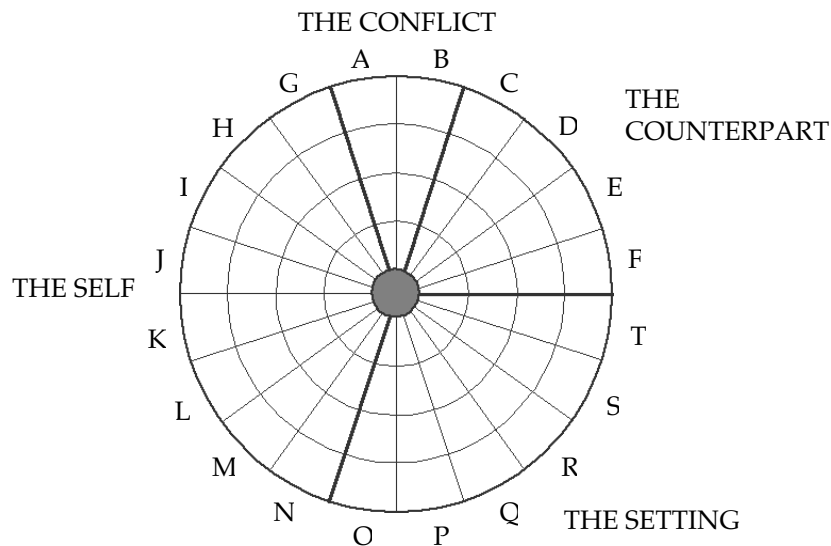
Her images of her counterpart are fragmented and strongly dominated by her feelings and opinions about the other. She has not put together a distinct conception of what kind of person the other is in terms of personality traits. When asked to describe the counterpart, her answers are evasive and unsystematic. She associates somewhat randomly and may mix a description of the other's physical looks, details of the other's educational background or family circumstances, and negative opinions, such as "she is mean." It is evident that she has not spent any time trying to make up an image of what kind of persons others are and why they behave as they do.

Helen is almost completely unaware that her interpretations and opinions are subjective. Her condemnations of others are not tempered by the insight that things may look very different from another point of view. She has very strong and fixed ideas about what is right and wrong and a low level of tolerance for deviations in style or behaviour. People with an unconventional look, unconventional values or an unconventional life style are almost per definition morally dubious people.

Helen is consequently often unrestrained in her sayings and doings in relation to others. She can be very brusque when she finds that others are acting stupidly. On the other hand, she may easily feel helpless because she lacks instruments for handling difficult situations and strained relationships.

One of Helen's most important values is that people ought to do a decent job in order to deserve respect.

In a conflict Helen needs assistance from other to review how events fit together. She does not automatically reflect on what impact her own behaviour has on others and how she contributes to the problems. She needs an ordered role distribution with clearly defined tasks and a boss who can intervene in order to ensure a smooth functioning of the team she is a part of.



*Figure 5.2 Conflict Awareness Mandala for Helen*

## Andrew

Andrew's image of the conflict is mainly made up of concrete events and his own reactions to these events. His experiences are relatively well organized into a chronological and coherent narrative. He has a good overview of what has happened, and he can formulate what different persons have done and not done with many details. However, he does not include in his story such aspects as the workplace's general setting, organizational structure, culture and roles. His field of awareness is filled up by the concrete events, and there is little room for underlying preconditions and structures. He does not provide his story with a background and a context for the actual conflict, but dives straight into particular incidents.

Even though Andrew's narrative of the conflict events is wordy and detailed, it is also strongly subjective. Andrew is not really aware that his own interpretations and opinions permeate his image of what has happened. He is therefore not actively aware of the possibility that his own images of the other persons involved and the meaning of the events might prove to be incomplete or even false.

Andrew's foremost aspiration is to be able to do a good job. He thinks of himself as someone

with certain skills and personality traits, and he wants to have a job where he has the freedom to do what he is good at. His scope of attention does not extend far beyond what is part of his daily work.

Andrew's images of his counterparts mostly consist of how they have behaved and of rather superficial descriptions of their personality traits. He perceives others mainly from a first person perspective. Because of the lack of consideration of such aspects as management structures, role distribution, the nature of others' perspectives, and others' personalities, Andrew tends to blame individuals for frustrating experiences. In other words, he seeks the causes of problems in the behaviour of the persons involved, rather than in more abstract structures and processes. He makes no genuine efforts to imagine how other persons have perceived the situation or himself, nor does he reflect on the motivation, goals and general perspective of his counterparts. The absence of efforts to look at events and circumstances from others' perspectives, and the lack of an ambition to keep his own feelings and opinions separated from his interpretations mean that the images he has are strongly subjective. His narrative is not necessarily outright false in its details, but it is very selective and permeated by value judgments and assumptions which have not been reviewed for accuracy. The proportions that particular aspects of the conflict events have in Andrew's experience are not tempered by other people's versions. His own version of the events would therefore scarcely be regarded as an acceptable description of the conflict by the other persons who were involved. This often leads to major communication problems between the parties, in particular when other people involved are as strongly embedded in their own subjective images as Andrew is. The images different persons have of the conflict are so diverging that they don't have a common frame of reference for starting to talk about how to handle the situation.

Andrew's one-dimensional image of his counterpart means that he does not routinely reflect on how he can express himself or behave in order to influence the other's attitudes and interpretations. He does not reflect on the nature of the relationships between himself and others, how these relationships came to be what they are, and how they might be transformed for the better. Andrew doesn't even *want* to spend effort trying to understand his counterpart better, because he is busy disliking him or her. As a consequence, he usually does not take any initiatives to talk about what has gone wrong and why. He might minimize his contact with the counterpart, show his dislike in various ways and try to pursue his own interests using various concrete means of exerting pressure. In contrast to Helen, he is to some extent aware that his value judgments are his own subjective opinions. He therefore does not express them in the same unrestrained way, unless he really feels his negative opinions are well-founded. However, since he is not really conscious of how subjective his interpretations of events and others' motivations are, it happens rather often that he feels that his opinions are justified.

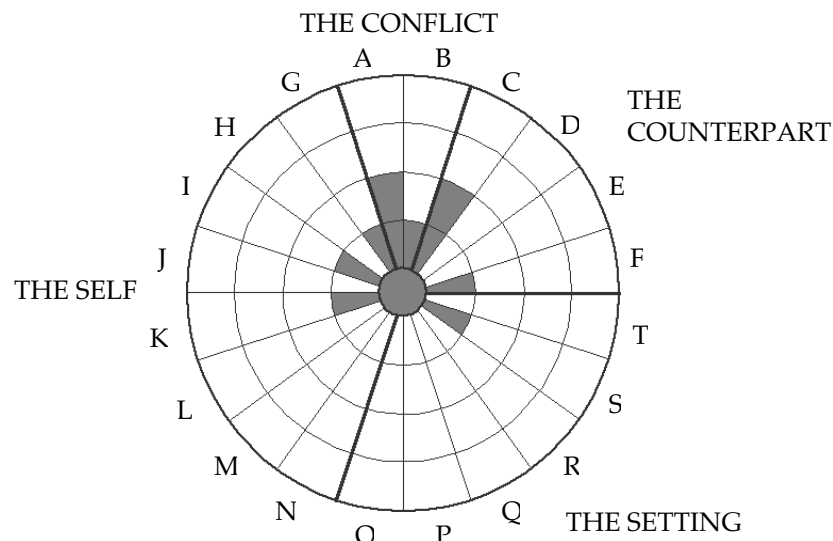
Since Andrew is prone to blame individuals for frustrating events, he often feels hurt and treated unjustly. He does not have a distinctly articulated conception of his own values and his own personality and he is therefore rather vulnerable to negative feedback from others. If others directly or indirectly convey to him that he has made errors or that his competence is inadequate, it hits him hard. He does not have a well grounded and distinct image of himself that gives him a steady foothold when faced with others' criticism. Since he does not take his own emotions as an object for reflection, he is to a great extent a captive of them. Often, the only way he can see for getting out of his negative emotions is to be rehabilitated by getting those who have treated him

badly to admit their wrongdoing, make apologies and give him recompensation for his sufferings.

For Andrew it is important to have a well functioning workplace where he can exercise his professional skills as well as possible, without undue interference from others. He likes being able to solve problems and to do a good job. He wants to have a boss who can make decisions, but who is also capable of listening. He may get upset by injustices and malfunctioning organizations, but he does not formulate what is important to him in terms of principled values, his own development as an individual or the function of his organization in relation to the surrounding society.

Andrew is only in a very limited way capable of drawing on his conflict experiences for his own development as a human being. He scarcely reflects on himself, how he feels, how he thinks, what kind of person he is. Since he does not actively ask himself how others perceive him, he lacks an important instrument for gaining some measure of distance to himself and his own role in social interactions.

When Andrew gets involved in a serious conflict, he needs access to a conflict management procedure where a process leader helps him listen to other parties' image of the conflict, and guarantees that Andrew may feel that his counterparts listen to his issues and respect him. If he suffers emotionally from the conflict, he may benefit from counselling with someone who can help him articulate the feelings he has, and help him see the interpretations that generate enduring negative feelings. He might thereby learn to take his emotions as objects of conscious attention, which enables him to work through his feelings and constructively conclude his negative experiences.



*Figure 5.3 Conflict Awareness Mandala for Andrew*

On a general level, the most important items on Andrew's developmental agenda are to increase his awareness of the role his own interpretations play in his experience; to become aware of the importance of getting acquainted with other peoples' perspectives; to start reflecting on the role of organizational structures and cultures as causal factors; and to start taking his own emotions, interpretations and opinions as objects of conscious inquiry.

## Karen

Karen takes for granted that a conflict must be understood in terms of its wider context, such as the type of workplace, the working conditions, the management structure and the leadership style of her bosses. She also includes her own background as an important variable: her education, what she has worked with before, the reasons and manner in which she came to her workplace. She regards these circumstances as important because they constitute a frame for the conflict, a frame that at least partly explains why the conflict developed and why she became a party to it. Karen consequently has an inner map which allows her an overview of the conditions and a means of orienting herself in the course of events. When she tells the story of her conflict, she starts by describing the workplace and how it came that she started working there. Her way of telling her story shows that she has a good ability to take the role of other people: she knows that it is important for the listener to have some general knowledge of the workplace in order to be able to follow the narrative of the conflict events. Her story is well structured and gives many details about the salient events. She also interweaves the story with comments about how she interpreted various incidents and circumstances. She has a clear and well articulated image of how she would like the workplace to function and she continually compares the actual state of affairs with her vision of what the workplace ought to be like. Roles and role distributions are important themes in her reflections. She makes a clear difference between the roles in the workplace on the one hand and the individuals that are supposed to live up to the roles on the other hand. She believes that it is important that the roles are clearly defined and she reflects on how different individuals relate to the roles they are assigned to. This means that she does not exclusively blame individuals for the problems that emerge. Problems may also have their sources in impersonal conditions, such as unclear role distributions, poorly functioning communication and the fit between individuals and their roles. Since she perceives some problems to be related to organizational forms, she is likely to take initiatives to change problematic conditions. She may suggest changes in job descriptions, improvements in the communication patterns or clarifications of role distributions. However, her approach to thinking about role distributions is rather concrete, such as who should be assigned to specific work tasks. She does not think about roles in a more psychological sense, e.g. who has a hold on someone else, who has a higher informal rank, etc.

Karen takes pains to describe the conflict events in an objective way. She clearly separates her own subjective feelings and opinions from her image of the conflict and the persons involved. She consequently does not perceive the conflict from a first person perspective (see chapter 4). However, she also does not go very deep in her reflections about other persons. She notices that others behave in certain ways that are problematic for herself and other colleagues. While she makes up images of other people's personalities as wholes, she does not spend much time reflecting on why they behave as they do. In the cases when she speculates about the inner



workings of others she is aware that her ideas are subjective and should not be treated as the final truth. Her basic philosophy is that individuals are different. Some people are more difficult to cope with than others, but that is simply a fact of life. She wants to believe in other people's goodness and she wants to be able to respect them. She is not prone to blame individuals, but thinks that a good organization should be able to deal with the existence of individuals who are not as agreeable and adaptable as others.

Her second person perspective is primarily related to concrete situations: she is aware of how other people feel in certain situations and understands, for example, how their attitudes and behavior was influenced by the stress they were subjected to. However, she does not reflect very much on what it means to be the other person, taking the whole personality system into account.

When Karen gets involved in a conflict with others she feels a lot of strain and frustration. She notices what she feels and what she needs in order to feel well. She has distinct notions about the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. When the situation becomes too strained she takes responsibility for herself by looking for support from colleagues or professionals. She knows when it is time to report ill or to give up her job because she continuously monitors her own emotional and health state. Her frustration does not turn into a heavy antagonism since she does not put all the blame for the problems on individuals. Other people cannot be made responsible for all the limitations they have. When she is made the target of criticism and depreciatory comments she is not very badly hurt. She has her own internal norms as guidelines for evaluating if she has done a good job or not. The criticism of others can feel tough and constitute a negative environment that she would like to be rid of, but it has no major impact on her self-esteem. She can consequently take notice of the intense dislike someone else has for her without feeling the need to launch a counterattack or mobilize a vehement defense of her self-respect.

Karen's awareness of her own interior does not go very deep. She notices what she feels (including intuitive hunches), she has a clear idea of what she wants her worklife to be like and she has a distinct sense about what is important to her. She can also to a certain extent look back and reflect on how she felt and reacted in a certain situation and notice that she was not really aware at the time of the background to her feelings. She may, for example, in retrospect know that she let herself be persuaded to take a job because she was flattered by the offer.

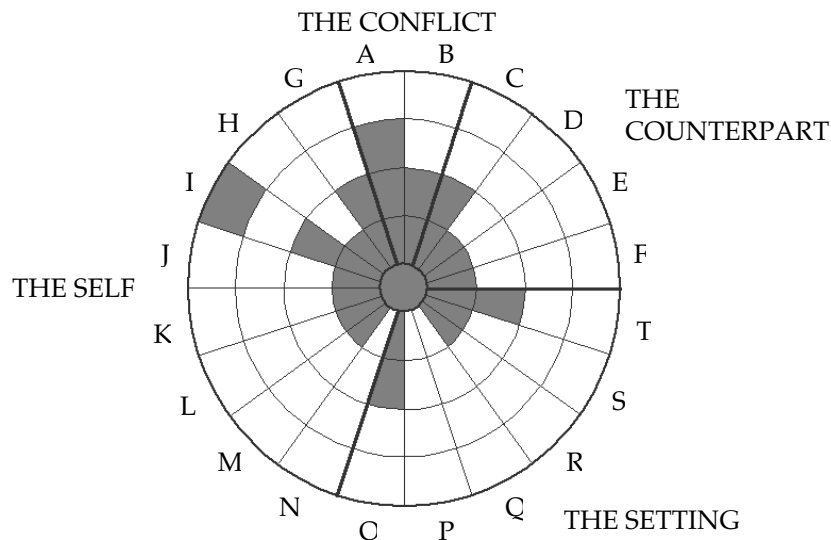
A prominent value in Karen's workrelated value set is to achieve a high level of quality for the products and services produced, resulting in a contribution to the life quality of the consumers or clients. Her main goals are consequently of a more principled nature than Andrew's.

Karen realizes that each experience is an occasion for learning, but since she does not have a particularly differentiated conception of her own interior, her learning is rather vague. She accumulates experiences about life and therefore she becomes more experienced and more skilled over time. However, she does not have a distinct conception of how she can develop and change as an individual. Her learning is only accidentally transformative.

In order to feel well at her workplace Karen needs to feel that her work is meaningful in a larger perspective. She wants to be able to communicate constructively with colleagues and managers about how to organize the work. When she gets involved in conflicts she needs access to persons who may take on the function of being dialogue partners in a common quest for constructive

solutions.

As a person, Karen may benefit from devoting more attention to learning about how other people function. Such an understanding of the inner workings of other people may allow her to relate to individuals in ways that have good chances to function well in the particular circumstances.



*Figure 5.4 Conflict Awareness Mandala for Karen*

## Michael

In Michael's story about the conflict the informal roles and the relationships between the parties is a prominent theme. While Karen thinks about roles primarily in terms of who is responsible for what, Michael is keenly aware of how individuals try to position themselves in the informal web of relations in the team. Like Andrew and Karen, Michael describes the concrete events that make up the conflict, but he conceives these as expressions of an underlying process. His image of the counterpart may, for example, include an idea about the other having a weak sense of self-esteem and trying to compensate for this by achieving a powerful position in the workplace. Michael consequently believes that the annoying behaviour of the counterpart can be explained by the internal psychological processes of which the counterpart may not be aware. The actions of the counterpart are interpreted in terms of the functions those actions have for creating and maintaining a certain ranking order among the parties. Michael is aware of non-verbal messages, such as the significance of body language, tone of voice, veiled hints and indirect meanings of specific behaviors. He interprets these messages as expressions of other people's feelings, attitudes and efforts to attain a certain position for themselves.

Michael's own personality is an everpresent distinct gestalt in his field of vision. He reflects on

his own behaviour and its reasons and he has some ideas about how his own biographical background has conditioned him to react strongly to certain things. Michael consequently perceives himself as an active part in the shaping of the conflict events. Furthermore, he uses the events as a mirror for getting a clearer image of himself. He knows that his own interpretations may be incomplete or erroneous and he knows that there is a possibility that he may have a misguided self-image. He is aware of how his own strong emotions may cloud his ability to reason clearly in critical situations. This awareness means that he may decide to try to curb his own immediate impulses in hot moments. If this does not succeed, he reflects afterwards on what was going on in himself. He is interested in seeking out other people and asking them to give him their sincere opinion about what is going on. He is keen to attain a more accurate image both of himself and of the counterpart. In Michael's perception, the conflict has many variables: a situation which is stuck can become unstuck not only through changes on the part of other people, but also by his own shifts in feelings and stance through new insights.

Michael has a mental model of how his counterpart functions and can to some extent predict how she will react in different situations. This understanding is spontaneously used by Michael to fashion strategies for bypassing the most annoying aspects of the situation. He may nurture the counterpart's needs to some extent in order to influence the course of events in a constructive direction. Michael also perceives the character of the relationship between himself and other people as a distinct gestalt. This means that he can actively reflect on the quality of the relationship in the present as well as on what might be done to change the character of the relationship in a desired direction. A further advantage of his clear perception of the relationship as such is that he can voice his perceptions of what is going on between himself and the counterpart in discussions. He can point out to the other what kind of relationship they have now and initiate a discussion about how the character of the relationship could be changed for the better. His mental model of the counterpart gives him some lead in assessing whether such discussions are meaningful or not. If it doesn't seem meaningful to take up a conversation about the character of the relationship, Michael tries to find other ways to handle the interactions.

Michael's habit of reflecting on his own and other people's ways of functioning and the social skills he has developed by drawing on this habit means that Michael feels that he is a rather competent person. He has a high degree of self-acceptance and a strong sense of self-esteem.

The themes of personal development, learning and realizing his own individuality are prominent in Michael's field of vision in his worklife. He has a keen sense of his own uniqueness and a long time horizon. When many others only perceive the concrete aspects of various events during the workday, Michael makes sense of them as expressions of universal existential themes. He can therefore make connections between different situations that somehow share some rather subtle quality or dilemma, using experiences and learnings from one situation for elucidating and handling another. When he gets involved in a conflict, he does not only regard it as an annoying situation that he has to sort out. Conflicts are a part of life, and it is one of the tasks in the life of a human being to learn to deal with them. A conflict might therefore be an enriching experience. Through the conflict experience, one may get to know one's own reaction patterns and one might learn things like asserting oneself in constructive ways or emotionally handling one's own frustrations.

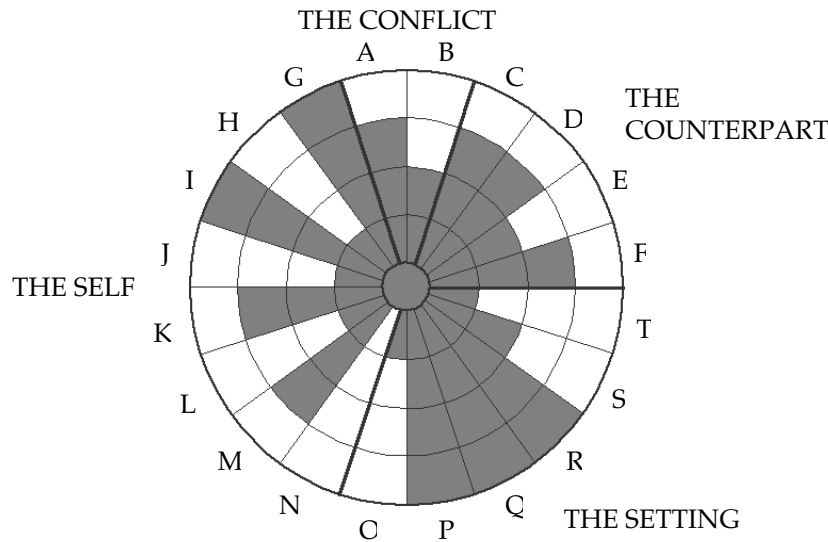


Figure 5.5 Conflict Awareness Mandala för Michael

## Elisabeth

When people like Elisabeth gets involved in conflicts, the reason is often that they have their own ideas about how their workplace ought to be organized in order to function optimally with regard to the function their organization has in a larger societal context. Elisabeth is keenly aware of the problem of designing systems and processes. She wants them to create an environment where the employees can feel satisfied and where it is possible to attain high quality standards for the products and services produced. Her image of the conflict is very complex. She considers a wide spectrum of preconditions, such as organizational structures, changes in the organization's environment, traditions, organizational cultures, role distributions and the personality patterns and meaning-making perspectives of individuals. She takes for granted that a conflict and a workplace can be seen from many different perspectives. She moves with ease between these perspectives without becoming disoriented. She can look at the events as they appear to the CEO, to the team leader, from a technical point of view, from her personal point of view and from a moral perspective and she can integrate the insights she derives from this into a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Continual and active reflection over a wide range of phenomena is a prominent ingredient of Elisabeth's meaning-making. She reflects on how other people think and experience various situations, on how large-scale societal changes necessitate changes in procedures and goals in her own organization and on her own actions, reactions, goals and intentions. She finds it important to continually test and reevaluate her own interpretations, goals and values. She expects and welcomes that she herself will change.

Elisabeth's sense of identity is grounded in an intimate self-knowledge. She has a high degree of acceptance for herself as she is. She is therefore not very vulnerable to or dependent on others' opinions about her. This means, among other things, that she can act in a way that is completely free of prestige concerns. She can take on a leading role when necessary, but also retreat into the

background if that serves the cause she is committed to.

When Elisabeth gets involved in a conflict, she reflects on how her counterpart functions in order to adapt her own behaviour to make it easy for the counterpart to be constructive. She takes many and diverse initiatives in the conflict in order to address the problems. She is not afraid to raise the problems in plain language with anyone of the involved. She expects and wants all people, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy, to be able to meet each other as adult, mature human beings. Her greatest frustration is when this is impossible, for example because some people refuse to communicate about problems Elisabeth regards as shared concerns.

Elisabeth needs an environment where it is possible for her to exercise her ability to think strategically and implement creative solutions. She needs to be able to communicate with her colleagues and bosses in an open and openended way. She wants to be respected as a competent and unique individual regardless of titles and rank. She does not feel well in places where there are rigid traditions and restricted possibilities to change things. When she gets involved in a conflict she may need access to a person who can listen to her concerns and who can help her achieve some distance to the inertia she is frustrated by. She may also need support for leaving jobs which have no chances of giving her the action space she needs to realize her potential and act in alignment with her values.

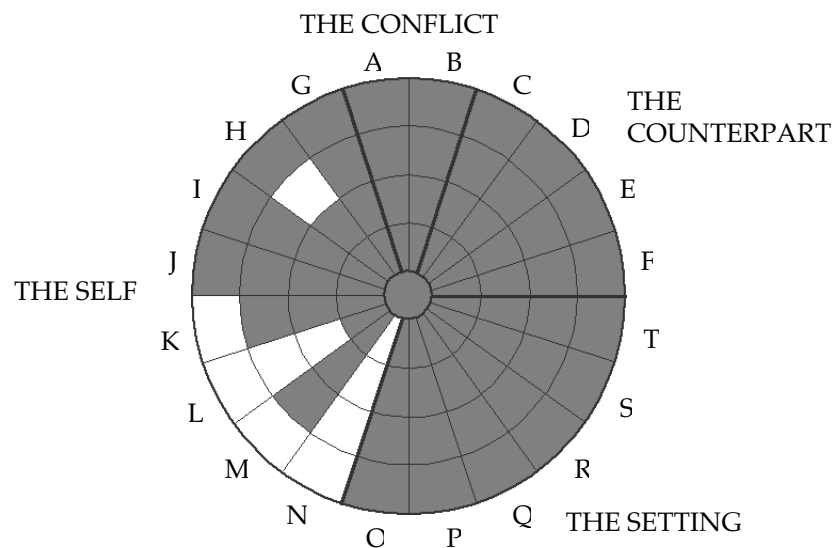


Figure 5.6 Conflict Awareness Mandala for Elisabeth

One of the things Elisabeth needs to learn is to accept that many individuals and groups are so strongly embedded in certain thinking patterns and traditions that they are incapable of change. Elisabeth may find it difficult to let go of her ideals about how people ought to relate to each

other and about how organizations should function. By learning to recognize unproductive situations early on she can focus her energies where the circumstances allow her to be an efficient creator of valuable services.

### Individuals and workplaces

We are convinced that the characteristic differences that become apparent when comparing the portraits above are relevant and important in order to understand how individuals and groups function in workplaces. However, more empirical research is needed in order to develop and validate this preliminary formulation of our perspective. We have focussed on individuals in this study. It would probably be interesting to explore the workplace cultures that develop in workplaces where the majority of the employees are similar to John, Helen, Andrew or one of the others. In some of the interviews we have made, we believe we can discern workplaces which have developed cultures that reflect certain meaning-making patterns. Several of the conflict cases we have studied appear to involve situations where people who are similar to Elisabeth or Michael come to a workplace dominated by people like Helen and/or Andrew. We hope to be able to explore the dialectic between workplace cultures and individual meaning-making patterns more systematically during the coming years.

## 6. Jane gets fired

### Introduction

This entire chapter is devoted to the interview with "Jane." We have chosen to discuss this interview in depth for two reasons. The first is that Jane is, in our opinion, exceptional in terms of her inclination toward reflection and her ability to handle situations involving other people. Because Jane also tells at length and in detail about her experiences, the interview provides many illustrations of different types of sophisticated competencies. The other reason for using this interview is that it so clearly reveals the limits of what individual conflict management skills can accomplish at a workplace where most people do not wish to work through conflicts. Jane, despite her sophisticated skills, was fired.

We hope that the interview with Jane will give the reader a vivid insight into how an unusually aware person thinks, feels and reacts in the face of frustrating working-life situations. At best, Jane's reflections can cause the reader to look at him-/herself, thereby gaining insight into how he/she functions at present and seeing possibilities for functioning in another, perhaps more satisfying way.

Jane's was the longest of all the e-mail interviews we conducted. The printout comprises almost 40 pages of text. Jane told of her experiences in *great* depth, and although the interview was the longest conducted, only four rounds of questions and answers were used, as compared to the usual five to seven. We report almost the entire interview, a few sections at a time, and largely in the order in which they were originally written. We provide comments following every excerpt, meaning that we point out those aspects of the interview we find relevant to our questions, in order of appearance. We have also inserted bracketed code designations into the text (e.g., [C4]). These codes refer to the table of questions presented in Chapter 2. The purpose of this is to point out characteristic features of Jane's way of telling as well as to use the interview as an additional illustration of what the various questions involve in practice. At the end of the chapter we also present Jane's Conflict Awareness Mandala.

The interview has been edited slightly, partly to conceal the identities of those involved and partly to eliminate the few digressions that are not relevant here. We have, naturally, obtained "Jane's" consent to use her entire interview as a case study in this report.

### Interview Round #1

We plunge right into Jane's story, just as she wrote about it in her introductory case description:

1 There are a number of conflicts I went through at my last job. I believe that my primary conflict was with my boss, Becky. I think that this conflict gave rise to other, secondary conflicts. Both ultimately led to my leaving my job. I'll tell you a couple of sample conflicts, but, first, I'll try to put it in context.

2 My part of the company is in charge of product development. The company goal is to "work fast and produce a lot." My personal goal is to "work efficiently and well and produce quality work" [L1,

**T2**]. I was hired to be a project manager, and was the first employee on my team. I hired and built the team, therefore, my position was Team Lead. I was responsible for work assignments, scheduling, as well as some product development. I also did other work for other groups as needed. Eventually, it was my responsibility to act as the representative from our branch to the corporate product development team. **[O1]**

3 Within a week of my joining, our small company announced a merger with a large corporation based in another part of the country. Within a six months, I was no longer able to allow my team or myself the freedom to make all of our own decisions about things like styles, templates, tools to work with, etc. We had to work within a larger structure. I saw the need to conform to the larger corporate structure; there was a mandate to do so **[L1, T4]**. My boss felt that we could continue to operate as we wished; until someone forced us to do otherwise I suppose **[D1]**.

We see already in the first paragraph that Jane has thought quite a bit about her conflict experiences and that she has ideas about what constitutes the most fundamental problem as well as its side effects. When beginning to tell, she puts herself in the reader's perspective and is careful to provide a clear background to the story. What she finds essential to this background are the organization's character and superordinate values ("work fast"), her own role and function, and the company's organizational context (changed ownership structure, and the consequences of this). Jane already intimates one of the underlying causes of the conflict, namely that the company's ideology and her own notion of goals are at odds. She expresses this in neutral terms, i.e., without passing judgment on the prevailing attitude in the company, but it is nevertheless clear that her own attitude is different. Owing to this, she appears to be safe and secure in her own world – she does not seem to need to defend her own diverging attitude, e.g., by belittling that of the company.

Paragraph 2 also shows that it is natural for Jane to think in terms of the role one has in an organization, i.e., the tasks associated with her position in the company. In paragraph 3, Jane shows evidence of her broad strategic perspective: she believes that the merger with a larger group of companies will, in the long run, require harmonization of certain aspects of work to those conventions applying to the group as a whole. She wanted to begin this harmonization process at an early stage, whereas her boss did not seem to see the necessity of this.

4 Within a year of my joining, my reporting had changed so that while I still reported to my same immediate supervisor, Becky, I also "dotted line" reported to a new Director in the corporate office. I asked Becky to investigate what this meant and how it affected us and our budget. I gave her very specific questions. I never received a reply. **[P4]**

Jane's keen awareness of the importance of clear roles is expressed here. By turning to her boss, she tries to elucidate the uncertainty she immediately perceives.

5 Within a year and a half, my team had grown from one person to four and our responsibilities from three products to twelve. The deadlines were constant, and the stress was affecting everyone. **[O1]**

6 By September, I was very stressed and unhappy with my job **[I1]**. I felt like Becky was no longer available to help me because she had too many other responsibilities **[H1]**. Our weekly meeting with the Leads had decreased to none at all or only very occasionally. I was questioning her ability to let go of work and let me handle situations. I felt abandoned and like I lacked power to do my job **[I1]**. Regularly she would take such an active interest that she would handle situations or do work rather than refer it to me. I often found out information after the fact or too late or not at all **[C1]**. I would try to broach her with these issues, and was often "dismissed" or invalidated **[A4]**.



7 For example, I asked to reconsider work load so that I and my team each had more time to learn and become experts in the products [R4]. I feel that research that leads to knowledge is a requirement for any engineer to successfully create a user manual that will best assist and support the end-users [T4]. She said it was unnecessary. I felt that either she was misunderstanding me or I was misunderstanding her, both in this case and in many other cases. I regularly asked her verbally or through e-mail to discuss clarification if I sensed or noted that she disagreed with my methods [D4]. I believe that in general, I initiated all contact.

When Jane arrives at the period when she begins to feel real frustration with the situation, her description interweaves three circumstances (tight deadlines, increased work assignments, her boss' reduced availability due to work pressure), Becky's behavior and her own feelings about what is happening. Jane desires the authority and information she needs to function within her own role as boss, but she feels that Becky often prefers to do things herself instead of delegating responsibility to Jane. Once again, she notes that the role distribution is not in place and functioning, and again she tries to discuss the issue with her boss, but to no avail. She also actively seeks critical feedback from her boss so as to, early on, clarify differences of opinion on how she should work.

8 First conflict example:

In September, however, she initiated contact. She sent me message that requested that we meet to discuss the direction of my team and to talk about ways to improve how we worked [C1]. There was no context, but I suspected it came from somewhere. I went to meet her. She began talking about how we need to keep all of our options open and encourage people to come up with ideas. I said I agreed, but where did all of this come from? She said that someone (Donald) from my team had come to her to discuss how he was unhappy with the way things were. The other two from my team (Bill and Carlos) also spoke, but to say they were concerned that Donald might quit. Each team member wanted more independence [B1]. We discussed that both of us felt discomfort with this based on past performance and lack of experience [B2] (Donald had less than two years of experience and had only had one previous job which he was the sole engineer at and had no immediate supervisor. This was Carlos's first job out of college. Bill had about five years of experience.)

9 I asked her if she had suggested that they come talk to me first [A4]. She said she had, but that Donald indicated discomfort in doing this. I said, well, to resolve it, I need to know the problem and need to be able to deal with him. She said that she didn't see any problem in her handling the situation. I felt frustrated by this [I1]. I regularly felt like I didn't get the opportunity to handle things the way I thought I needed to, and felt like she overinserted herself into my work [C4].

In this description of an important incident, we see that Jane asks herself what the background might be to Becky's statements, and she does not hesitate to confront Becky with questions as to this background. In this way, the discussion is quickly focussed onto the concrete problems that have arisen. Besides discussing these, however, Jane sees that there is an additional level to the problem, namely how one should fundamentally approach dealing with this type of question. Becky obviously does not feel this is an important topic to discuss – perhaps she is more inclined to think in terms of concrete problems that should be solved quickly. Again, Jane reports how she felt in the situation as well as the interpretation of the situation that gave rise to her feelings.

10 I spoke with each team member and offered this solution: I would hand over ownership to the team and take on a guidance role [E4]. They would handle their own schedules and could write up how they wanted the team to work and how they thought that could happen. I asked for status reports and team meeting for updates and information exchange each week. I told them to tell me how they wanted

to do this [R4]. (In the past, they had been very resistant about the reports and meetings. I had to remind them every week.)

In this situation, Jane's idea of being a good boss is to allow her team members to take more independent responsibility for how the experienced problem should be managed. She is prepared to take a step back from her role as boss, but asks of her team members that they should clearly formulate what the role distribution should be and how work coordination will be accomplished. Jane feels it is necessary that she, as team leader, have information on how work is proceeding, but since she knows from experience that the team members have been reluctant in this regard, she asks them to propose an appropriate way of handling this function. She wishes to engage the entire team in an open process for developing a method of working that satisfies the goals and needs of everyone involved.

11 My discussion with Donald went badly. He felt he had no obligation or responsibility to come to me (which I think Becky regularly reinforced) and did not think he could work things out with me [D1]. I asked what I could do and he said nothing. From that point forward, he communicated very little with me [C1]. Prior to this, he had indicated no problem to me. Anytime I asked how things were, he said okay. In our annual review, he marked me as an excellent manager. When I asked about this, he said, well, he just hadn't felt comfortable with the truth.

12 In fact, even in this discussion, he admitted he really liked me and knew I always tried to help the team out and that he knew I always tried to give him projects that he would like and then let him have a lot of freedom on it [E1, D1]. I was really confused [I1]. His anger seemed to be focused on, and Becky agreed, the fact that he felt like with such an involved Lead, he felt uncomfortable [E3]. We decided he preferred to work on his own [E4]. In fact, the product engineer for his main project had complained to Becky that Donald was not communicative enough. However, I should have given him an increasing amount of space, and did recognize where I should have done more or less with regard to working with him. I should have offered more encouragement and less suggestions [G4, E4, C4, F4].

Jane begins by establishing that the conversation with Donald "went badly." It appears from her statements that she had hoped to get Donald to make constructive suggestions himself as to how they might form their working relationship. Characteristic of Jane's mentality is that she tries to discover what type of person Donald is and under what working conditions he best functions, and to then adapt her leadership to these factors. For Jane, this adaptation to the individual is more important than carrying through her own definite ideas on what the role distribution should be between a boss and her subordinates.

13 Nevertheless, in my opinion, Donald had an obligation and a responsibility to communicate any problems he had with me to me [C2]. I felt that he should have had this reinforced by my boss, and that she should have backed me up when I tried to reinforce this [C2]. Instead, she said I tried to take on too much authority. I said, Okay, so we have different ideas of my role. Perhaps this is the problem. I stated I thought it was my responsibility to supervise the day-to-day work of the team, allocate resources, and schedule projects. In this, I told her, I felt like I was the primary line of communication for the team. She agreed with this [P4]. So I was left very confused and frustrated [I1]. This is what she said, but when I worked like this, I got a negative response?

Jane does not see Donald's behavior and attitude as the primary problem, but instead it is what she perceives as her boss' inconsistency that has created a difficult situation for Jane herself. She formulates the problem as different viewpoints on roles, but Becky fails to report any conceptions of Jane's role that are clearly divergent from Jane's own conceptions. Jane finds this confusing; she desires clarity and consistency in extant roles.

14 I felt like the discussion with Bill and Carlos went well. They agreed. However, a month and a half later, not one had proposed any ideas about how they wanted the team to work. I asked the team members, and each said they were just too busy right now. I followed up regularly with Becky about this. She kept saying that she knew we needed to meet about it, but didn't have the time. I asked if she thought I was doing my part to improve the situation and she said yes [D1].

15 I still felt uncomfortable, as if an explosion was pending, but since everyone kept saying everything was fine and no one mentioned any problems to me, tried to believe that [I1].

16 In the meantime, I felt like the best fix to the solution was to step down as Team Lead. Over the course of a month, I suggested this to Becky at least three times, each time with a reason of why and how we could make it work. She continually said she thought it best that I stay in my position, but that she would work on a solution that would make everyone happy [R4, P4].

Jane's chosen solution for dealing with the discontentment did not work. The team members say they do not have the time. When Jane realizes it failed, she consults her boss, who agrees that there is a need, but who also has no time to deal with the question. Now Jane tries to reassure herself by asking Becky if she thinks Jane is doing what she should. In this way, Jane has at least protected herself from becoming the scapegoat if the problems continue to be serious. Because the problems are not being analyzed, Jane sees the situation as untenable: her role contains antagonisms that she is powerless to resolve. The natural alternative for Jane is to step down, but her boss sees things differently.

Second conflict:

17 Early in the summer, we hired a new project engineer. This is the person who coordinates all of the people working on the project. She is the head of the project, but doesn't manage the people on the team [O1]. In my opinion, this creates a situation of "too many cooks in the kitchen". In other words, an overlap of authority [O2]. She often made decisions that conflicted with decisions I or another Lead had made. Both I and the QA Team Lead regularly went to Becky, our boss, and tried to get her to help resolve the conflict. She always told us that Mary was in charge. So I began just trying to do whatever Mary wanted to try to avoid problems, and since I knew this was what my boss wanted [P4, R4].

Once again, Jane sees unclear role distribution as a problem and again takes the initiative to clarify the roles. She yields to Becky's interpretation and tries to minimize the problems by viewing Mary as her boss, whose instructions should be followed.

18 In one case, my team was confused about how a part of the product worked. I e-mailed Mary and asked her to help us understand it better. Becky knew this was a question and knew this was how I was going to handle it. Mary replied that she didn't really think it was a question and copied in Becky, and three other people. I replied back to her and Becky that maybe she had misunderstood, but we were confused, and it was very important to us. She said she had already discussed it with Becky and it was all settled. Becky had never mentioned to me that she and Mary had talked about it. I asked Becky, why does she always talk to Mary about my questions -- why doesn't she send Mary to me to talk? Again, Becky did not see an issue [P4].

Every time a problem arises, Jane tries to discover the interpretations underlying other people's actions, and she does so by asking open questions inviting the counterpart to explain his/her view. This does not work as Jane had intended, however, as the others do not perceive any problems worth discussing.

19 One week, I was out for three days. I have been having serious stomach and intestinal troubles, I believe due to stress. I had to have minor exploratory surgery to eliminate a diagnosis. It was outpatient, but was painful and required a small recovery period. While at home, I kept in touch with the team and did some work. While planning for my absence, I asked if anyone on my team could help me with my project, since the deadline fell while I was out. No one was available. I asked another team lead within the company if she had any staff available. She did and loaned me an engineer for a week. I notified Mary, who happened to be the project engineer for this project, that Sue would be working in my absence, but that I would pick it up when I returned. I also notified the team. I returned to work on Friday, October 22, met with Sue and we planned that she would finish up what she was doing and then give the files to me.

20 Early last week, on October 25, in the afternoon, I read a message from Mary to Sue. Mary sent the message to Sue and copied me, Bill from my team, Becky, a developer, and Mary's boss K. She thanked Sue for her hard and good work and said she had reassigned the project to Bill [A1].

21 My problems with this: I am the engineer assigned to this project, I am the Lead who assigned projects, Bill had said he was not available to help me when I asked, and just general frustration of continually being kept out of communications I needed to be involved in and feeling like no one was going to help me [I1, H1].

22 What I did: I emailed Mary and reminded her that I was the engineer and had already been working on this, that I was the Lead and responsible for assigning projects within the team, and so asked that she please remember to include me in conversations next time [A4]. No response to me from Mary, however, she did go to Becky and talk to her about it. Again, Becky handled the situation. Mary maintained that she did what she thought was right and did not deliberately exclude me. Becky told her it was okay and to ignore my message. I went to Becky and tried to discuss it with her (not knowing yet that Mary had talked to her and having had no contact from Becky) but Becky told me she had no time to talk to me. She did however, manage to tell me that Mary had talked to her and that she didn't think Mary had done anything wrong. She said, "There are always two sides to every story."

23 I also went to talk to Bill. I told him that I was the engineer on this project and that he needed to talk to me [P4]. His only response was that my hair looked nice that day.

24 I also spoke to Mary's boss K. He refused to do anything, saying only, "There are always two sides to every story."

25 I was so angry and frustrated that I left (it was 5:00 a little early but not terribly) [I1].

In her description of this incident, we see how precisely Jane keeps up with what has happened and the order of events. She is careful to differentiate her description of what has happened from her own opinions (paragraph 21) and from how she dealt with the incident (paragraphs 22-24). As before, she sees the problem in terms of an unclear and dysfunctional role distribution and does her best to attend to this. No one else, however, wishes to begin such a discussion, and Jane's attempts are warded off in various ways.

26 The next day, I contacted Human Resources and the Director I reported to for assistance [A4]. The HR rep wanted to talk to each person. I felt fear of reprisal. However, I did take his suggestion that I mail some specific questions about the situation and my job role to Becky. The Director called me that evening and suggested some good methods to try to solve the situation. I also contacted the Employee Assistance Program to try to get some mediation and help. Each person I talked to felt that I had a valid issue, and that it sounded like,, at the very least, that there was a great deal of confusion about what I perceived my responsibilities to be and what Becky did. Becky replied to my questions saying only, "Yes, we need to talk. I think you create crisis where there doesn't need to be any."

When Jane feels she is not making any headway alone, she seeks contact with three other people within the group of companies in order to get support. She understands the consequences this action might have and chooses which suggestions she wishes to test. We can imagine that it was a relief for Jane to hear that others outside the situation agreed with her problem diagnosis.

27 On Thursday, I had a follow-up appointment with my doctor and so went in to the office late. My doctor was concerned about my level of agitation.

28 When I go to the office that afternoon, I received a phone call from Becky's boss Michael. He asked to see me in his office. His first comment was, "I don't think we have a fit here." It was immediately apparent to me that he was dismissing me from the company. Although he and Becky both maintain that there are always two sides to every story, neither seemed willing to consider mine. Was Michael right? I had long thought that my job there was short-term. I had continually mentioned to Becky that I wanted to step down. Michael told me that Becky had presented her argument about why it wouldn't work. I mentioned several things, such as she regularly didn't have time to talk to me, she didn't have the weekly meetings anymore, and that I had been saying for weeks I wanted to step down. He didn't see, to be aware of any of this. I asked him to listen to my side. When I mentioned the Mary situation, he said, "Well, Becky says it is fine and she is your boss and I respect her so I have to believe her." So much for there being two sides to every story!

29 Michael and I talked for a while. Three things became obvious to me. I was fighting for something I didn't want [H2]. I felt like it was a huge point against her that Becky wasn't there. And Michael was right, it wasn't a fit. He said two things that really struck me and made me change my tune from, let's try to solve this to, okay, I'll leave right now.

30 One, he said when I mentioned that I felt it unfair to dismiss someone with no warning (Since any one of the times I had asked, if I had once had the indication that this was on her mind, I would have looked for another job.), "What's a warning? What does that do? Since it is obvious that there really isn't a fit, there is just no point in delaying so we may as well end this right now."

31 Two, he said, "We're here to work really fast and that is the most important thing. So we need to have people on our team who just don't get frustrated, or since everyone gets frustrated sometimes, we need to people who just blow things off."

32 At that, I said, okay, well, I haven't got much left here anyway, so I'll just pack up and go on two conditions, one, you let me handle my departure my way, and two, you give me a recommendation and your guarantee that you will say nothing to anyone that might harm my future career. He agreed.

33 In my opinion, he had the obligation to try to sit with both me and Becky and hear the situation and then see if we could resolve it. But, like I said to him, if you guys aren't willing to try to resolve it then yes, you are right, there is no hope to find a solution.

34 So, that's my incredibly long story of ongoing conflict. Hope it helps you, and feel free to ask me any questions about it.

Jane reports here the very culmination of the conflict: she is fired without any warning. What is remarkable is that, despite her indignation and the fact she was fired with immediate effect, Jane is nevertheless able to overcome the situation and choose which path she wishes to take. Not even under such circumstances is her feeling of controlling her own fate diminished.

## Interview Round #2

35 In answer to your general question, I could very easily, I have been told by career agents, find another job -- just like the one I left. I am sorry to say that in my career and industry, my complaints are not unique. The difference, in my opinion, between me and some in my field is that when faced with a frustrating situation, many just ignore it and plow on. I do not seem to have that ability. I have been described as a "crusader" and a "boat rocker". This means that when I see a problem, I tend to want to solve it. As you can see, this does not always make me the most popular person. [M1]

36 I am burned out and feel sad and sick when I consider taking another position at a similar company. It makes me feel defeated, and uninterested [I1]. With this attitude, I know that I won't feel or be valuable to a company. Therefore, I am spending a bit of time looking for freelance work and planning a career change. I am trying to find a clever, creative way to work that benefits both me and an employer.

Jane does not avoid feeling burned out by her experiences. It is clear, however, that she is not absorbed in such feelings. They are there, but she retains the ability to creatively consider her future. When doing so, Jane thinks in terms of how she can coordinate her own conditions, i.e. how she feels following the conflict and her wishes as to what a job should be, with the desires and requirements of an employer.

37 I have posted my replies to your other questions below. I fear they are horribly long-winded. It's true, my tongue is hinged in the middle so it can flap at both ends both verbally and in writing. I apologize. It's all in the spirit of trying to be complete!

Here Jane expresses her desire to be complete. It is characteristic of Jane's entire way of being that she strives to achieve a picture of events that is as objective and multifaceted as possible. This matter-of-factness is Jane's way of orienting herself in life. Perceiving things in detail is a way for Jane to process and learn from her experiences.

*I like to have the timeline reasonably clear. Which year did you join this company, was it about two years ago?*

38 Yes, I joined the company in early 19XX. I was several months from my two year anniversary.

*Can you describe Becky to me? What kind of person is she, do you think? What is important to her in her position?*

39 Describe Becky. What a complex question. Becky is a very petite, energetic woman, who attended and graduated from Cal Tech before too many woman went to school there. If you have any familiarity with Cal Tech or any US Ivy League college, you understand that the atmosphere is very competitive, and it becomes a sink or swim environment [F1, F3]. Although she majored in architecture, it did not take her long to move into this industry, where she has worked happily for many years.

40 She is incredibly bright in a dual-hemisphere way, as I like to say. This means she can pull and use either side of her brain equally well. She may not be as good as someone more focused in artistic or mathematical endeavors, but I never saw such a weakness. [F1]

41 Becky has one child who is moving towards four years old, and another on the way in approximately five months. She is the second wife to her husband, who travels regularly. They seem happy together. I would not be happy in the same situation. [F1]

42 Someone else once described her as a "soft manager who is more focused on making everyone happy on the surface than solving the problem." I think this is pretty appropriate. She once described

herself as the most non-confrontational person she knows, aside from K. (who I believe I mentioned earlier in my story). She once told me she'd rather do anything than confront, but was willing to do so if necessary. [F1]

43 (As an interesting side note here, Becky was not present when Michael and I discussed my leaving nor have I heard from her since or at all.)

44 I think it is very important to Becky to be very needed in her job. She is one of the original employees and so is very knowledgeable about the company and its products. She likes to do and be many things at once. Becky is very focused on adding value and being a team player, as well as trying to encourage an open, group atmosphere. She once said the most important thing to her was upholding the company's values. She regularly takes work home, works much more than eight hours a day, never takes a lunch break, is one of the first in the office in the morning (although generally left promptly at 5:00 to pick up her child from day care), and even comes in sick, or at least works from home when sick. [F1]

45 Becky likes everything to be all-right. [F1]

46 Feel free to ask for more details here, but I didn't want to tire you on the first question. I've spent a great deal of time analyzing Becky -- mostly to try to figure out how and why things happened as they did over the course of our working together, but also to try to figure out how to interact with her [C4].

When the interviewer asks Jane to describe the person who was her primary counterpart in the conflict, her answer is long. It is clear that Jane has spent considerable effort thinking about Becky, and she felt this had been important for working out a positive way of dealing with her. Jane's picture of Becky is balanced and multi-dimensional. She discusses Becky's personality traits as well as the environment that has marked her, her talent, her family situation, her basic attitude toward conflicts and her values. One feels that Jane wishes very much to understand Becky on Becky's own terms, i.e., to understand how she truly functions. We see this in how Jane keeps the description almost entirely free of value judgements. In section 41 she states that she simply would not be satisfied with the life Becky leads, but there is no indication of repudiation. Our interpretation is that Jane realizes it is in her own interest to differentiate her opinion of Becky from the picture she creates of how Becky functions as a person. She does this because value judgements tend to distort the picture, thereby impairing possibilities to find constructive solutions to problems of cooperation.

>Regularly she would take such an active interest that  
>she would handle situations or do work rather than refer it to me. I often  
>found out information after the fact or too late or not at all. I would try  
>to broach her with these issues, and was often "dismissed" or invalidated.

*Why do you think Becky acted in this way? Lack of time, or were there also other reasons?*

47 Hmm. Another complex question. I think in part, it was a lack of time and too diluted a focus due to too many interests and responsibilities. After a while, I believe she developed such an antipathy towards me that she avoided me to avoid conflict and negative feelings [D1].

48 I think, perhaps subconsciously, she also saw it as important to "keep her fingers in all of the pies". Further, she seemed to think that ever referring someone to someone else was a breach of her values because it "closed the door" on open communication [D3].

49 What this all led to, the never saying no or delegating responsibility, was a lack of time [C3]. When you have a very bright and capable person in the office who tends to do not just her own work, but anything else she sees that needs doing, manages to get it all done, and done well, you have a very

busy person who people always tend to go to since "Becky will know". (Nice little run on sentence there.)

Here the interviewer asks Jane to explain Becky's attitude. When looking for explanations, Jane uses a genuine third-person perspective, i.e., she tries to understand how *Becky* has experienced things. Jane is able to state that Becky probably disliked her (Jane) so much that she (Becky) avoided contact and to say so without showing any signs of feeling offended or taking a defensive stance by passing negative judgements on Becky.

>I regularly asked her verbally or through e-mail to discuss clarification if I  
>sensed or noted that she disagreed with my methods. I believe that in  
>general, I initiated all contact.

*Do you think her lack of communication was the way she was generally, or do you think it had something to do with her relationship to you?*

50 Yes. This goes back to the time issue and the antipathy, I think. Initially, when I first started, she worked to be very communicative (weekly meetings) when the other Team Lead and I requested more interaction. As time went on, and time got tight and her antipathy grew, this communication decreased to almost nothing [C3, D1].

51 Further, I don't believe too many other people ever initiated any conflict oriented discussions with her, therefore, most of this was unique to me [G1, D1]. However, I believe she would be like this in general were anyone to approach her with conflict [C1]. Does that make any sense? (laughing!) Since she was the hiring manager, she got to choose who she surrounded herself with -- I must have slipped through a crack somehow (more laughing).

Here, Jane tries to imagine how Becky probably experienced her (Jane). Jane's depiction of how the situation appeared from Becky's point of view seems plausible; she combines different factors such as the work pressure Becky was under, Becky's growing irritation with her (Jane's) questions and pressuring, and how she (Jane) probably seemed in comparison with other colleagues. Once again, Jane exerts herself to present a fair picture of how the situation looked from Becky's point of view. The fact that Jane can take such an impartial stance probably indicates that she has such a distinct and secure self-image that Becky's negative attitude toward her does not appreciably threaten her (Jane's) self-esteem.

52 I've been conscientiously trying not to drag other people's interactions with her into this, but here I feel it relevant. She had three team leads reporting to her, including me. One had a different type of position and working relationship. The other and I worked very closely and often shared the same traumas and stories. We had agreement with each other where Becky was concerned -- both of us were frustrated. However, this lady does not like conflict either, and will also go to great lengths to avoid it. She had the same problems, and worse actually, that I did with Mary. Each time she approached Becky about it, she also was told not to worry about it or Becky would agree with her, but do nothing about it. We seemed to have many of the same reactions initially from Becky, the difference is I pushed the envelope and she did not.

53 (Gee, I use a lot of cliches. Your English is fluent, but that means nothing I suppose. I have no idea if you are American, English, German, Swedish, English as a Second Language, etc. If you miss my connotation, please let me know.)

54 To be honest, I always half wondered if the other Team Lead exaggerated her conversations with Becky a wee bit. Perhaps she liked to portray herself pursuing her position more strongly than she actually did. If she truly was as zealous as she sometimes claimed to be, I am surprised that she had no negative feedback as I did. I don't know. [J1]



We see from Jane's statements that she is aware that these are her own interpretations and that she actually does not have sufficient information to know for certain that her suppositions are correct.

*Can you also describe what kind of person Donald is?*

55 Donald. What an enigma. On the first glance, he is a bright, well-educated, conscientious kid who is the epitome of white-bread Americana. He plays sports and weight-lifts and is very, very disciplined -- to his own rules. Clean cut, dresses like a J Crew advertisement. Michael once said, "Donald must be the most normal person we have working here." Not talkative, but friendly. Nevertheless, everyone always referred to him as the kid. He may have been the youngest person in the office, or one of the youngest. [F1]

56 For a year and a half he seemed like a happy, content employee with occasional lapses of understanding authority [E1]. (Of course, using the word authority was like using foul language at this office [S1].) Very often he would go right over my head.

57 For example, it was my responsibility to schedule employees and projects. I would go to look for him and he'd not be there. I'd start asking if anyone knew where he was, and would finally learn from Becky that, oh, yes, she had signed a vacation request form for Donald and he would be out on vacation all week. Neither thought to tell me. Becky concurred that this was wrong after I confronted her about several instances, and we changed the process [R4]. She wouldn't sign any forms until she saw my signature. Doesn't it all seem to lead back to Becky somehow?

Jane is invited to describe Donald, the person who disliked her most. Not even here is her description marked by opinions, but instead by curiosity. In an aside, Jane reveals that she has noticed specific features in the organizational culture prevailing at the workplace (we will deal more closely with this topic at the end of the interview). In paragraph 57, Jane uses one incident to describe Donald's behavior as well as to further exemplify the unclear role distribution. In this case, Jane was actually able to achieve a change in routine that led to clearer roles.

58 Suddenly, out of nowhere, a year into his employment, he suddenly had a public display of incredible anger -- over a year's worth of built up resentment [E1]. This was the scene I described that happened approximately a couple of months ago. He went to talk to Becky. She let me know they had talked. (But couldn't understand why I would ask if she suggested he try to talk to me first.) I asked him to come and talk to me. He had a list of everything I had ever done that annoyed him.

59 Most of the incidents I wasn't aware of or couldn't recall. For example, he claimed one time we were so furious at each other that we didn't speak for a week. I would think I would recall that. I asked if perhaps he had misunderstood? [D4] He did have some good points, however, that I did concede. At this point, he was what I would call furious, so angry his whole body shook with it [E1]. The only thing that would make him happy would be to see me depart. He bluntly stated that he did not see how we could work things out.

In the face of Donald's accusations, Jane seems rather surprised. Despite the fierceness of Donald's opposition, Jane does not shut herself off in defense, but instead listens to the details of Donald's version and admits that some of his criticism is justified.

60 In hindsight, I'll say Donald and I had a rocky relationship from the start [Q1, Q2]. Whereas the other team members sought me out, Donald never did. I tried to respect this distance he seemed to prefer [Q4]. I usually only approached him about business things. We did have several talks in which I reminded him that I was the lead and he needed to try to come to me first with questions, issues, etc. Oddly, outside the office, we were friends to a degree. We played together for three seasons on a sports team.

Here, Jane reflects upon the nature of their relationship and notes its various dimensions. She also shows that she actively tried to find an approach to Donald that would work for him and thereby for their relationship.

61 The sports team is an interesting thing to consider. He was the captain of the sports team (football) and specifically pressured me to join. Nevertheless, EVERYONE else ran that team except for him. He was quite good at coordinating everyone and sending out notices and reminders about the game, even sending out articles that replayed the game. However, on the field, he never asserted himself, made or overruled decisions, or settled disagreements between two men who kept battling between each other for leadership. This is very like how he was in the office, too. [F1]

62 In truth, I did notice he was even more withdrawn than usual the last few months and it was impacting his work [C1]. Others noticed as well. I just didn't know how to reach him. Anytime I asked how things were, he would always say, "Fine." I would get terse answers to more detailed questions. I just couldn't get through to him. I usually can find a way to communicate with anyone. This is one thing that I feel really disappointed about in the whole situation [I1].

In the paragraph above, when Jane expresses her disappointment, it is not in Donald's behavior toward her, but in the fact that she was unable to find a way to open a line of communication with Donald.

*Did you ever get any specification of what aspects of you and your management style he didn't like?*

63 I tried to always work well with him, despite how he often frustrated me [Q4]. Even when he was furious, he conceded that he actually really liked me, and appreciated how I always made sure to give him projects he would really enjoy. And he appreciated the opportunities for leadership and special projects I assigned to him. But he was really unhappy with me and couldn't put his finger on it. He said there were just some things I had done which he didn't like [D4]. I can try to remember some examples if it will help you.

64 Truthfully, I believe it all boils down to authority. My boss didn't back me in it, Donald resented me trying to assert it. When the two of them talked, his position was validated, my position was not, therefore his resentment towards me grew [E3]. I can see how it looked to him like I was on a huge power trip [D1].

Jane does not place the blame for the problems on Donald, but instead on the fact that she lacked the clear authority to deal with them. Here, she also tries to imagine how she might have appeared in Donald's eyes.

>Each team member wanted  
>more independence. We discussed that both of us felt discomfort with this  
>based on past performance and lack of experience.

*Do I understand you correctly that Becky agreed with you that giving them more independence might generate new problems?*

65 What did Becky say to me, what did Becky think, and what did Becky do. These were all very different things, I believe strongly.

The short answer is Yes, you do understand that correctly.

The long detailed answer is: Becky said that giving them more independence gave her large cause for concern. She did not think they had displayed any qualities that made her believe they could handle it. She expected it to be a lesson in: okay, go ride your bike by yourself, and I'll put a Band-Aid on your

cuts from when you fell because you really weren't ready to go solo. She fully expected me to peer over their shoulders to a degree to make sure that the "fall wasn't too bad". [D1]

66 She felt, and I agreed, that they didn't understand it what all this entailed, and thus what all I did. She thought that if they had to do it themselves, it would give them a better appreciation, as well as teach them something new and expand their skills. [D1]

Both of these paragraphs provide further examples of Jane's readiness to try to imagine how other parties perceive the situation.

67 As it happened, it did cause problems. At least one project manager reported back to Becky some concerns about the schedules and coordination. Some projects ran late because they didn't get on the schedule in time, for example. And Donald had not created a project description and schedule for his project, which frustrated the project manager. [C1]

68 I suppose you are wondering, then, why we did it. Plain and simple, it was a placating measure and a lesson [E4, R4]. Less plain and simply, from my perspective, it seems like the only possible thing we could have done. She either needed to give and back my authority, or not expect me to be in charge [P4]. Since she wouldn't do the former, it was obvious the team members needed to be assigned more independence. We couldn't keep battling for ownership. And the team members needed the signal that we trusted them [E4].

Jane always interprets the current problems as expressions of the role distribution and organizational culture prevailing at the workplace. When she does not succeed in treating the problems at what she believes to be their root, she turns instead to other strategies.

<An irrelevant passage has been deleted here>

*Two people used the phrase: "There are always two sides to every story." Do you think this was pure coincidence? Do you think they had something specific in mind when they said this?*

70 No. Yes. I assume they may have spoken with each other and unconsciously mimicked each other's words [J1]. I took it to mean that they were not going to take any action as I requested because they were giving equal consideration to both sides. No, this isn't true, because Becky specifically said Mary had not done anything wrong and that I was wrong in judging her behavior as out of line.

71 It clearly meant something else which I just could not catch.

72 K. (Mary's manager) seemed to suggest something a tad more devious, "Is there something Bill could be saying or doing that might make Mary think he could make these decisions?"

73 I asked if he knew something about that. He said that he didn't. But then, he repeated, "I just know that there are always two sides to every story."

74 I replied, "But if Mary won't come talk to me, how can I understand her side?"

75 Did people know much more to the story than I ever did? I regularly felt this way, often because Becky intercepted communications. I often felt there was something I needed to know but didn't.

Jane seems to be quite aware of when interpretations are her own, and this causes her to take caution in drawing far-reaching conclusions as to the underlying reasons for the attitudes of others.

>The next day, I contacted Human Resources and the Director I reported to  
>for assistance. The HR rep wanted to talk to each person. I felt fear

>of reprisal. However, I did take his suggestion that I mail some specific  
>questions about the situation and my job role to Becky. The Director called  
>me that evening and suggested some good methods to try to solve the  
>situation. I also contacted the Employee Assistance Program to try to get  
>some mediation and help.

*OK, they were sympathetic, but obviously they could not offer you any concrete assistance. Would it have been possible to insist on mediation, for example?*

76 To my knowledge, the company has no clear cut policy for communication or conflict resolution. I was flying by the seat of my pants, hoping I wasn't doing anything too wrong, but desperate for assistance. [G4]

Even in a state of desperation, Jane does not take the position of victim, but instead actively seeks the support she feels she needs.

77 What do you mean by concrete assistance? The HR rep was willing to step in, but I feared that this would worsen the situation [J1]. I would have accepted this offer if both sides agreed there was a conflict that needed solving. But Becky was adamant that I was "creating issues and conflicts where none needed to be." The conflict was over whether or not there was a conflict! (laughing)

>Becky replied to my questions saying only, "Yes, we need to  
>talk. I think you create crisis where there doesn't need to be any."

*How do you interpret this?*

78 Sit down and shut up.

79 Michael phrased it best, "The most important thing here is that we work fast. To do that, we really need people on board who can just overlook frustrations and just ignore them. To be successful here, you just have to dismiss these things."

80 This one phrase is the point at which I quit trying to suggest ways and argue that we should try to resolve the issues -- because I clearly realized I was wasting my efforts! I immediately said, all right then, I'll send out a letter tonight that I am leaving and take the rest of my things home.

81 (You might be interested to know that over the course of the last several weeks, I had been cleaning files off my computer and surreptitiously taking home personal items from my office -- even trying to always keep my work mostly finished so I could leave at a moment's notice. I somewhat worried they might let me go, but actually thought I would leave first. On some level, I had long quit thinking we would actually resolve anything. For some reason, I kept trying.)

>When I go to the office that afternoon, I received a phone call from  
>Becky's boss Michael.

*Did you have any interactions with him before this worth mentioning?*

82 Ironically, he spent part of the conversation explaining how much he liked me and that he thought we had a "special friendship" and he always enjoyed the time he spent with me. That he thought socially we got along really well and he was very impressed with the work that I did.

83 I never really worked with him, but we did socialize out of the office. Ask me sometime about the Cal Tech alum situation at my office and the incredibly small, tight knit community centered around Cal Tech. And how most of the men never seemed to get too far past the fraternity mind set. And how it felt to not be a man, an Cal Tech graduate, or an engineer. Welcome to coach class! (laughing) [S1]

Jane shows here that she not only sees personalities and role distributions as causal factors, but also the style and norms many of her colleagues had acquired through their educational background.

84 Michael certainly never interceded in any of the situations, never sat and talked with me about any of the issues, never met with me and Becky, never let me know he knew about any of the issues, and so on. [C1]

85 So, during the work week, unless we went out to lunch or for a drink after work in a group, I really didn't talk to him. Please understand, and I say this as kindly as possible, I never counted Michael as a friend. Maybe we had different definitions of that too. [Q1]

*Can you describe how you actually exited your workplace? How did your colleagues react?*

86 How are they still reacting (small laugh).

87 Michael and I met. I tried to press him to see that if everyone worked together, we could solve this [A4]. He refused. I see his point. I thought we needed structure, he thought we needed blindfolds. (laugh again)

88 We finally "mutually agreed" that it was "not a fit". I asked to be able to set the terms, he agreed. He will write or offer a verbal reference at any time I need one. I was allowed to say I resigned, and would send a notice to my co-workers. It was all effective immediately.

89 Of course I never told the office at large (nor anyone really except you and my husband) the whole story. Michael and I agreed to that, which in truth benefited him far more than me. See, he has a history of abruptly letting people go. People who were liked and perceived as valuable by the masses at least. This happened very recently and there was quite a backlash in the office. In fact, I was not the only person to depart that Thursday.

90 What I did say was more or less, "I am leaving to pursue contract and freelance work and to consider the possibility of returning to school to study nutrition."

91 This is all true -- but not fully planned until just then. You understand?

92 I left smiling and relieved to be honest [I1]. This showed as a lightness of spirit which I think will help prevent any awkwardness between me and people I hope to keep in contact with [Q4]. No sense burning bridges or making a scene. I thanked everyone for the opportunity to work with them and said good things.

In this paragraph, Jane's comments show that she is reflecting upon how her own attitude can affect her relationships, and she actively creates her own exit in consideration of future relationships.

93 I returned to my area, notified the other lead in person. She cried.

94 Donald was already gone for the day. I have not heard from him about it, although we saw each other when we played football this past Sunday.

95 Bill and Carlos were shocked and somewhat upset. Both have e-mailed me since.

<Summary of e-mail contents deleted>

100 A manager from another group came to see me personally, very upset. Another coworker cried as well. Still others made me promise to keep in touch. All were very shocked. People were very kind.

101 Two former coworkers wondered out loud to me this past Sunday at the game whether there was a trap door in Michael's office through which employees suddenly vanished. They implied a question which indicated concern (for themselves) to me. I merely laughed and said, oh, no, no trapdoor. There seemed to be no point in elaborating.

102 I continue to receive mail from the other team lead and another coworker -- each day that I have been gone. Nothing work related, just to keep up friendship.

*If you try to make a summary of what you think are the main causes that this conflict arose, what would have to be mentioned?*

103 \* difference of opinion about how to acknowledge and handle conflict

\* difference of opinion about how I should execute my responsibilities

\* lack of action on conflict or closure

\* no intervention

\* no clearly defined means of communication or conflict resolution

\* some conflict between how our office wanted to work and how corporate wanted us to work, with me caught in the middle (reported to both) [A3, B1]

Jane's summary of the primary causes of the conflict stresses the importance of disparate viewpoints on questions of leadership, role distribution and how one should approach problem solving. Thus, she does not place the blame on a particular person; in fact she does not think in terms of blame at all. Problems arise when different points of view cannot be brought into line with one another, not because one view is right and the other wrong.

*Which concerns played a role for you in this conflict?*

104 I don't follow?? What was my motivation in pursuing my course of action?

*Is there something specific of which you could say: if \*that\* had been different, I would have felt different about the whole situation?*

105 Sure, I can probably think of a million things. Probably top most is: "If we had actually sat down, acknowledged situations and discussed them honestly with everyone who needed to be involved (in other words, encouraged rather than redirected or interfered in communication between two people), I might have felt that we at least really tried." [R2]

106 Or, maybe what I mean is, I might have felt differently and not lost so much respect if I felt that people (here I really mean Donald, Mary, Becky) were talking more to me than about me. And, if someone who was really unhappy (Donald) had actually taken the opportunity I offered to suggest some fixes, rather than just continuing to be upset and complain to Becky. [C2]

This excerpt shows that one of the most important issues for Jane is being able to handle interpersonal relationships in an honest and respectful way. She is disappointed that others have behaved in such a way that she can no longer respect them, which she would like to be able to do.

*Can you see any way in which your own personality or your way of handling things contributed to the conflict?*

107 Certainly. Did anyone really like or laud the little boy who yelled at the parade, "But, the Emperor isn't wearing any clothes!" Suddenly causing everyone, including the emperor, to become aware of his nakedness?

Oh, I am no martyr at all. And, to be fair, I may have ended up going to the opposite extreme. Whereas they preferred to sweep things under the rug (for the most part at least), I may have shined a light on the most miniscule things. I suppose I thought, at some point they have to take notice and fix this -- if I show them how much is wrong, maybe that will work. [G2, G3]

108 I also kept pressing issues, even sometimes when I recognized the danger or negative reactions. I just wanted to make things as good as I thought they could or should be. [G3]

Typical of people like Jane is the ability to observe group dynamics from the outside, and to see how the specific situation has caused them to adopt an even stronger attitude, which might also have worsened the conflict.

109 I told people we had to get in line with the new corporate standards. I tried to compromise and offer other solutions or guarantees that I would propose their suggestions to the corporation. I tried to coordinate a process and a structure. [R4, T4]

110 This is not at all what the office wanted to hear or do. I recognized that we really diverged on what we thought -- even if that was more through actions than words.

111 I am a very strong personality, Thomas, and that very much intimidates and bothers some people [M1]. If I were a man, I think I would be labeled as confident and focused. Instead, I am on occasion called pushy. For example, it is more important to me to have a solid structure in which people can work well (this does not indicate a limit to freedom like some might infer -- it merely provides guideline in which people can work more efficiently) than for people to feel happy or have things their way. I want people to be happy and encouraged, but not at the expense of the group structure and quality of work. Someone has to coordinate the big picture. [L1, L2]

112 This is absolutely contrary to the theory at my former office. It is however, in line with the corporate office. I must have seemed like a Evil Empire sympathizer to people who were as resistant as possible to the new regime. [D1]

Jane once again demonstrates her ability to see her workplace from a systems perspective, i.e., to see how the overall organizational structure relates to separate individuals and their work.

113 The Director said, "You are a very strong person with solid opinions. Becky is a very soft touch manager. You probably can't be the type of employee she needs, and she probably can't be the type of manager you need."

114 That's probably the base conflict. And the reason why there could be no outcome other than for me to leave. [A3]

115 Someone once said to me, "I suppose you were Joan of Arc in a past life. You'd stand alone if you had to if you thought the cause was just, wouldn't you."

116 This was one of my former coworkers. I never figured out if he meant it as an insult or a compliment, but I took it as one of the nicest compliments anyone has ever paid me.

117 So I practically talked your eyes out of their sockets, I'm sure. If it is any consolation, this has been marvelously cathartic for me! [I1]

118 I've tried to be as honest and objective as possible. It all is of course, based on my perception and is all told by me [J1]. I suppose that's how King Richard III ended up with a hunchback, withered arm, and limp in history books! Well, I tried not to pull a Henry Tudor here. (laughing)

Take care, and again, thanks!

Jane

The second interview round ends when Jane points out that she realizes her story is her own subjective version. She does not, however, specify the way the story might have been affected by her special perspective (i.e., Theme N).

### Interview Round #3

A few sections have been removed here; they comprised a discussion of an article Jane had read on the interviewer's recommendation. This discussion led directly to reflections on Jane's bosses. Comments concerning the article have also been removed from the following sections.

120 They [Becky and Michael] said they wished to create an open and dynamic workplace where people were happy and challenged. They seemed to not want to draw boundaries in certain cases: Mary was free to redistribute work on my team. Yet, the line did not flow back the other direction which made it incredibly hierarchical, with me at the bottom of the ladder. [P1]

121 In other words, had I wished (as I often did) to interact directly with Mary's team, she regularly blocked this direct communication, with the backing of Michael, Becky, and K. Whereas Mary (and others) were free to allocate resources on my team, comment on my work and suggest improvements (which I had to employ). I was not allowed to participate in planning or design meetings, and any comments I did make (after the project was complete which was the first time I was allowed to see it) were regularly ignored or dismissed. It was not my position in actuality to contribute in this way. However, I had been told (by Becky among others) that the opportunity was open to me. [P1, P2, R1, R2]

Here, Jane discusses role distribution and how the working team functions; she also indicates concrete details that she finds problematic.

122 I brought these incongruities to Becky's attention -- multiple times [P4]. Finally, in one discussion she snapped at me, "We are making changes, just not at the pace you would like!"

123 I insisted that we form concrete flows of communication and try to institute a structure [O1]. Right now, I am trying to discover: was this what I really wanted or was I reacting to the chaotic environment or was I reverting to a known answer, a taught response? (nature versus nurture) [G3, L2, M3]

124 I would in general describe myself as an initiator and would in general then say that I feel like an initiator [M1]. However, I regularly felt more like a pawn at my former company, while I would still describe myself as an initiator [I1].

This is one of the relatively few times in the interview when Jane considers her own personality, how it is constituted and what this implies. Her attention is primarily directed toward the three other main themes, The Conflict, The Counterpart and The Setting.

>Feel free to ask for more details here, but I didn't want to tire you on the  
>first question. I've spent a great deal of time analyzing Becky -- mostly  
>to try to figure out how and why things happened as they did over the course  
>of our working together, but also to try to figure out how to interact with  
>her.

*I have two follow-up questions here: - How do you feel when you think of Becky now? Do you feel resentment?*

127 Hmm. Not really. A bit I suppose; I must. Mostly, I feel sad that not only do I not have any closure with her, but that she felt so cornered (my opinion [J1]) that it became more useful for her to lose a valuable and talented employee than to take on some tough situations and resolve issues [I1]. On



the one hand, I am not completely surprised that not only was she not present during my "leaving" discussion with Michael, but that I haven't heard from her since. And yet, I am surprised because it is so far away from what I could do. It shocks me in a way. Disappoints me. [I1, C2]

128 I suppose any resentment I feel is based on not getting to have closure. But that would mean she would have to be a different person and then, in that case, we might not have had any problems at all [F1].

Passages such as these are quite typical of people who think in terms of complex psychological causality. They do not build up antagonistic attitudes and bitterness to any considerable extent, because they do not see the cause of the frustration only in terms of the counterpart's traits, but in terms of an entire fabric of circumstances and causal relations. This need not imply a lack of feelings or frustration, but for people like Jane, negative feelings are more likely to take the form of disappointment and sorrow than accumulated anger and bitterness.

*- You tried to figure out how to interact with Becky, could you expand on this? Did you try any specific tactics or approaches?*

129 What all did I try. Here are the attempts, not in any particular order:

- \* I tried the buddy buddy approach. All girls together now.
- \* I tried the we're all on the same team and I just want to see how I can help approach.
- \* I tried the tell her everything and act subordinate.
- \* I tried tell her only what I have to and act independent.
- \* I tried approach her constructively with issues: here are some things I was thinking about, I would say, and here are some ideas I had for improvement.
- \* I would try to take ownership and try to solve the problems myself.
- \* I would take the problems to her and ask that she deal with them.

[A4, C4, O4, P4, Q4, R4, T4]

130 I say these are in no particular order because I didn't per se go through them progressively. For example, I might try a combination over the course of the week, trying to gauge her mood. Or, I might try one predominantly, and failing, might switch to another tactic. Sometimes all for the same issue.

In the excerpt above, Jane demonstrates almost over-explicitly her awareness of the various dimensions of the conflict and how she tried many different tactics to constructively influence the course of events. Despite this inventiveness, however, her efforts failed for the most part, which shows how powerless even a person with considerable awareness skills can be when others involved are unwilling to participate in a problem-solving process. As an onlooker one might understand Becky's irritation with Jane's stubbornness in bringing up problems – another person might have shrugged their shoulders and continued working. But if Becky had taken just a bit more time to talk with Jane about the problems, Jane would probably have listened and perhaps have changed her style. This, however, never happened.

>Hmm. Another complex question. I think in part, it was a lack of time and  
>too diluted a focus due to too many interests and responsibilities. After a  
>while, I believe she developed such an antipathy towards me that she avoided  
>me to avoid conflict and negative feelings.

*It is not very clear to me of what nature this antipathy was? Do you have an idea of what she didn't like?*

131 It is not very clear to me either. It is just a sense I got, mostly in the last week or so of my employment there. I don't think it was directed at me personally. Perhaps it was the fact that I continually brought up issues (which sometimes she didn't think were issues [D1]) and asked her to help solve them? Perhaps I made her not be able to avoid seeing conflict? Perhaps I created some

conflict? Probably it was because I asked her to be and do things she wasn't comfortable with or didn't believe in. [J1]

>He did have some good points, however, that I did concede.

*Could you give some examples?*

133 I think this was about Donald? He was frustrated because I was unable to complete more than one general review of one of his very comprehensive projects in one week [E1, E3]. We both agreed that considering how much else I had to do, it was unrealistic, but he was still annoyed that I couldn't make it a top priority. I agreed. An engineer is only as good as his chief engineer in some respects. Without a thorough review, the work may contain many errors and the engineer will feel worried. This wasn't fair to him [E2]. I made changes to my schedule so it wouldn't happen again [E4].

134 He was also frustrated that I didn't implement all of his ideas, or at least an amount that would make him feel better about suggesting things [E1]. I didn't always have the power to say yea or nay; this changed from when he and I started. In my frustration over the loss of this freedom initially, I was more discouraging to him than I should have been [I1, G1, G3]. It was, of course, unintentional. For example, he would come to me with an idea to change a style in one case and I might say, "Donald, I am sorry, but we just can't do that anymore. It comes from a higher group and that style is already set." This suggested to him that I was not open to his ideas [D1]. He didn't have any other concrete examples. Mostly, he talked about feelings. He just didn't feel comfortable with me. He didn't feel like he could talk to me. He didn't feel like he could bring issues to me. [E1]

135 I pointed out that he had, actually, brought at least one issue to me. I asked him if he felt troubled by how I responded to him in that case [D4, E4]. In that case, I had asked him to do a demonstration of his product for another engineer at the last minute (3 hours before). He felt ill-prepared and uncomfortable and told me so. I feel that he should have been expert enough that it shouldn't be worrisome, nevertheless, I saw his point. So, what I said was, "Thanks for letting me know. I am sorry that it made you uncomfortable. You did a good job anyway. I'll make sure not to do it to you again." [E4] And I didn't. He agreed that he had felt comfortable approaching me and had appreciated my response. He really couldn't articulate it any better. Maybe it was the degree of the issue.

136 His feelings were very real and I wanted to try to discuss and work through them [E4]. He said he just didn't believe it was going to happen. He couldn't trust me to change things. I have to say I was really baffled. I asked if, when he had asked for change, had I not implemented it if I said I would? He said yes, but...

137 Basically that's as far as we ever got. He would bring up a point, I would be confused, I would ask for clarification, he couldn't clarify, he would get frustrated, and we'd be right back where we started. He seemed to jump to a lot of conclusions and that's usually when I got confused. [D1]

138 For example, he claimed that I didn't do as good a job reviewing his project because I didn't like him. "You knew it would cause me harm. You apologized when you handed it back to me but you did it anyway." [D1] I tried to assure him it was simply because of work and schedule overload, which I had since resolved and promised it wouldn't happen next time. He said he didn't care; it was too late. I said, "I proposed you as the lead of the task force along with several accolades, and this over a more senior engineer -- does this sound like I don't like you or want to help promote you?" [D4, E4]

In this lengthy passage, Jane shows her attempts to understand how Donald felt. She wishes that he could be spared from feeling so frustrated, and takes initiatives to remove the causes of his frustration.

139 I had approached him several times about issues I had with him. Much of this may have come from that. On one occasion, I asked the group to be cautious and thoughtful about jokes they mailed around the group [S4]. Some very inappropriate things were being mailed around, for example, a photograph of a naked man on top of a fat naked woman. On multiple other occasions, lunch table

conversation centered around which woman in the office would look best naked mud wrestling. Other times, the discussion was about, if we were on a deserted island, who would we kill and eat first [S1, S2]. In their defense, Michael actually initiated most of these discussions. I said, "We are part of a larger, more conservative company, and I would like you to consider what jokes and conversations you take part in. I don't want you to get into trouble." [S4]

In this part of the interview, Jane focuses on the culture of social intercourse, on which she forms opinions and tries to influence. Later in the interview, she also discusses how this culture arose and how it is maintained.

140 With Donald in particular, we had had many conversations about acknowledging me as his lead [P4]. I've already mentioned the vacation request issue. He also tended to ask higher up than me, which would get me backlash. He several times went to the Director with questions. In one case, I had already answered them, and in another case, I had already asked him to try to ask me first. She came to me and asked why I didn't have a better grip on my team. (conflict between how one of my managers expected me to run the group and how another did)

141 In one sense, he is an adult and should have the wherewithal to be able to respect his immediate supervisor. In another, I recognize his confusing position. He was like a young teenager caught between two parents, alternately resenting it and taking advantage of it. [E3, D3]

Again we see how Jane's ability to imagine how Donald experiences things results in her not placing the blame on him. His attitude, which causes great frustration for Jane, is seen more as a problem to deal with than as a hostile act.

>In truth, I did notice he was even more withdrawn than usual the last few  
>months and it was impacting his work. Others noticed as well. I just didn't  
>know how to reach him. Anytime I asked how things were, he would always say,  
>"Fine." I would get terse answers to more detailed questions. I just  
>couldn't get through to him. I usually can find a way to communicate with  
>anyone. This is one thing that I feel really disappointed about in the whole  
>situation.

*Do you now have any ideas of what could have been made (not only by you, but also by Becky, or whoever)?*

142 Yes. I wished I had pressed him [G4]. I don't know how much good this might have done, but at least I would have tried as hard as I could. Hmm. This might have benefited me more. I don't know really if I wished I had done this. It's my style, but not with people it will really make unhappy. [E2]

The final sentence indicates that the happiness of others is important for Jane, i.e., she is not solely motivated by her own direct interests or by achieving a well-functioning workplace of good quality. She is prepared to take an extra detour just to find a solution that works well for everyone.

143 I wish Becky had referred him to me [C2]. This might have forced better communication between us, and at least there would be a history. If my personality made him uncomfortable (and there are many reasons why this might happen between two people), obviously, as a non-confrontational person, he'll go somewhere he feels more comfortable (Becky) [A3, C3]. This gets me going to him saying he needs to come to me, she hasn't said such, and reinforces him feeling uncomfortable with me. If she had consistently early on said, "Donald, you need to see Jane about this" it would have forced us to develop a working relationship and then when problems arose, he would have enough of a real history with me to know he could talk to me, instead of vague feelings of fear and worry about what I might say or do. [C2]

To the extent Jane places blame on an individual, that individual is Becky. In her description of Becky (above), however, we also see a realization that even Becky is a prisoner of her own personality and background, and can therefore not be held responsible for the problems.

>And he appreciated the opportunities for leadership and special  
>projects I assigned to him. But he was really unhappy with me and couldn't  
>put his finger on it. He said there were just some things I had done which  
>he didn't like. I can try to remember some examples if it will help you.

*Yes, it would be interesting. Do you think Donald had a personal problem with authority issues in general? Or do you think your personality pushed some of his buttons?*

144 See above for the examples. Yes and Yes.

I think Donald definitely had authority issues. I don't think he'd ever had direct authority, and he cemented his work habits early on in a situation where he wasn't required to work on a team with a lead, but rather he worked alone with minimal to no supervision. Donald was not a very aggressive person on the surface, and he seemed somewhat tentative in some dealings. He didn't assert himself. He did this also on the football team. He was captain, but regularly let others argue to try to be in control. I really think he preferred to work alone. What's odd is that my initial impression was that he was a follower. [F1, F3]

145 I guess my personality pushed his buttons. I think that he had expectations of me which he didn't share, and didn't share when I didn't meet them [D1]. Therefore, I regularly "failed" him. I am almost his total opposite. I like working with people, I like being a leader, I tend to discuss issues with people, I am strong and direct, I like giving people responsibility, but I also like to hear back from them about it and be able to participate in the decision they make. When I nominated Donald as head of a committee, I think he really resented it when I asked him for reports and contributed my input on decisions. Perhaps I saw more gray, and he saw more black and white. [D1]

146 Maybe I reminded him of someone he didn't like and it started out all wrong. [D3]

It is clear from Jane's reflections that she has formed an overall picture of Donald's personality, which she uses to understand particulars of his behavior. She also construes the problems in terms of the *relation* between his and her respective personalities, rather than localizing them to the traits of a given individual.

>The HR rep was willing to step in, but I feared that this would worsen the  
>situation. I would have accepted this offer if both sides agreed there was a  
>conflict that needed solving. But Becky was adamant that I was "creating  
>issues and conflicts where none needed to be." The conflict was over whether  
>or not there was a conflict! (laughing)

*It seems to me that your leaving did not create too much problems for Becky, is that right?*

147 You're probably correct. She'll have to take time out to recruit and hire and train a new lead. Everyone agreed that no one on the team should move up, even Bill who had the same number of years of experience as I. I suspect he might expect it on some level, but I doubt it will happen. If it were possible, it would make my departure that much easier for everyone. Even though she'll have to bring in a new person, I suppose Becky sees this as much easier than trying to make it work with me. [D1]

148 No, it didn't cause her too much harm, nor me for that matter. I lost any respect for her and Michael I had left, but how does that affect them? [F2] And, though there was reportedly a little furor in the office, I am quite sure that things have already settled down and even if a little concern remains in someone's brain, I suspect it is pretty easy to rationalize it away. Didn't I do it when Michael and Becky dismissed the last two people who I really liked and admired? The bottom line is, this ultimately has enabled me to pursue some other things I am more interested in pursuing. I doubt any of us have lost any sleep over it. Well, Carlos says he did (from my team) but he is a very sensitive sort. Michael doesn't sleep anyway. (laughing)

>On some  
>level, I had long quit thinking we would actually resolve anything. For some  
>reason, I kept trying.)

*If you reflect a bit on the deeper motives of why you kept trying, what comes up?*

149 Here I was determined to try to give it as many chances as I could and to try to make it work. I suppose to a degree I thought, well, at least they are talking the talk so they realize the value on some level of valuing all employees and including them without creating a class system. It's so close, I thought, I can't believe we can't achieve it [G3]. And, on a personal level, I did like the people.

150 I was also burned out and sick at the thought of job hunting. Once I freed my mind from looking for another job just like this one, and started pursuing health careers, I started feeling more excited and interested in the future. [I3]

151 I needed this income. And a few months ago, they promised me a \$10,000 bonus in March, with potentially another similar amount to follow six months later. I would have to be an idiot to walk away voluntarily from that much money. It isn't the base of my existence, however, so I knew I wouldn't just "take anything" to get the money. I knew I needed some things to change to be able to make it at least until March. I knew after I changed careers, I wouldn't have access to the kind of money you can get in this industry. [G3]

152 I think, though, the bigger thing is, I am an improver. I like to bring whatever I can to a place and I give it my full loyalty. And I like to do whatever I can to help it succeed and be better. [G3, M1]

The interviewer's question to Jane was an invitation for her to reflect upon her own personality and how it is constituted. Most of her answer, however, dealt with circumstances of the concrete situation in which she found herself. Only in the last paragraph does she discuss her own personality type, but she does so mostly in terms of linear psychological causality ("I'm an improver"). We cannot possibly know, of course, how much Jane reflects upon herself, but in the interview she gives the impression of being more an extrovert than an introvert, i.e., her attention and analytical skill is mostly directed at the outside world, and not so much inwardly.

*So the phrase about the lack of "fit" was not said in an aggressive manner?*

153 I wouldn't say so. I didn't take it as such, nor do I think he intended it as such. He was also echoing something I had already said to Becky several times. I told her it wasn't working for me in this position and we either needed to move me elsewhere or change the position. He didn't seem to know I had said this, however. For some reason, Becky didn't tell him.

>Michael certainly never interceded in any of the situations, never sat and  
>talked with me about any of the issues, never met with me and Becky, never  
>let me know he knew about any of the issues, and so on.

*Any ideas about why?*

154 Hmm. Nope. I think he is a very busy man, and I think he expects his people to handle their own situations. As an executive, he doesn't really get involved. He used to be more so before we got so big. If Becky told him she had done everything and this was the only possible outcome, he believes her and executes the action. Without question. [D1]

Once again, it is characteristic of Jane that she uses a second- and third-person perspective rather than a first-person perspective, i.e., she is careful to form a picture of Michael's perspective that is as correct as possible. The picture she creates is complex (see the continuation below), and is formulated in terms that one can imagine Michael would agree with, at least for the most part.

155 Michael also, for lack of a better way to say it, has no life outside of the office. When people took vacation time to visit family, he said, "I don't see why they need to do this -- isn't work more fun?" [F1, D3]

156 One time Becky had to cancel a lunch date due to a project crisis. Michael said, "Gee, I am so glad I don't have any friends outside of the office. I mean, how could you possibly schedule to see them?"

157 Michael also many times said he saw no point to keeping in touch with family because they were merely a drain on your resources without a proper return. He argued this point so ferociously with a lady in the office that she slapped him.

158 I think he sometimes deliberately said many things to intentionally chap people's hides, but he must have believed this to some degree because it is how he lives. Nevertheless, I think it sets up a conflict for people with a family and family demands. I can't tell how much he just said, and how much he meant. (I think from the sentence completions you understand that family is incredibly important to me.) [J1, C3, F1]

159 I think, for whatever reason, Michael is very disassociated from people in many respects. And yet, he strikes me in another way as a very caring person. He does get more enjoyment from coding in his office with the door closed and the music loud than he ever does from sitting on a front porch in a swing talking about Camus [F1]. My husband and I live right on the ocean and go whale watching every year. I was telling him about it and he seemed to enjoy the story. I suggested he go himself and he said, "No need. Didn't you just tell me all about it?" I said, "But hearing a story and experiencing it yourself aren't the same thing." He said, "Well, you tell a pretty good story." He's never gone on a whale watch.

> *Which concerns played a role for you in this conflict?*

>

>I don't follow?? What was my motivation in pursuing my course of action?

I'll try to be clearer: when you felt this started to feel that the situation was very frustration, and could not continue so indefinitely, what concerns were important for your decisions and feelings? What was important to you, as primary goals and needs?

160 Oh, I think I covered this somewhat in the why did I keep trying question. Clearly because I like to bang my head against brick walls. (laughing) [This can be interpreted as a comment on her own personality, thus M1]

161 My concerns for myself were to try to solve or extricate without permanent damage to my trust, my career, my relationships -- whether it be on my side or theirs. I wanted to leave a positive legacy and a strong, talented group and good quality work. In that case, this is perhaps reason I kept trying. I didn't want to leave a mess behind -- leave things unsettled and unsolved for myself and others. I wanted to achieve a personal and a financial goal. [H1]

Thus, for Jane, her own personal needs and interests as well as contributing to good overall results from the team are both important goals. Using psychological jargon, the latter is called a decentralized goal, i.e. a goal for which the individual is not the center, but for which the center constitutes a larger whole to which the individual feels he/she owes his/her service.

162 I also truly considered my husband. He is really important (that seems like it should be obvious, but I think in many cases it isn't) and I wanted to consider him, his needs, and not let him down. Our financial goal wasn't just mine, it was a joint goal. I didn't want to be responsible for setting us back. He is often foremost in my mind -- he is also my best friend. [H1]

163 It was also important to me to learn the lesson here that I needed to learn -- so I didn't make the same mistake. I haven't completely worked it out yet, but a big part of it involves not trying to fit

myself as a square peg into a round hole. This industry was never a good fit, and beyond my first job, I haven't really been happy or excited about my work. I need to do something that really requires me to be a problem solver, researcher, writer, and helper to people. That's what I am pursuing. I think my mistake was in trying to make a position something it wasn't really -- and make it fulfill my needs, including my financial needs. Somewhere in here had also to be some resentment that I was trapped -- until I decided I wasn't really. [I3]

Here is an additional example of how Jane construes the problems in terms of an unfavorable constellation of factors, e.g., the inadequate fit between her own personality and the culture and organization of her workplace. She has, it would seem, such a clear picture of herself and her qualities that she never considers placing the blame on her own shortcomings, and she has such a complex understanding of the context that she is not satisfied with "explaining" this failure by passing negative value judgements on the company or her colleagues.

>Oh, I am no martyr at all. And, to be fair, I may have ended up going to the  
>opposite extreme. Whereas they preferred to sweep things under the rug (for  
>the most part at least), I may have shined a light on the most miniscule  
>things. I suppose I thought, at some point they have to take notice and fix  
>this -- if I show them how much is wrong, maybe that will work.

*So you feel that the situation prodded you into one end of a polarity?*

164 Yes, I think so. [G3]

>I also kept pressing issues, even sometimes when I recognized the danger or  
>negative reactions. I just wanted to make things as good as I thought they  
>could or should be.

*OK, a mean question: why did you want to make things good?*

165 Hmm. It's possible you may already arrived at the answer to this, from snippets I've said in previous answers.

166 Primarily, because I like to find and fix problems. I like to take good things and make them better, and I like to take bad things and make them good. I am pretty talented at this. It just annoys people when they don't ask for it, or don't really want to know. [G3, H3]

167 I care about people. I want to help them. I'm a sucker for strays -- people and animals. I knew that while changes would help me, they would also help other people. People who, for one reason or another, didn't stand up for themselves to get improvements they needed. I knew bottom line, the product and therefore company would benefit, but not at the expense of the people, instead, because of the people. [L1, T4]

This question is an additional invitation for Jane to tell about her thoughts on her own psychological inner workings. As in the previous case (see paragraphs 159-162), Jane does not respond with reflections based on complex psychological causality, but instead mentions some of her own personality traits as explanations. These responses reinforce the picture of Jane as a person who thinks more about how other people function than about how she herself does (but we cannot be sure of this).

*Do you have any thoughts about how a company can minimize the risk for conflicts such as this to get out of hand?*

168 I think it is really, really important for managers to empower their employees, yet stay in contact. I think that managers MUST ask people to first, resolve their own issues [O2, P2]. Again, if Becky had started by telling Mary or Donald that they needed to talk with me directly, the communication issue would not have, in my opinion, gotten so out of hand. I wouldn't have felt so disenfranchised, and they wouldn't have been able to bypass me.

169 When I was younger, I had a conflict with a lead. She continually keep the plummier projects for herself, and gave me and my teammate whatever work she didn't want to do. I approached her about this by saying, I really would like something to do that uses X tool, so will you think of me when something like that comes in? Something did, but she kept it. I approached our manager. She said, very wisely, "Have you told her that bothers you? I know you told her your goals, but have you told her you don't think she is helping you achieve your goals? You need to do that first." I felt a bit intimidated and worried, but approached the lead. See, I would have preferred the manager to handle it. But, she forced me to try to resolve it myself. Ultimately, that was a much more important lesson.

170 I think managers who answer questions and solve problems or take such an active role in solving problems for employees do the employees a grave disservice [O2, P2]. If the person is that uncomfortable, I would see no problem with the manager saying, Well, let's think of creative ways you can approach her. What about writing a letter? What about leaving the building where you aren't so much roles, but people? What about doing it after hours? And so on. As a last resort, if after showing effort in another way, the manager can go with the employee. There isn't just one way to broach a person about an issue.

171 Carlos (team member) regularly had issues with his project lead. I let him handle it himself until it got to a point. I'd suggest ways to try to approach it. Finally, I had to step in. Before doing so, I asked if he would like to keep trying or if he would like me to step in. I think if I had taken control in the beginning, he would have lost some of his respect for himself, for me, for how I viewed him, and the others on the team would have done the same. [D4, E4]

172 Avoid disparity in job role and expectation by writing it all down clearly. If you see someone acting outside of what you expect, you must sit and talk honestly and plainly with that person about it. Put it in writing, if necessary. I have found that writing something causes you to think more carefully about what you say and how you say it. [P4]

173 Set goals with yourself and your employees -- put it in writing. Tell the employee to check in about accomplishments on their own initiative weekly or monthly about it. The manager shouldn't be expected to do all of the follow-up. Employees need to initiate as well. [D4, L4]

174 Make sure managers don't have so much work that they don't have time to manage [R4]. This may require two tracks because people shouldn't have to stagnate in order to do what they prefer, if that preference is hands-on work. A creative solution is to hire a personnel manager who works side-by-side with a project manager. For example, Becky could have been the project manager who did all of the work and knew the project and direction. She could have shared this information with the personnel manager who was responsible for scheduling meetings to share this information, coordinating projects, handling personnel issues like conflicts and vacation time, and so on. That might have worked.

When the interviewer asks for Jane's thoughts on how conflicts can be prevented, her answer is quite exhaustive. It is obvious that Jane habitually gives considerable thought to how organizations work, and to how interpersonal processes can be dealt with constructively. However, Jane appears to be more pragmatic than philosophical in character, i.e., she uses more space to discuss how things are (Ring I in the Conflict Awareness Mandala), what she thinks about the situation (Ring II), and what should be done (Ring IV), than to consider *why* the situation has arisen (Ring III).

*Is there anything about this conflict you can say has been positive?*

175 Absolutely. I gained a better understanding of my perspective and other's . I recognize that I am okay, and they are okay, but we have different perspectives [N1]. This is, I believe, an indication that I



need to find a career that really values my skills and lets me work with people in a way I enjoy. And, now I have the opportunity to do so.

176 I really learned a lot. I am proud for how I handled situations, and proud of how much I've grown. I might have, in the past, been really angry and resentful. I'm proud that I am focusing positively on it. So, I have gained a better understanding of myself, and have gained a positive reinforcement of myself. [M2]

177 I think this positive is more due to me than to them, but aren't we ultimately responsible for how we proceed? I mean, we can't always help what happens (for example, get a flat tire) but we can help what we do (stomp and scream and get upset or feel frustrated but call for a service to come change the tire). Hopefully they learned something too, and will proceed better next time.

178 I pointed out some issues, and I know that eventually this will lead to improvements. I already know some things are set in motion (were before I left). I think I taught people to question some things, and I think that I set a positive example in many ways, work and conflict wise. [G2]

Jane, like other interviewees who have given considerable thought to various aspects of their conflict, reports having learned a great deal. Although she seems to have failed completely in solving the conflict – despite doing all she could – and although she was promptly fired, she still sees positive aspects of her experience. In other parts of the interview she reports feeling burned out and disappointed, but these feelings do not dominate her experience – she has them, but also many other feelings, thoughts and desires.

## Interview Round #4

*I have three questions left, these are standard questions I ask in order to get a bit of reflection on the impact of the method I am using. You may partly have answered them already, but please say something in response to them anyway:*

*Has this interview meant that you have thought about aspects of the conflict you wouldn't have thought about spontaneously?*

180 Hmm, I'd like to say yes, but I think I am a fairly introspective person and would likely have thought of this all anyway. Actually, I think I had already thought through quite a bit of it, which may be why some of it was so detailed and coherent.

181 What I will say is that it helped me look at it more productively and reasonably, and consider a third-party uninvolved perspective (that would be you).

These responses are also typical of people with a high degree of awareness: she has already asked herself and answered most of the questions about the conflict. People who do not routinely reflect upon various aspects of a conflict often report that the interview has led to many "aha" experiences, i.e., the interviewer's questions caused them to consider sides of their experience they had never previously considered.

*Did our conversation lead to any change in how you think and/or feel about the experiences?*

182 Okay, carrying the thoughts from the last question into this answer, I would say that by keeping it in an objective sphere for consideration helped me to accept it as a benefit in three respects: one, my experiences can help you with your research study and possibly long-term lead to better relations (optimally to make "conflict resolution" be a buzzword enough in corporations that they spring for education about it); two, it was a good learning experience: it helped cement the idea that my concerns were valid, my ideas valuable, and Becky and Michael are not evil (laugh); and three, and possibly

most importantly, it was necessary and part of a larger design because it forced me to launch into a new, albeit more risky, career venture (that ultimately I hope to find more pleasure and productivity in).

The answer to this question suggests that, in the interview, Jane might have made efforts to be objective that she would not have made without the interview, but one does not get the impression that she went against her basic character. It was more likely the case that she felt a need to think through her experiences from a third-person perspective, and that this is why she contacted the interviewer.

*What was your motive for volunteering for this interview?*

183 This is one of the easiest questions, but will be one of the most difficult to explain. I'll try a list:

1. To try to find some closure on my own since I likely won't get any with my former co-workers [I4].
2. To write the honest situation to an objective third-party -- an anonymous source, if you will, to whom I could tell the whole story, rather than pared down versions that considered the listener's time, interest, or feelings.
3. To find a catharsis through writing it all down and sending it away from me [I4].
4. To spare my husband from having to hear about it one more time (laughing)!

184 Thomas, it was a pleasure telling you my story (which also sounds strange considering I was sacked and all). I enjoyed your web page immensely and am very intrigued by your work. I will, if you don't mind, continue to check back there for more. I appreciate your compliments. I'll look forward to seeing a raw version to check for confidentiality issues. Feel free to follow-up with any further questions.

## Jane's reflections in retrospect

One week after the interview was completed, Jane sent an additional message containing reflections that had emerged afterward.

185 I thought of one more thing that was very interesting (in an odd way, I mean) to me. It relates to one of your last questions: the one about did this interview make me consider anything I would not have on my own?

Actually, after releasing so many of the little details, I did think of one large thing which seems incredible to me was not the first thing on my mind! I suppose it was, but the human mind is incredible. Rather than stare at a train wreck, we might instead notice that the traffic signal is not working.

186 I worked in an incredibly hostile atmosphere -- hostile to women especially! I faced sexual harassment, often daily, usually by Michael (the head of the office and Vice President). It was not always or even usually directed personally towards me, but it was directed at women, and at two in particular and it made me terribly uncomfortable [I1, S2]. There was also a horribly competitive atmosphere, instituted also by Michael [S2]. He regularly made comments such as:

187 1. He told the women to meet him for lunch and proceeded to tell us that his major design addition to the new office space was a shower. A unisex glass walled shower in the center of the office so he could watch women bathe -- they look so good in soap, he said.

188 2. Michael posed a question to the company: If all the women in the office had to fight to the death for their jobs, who would win. He selected a tie between two. (Not surprisingly, I wasn't one.)

189 3. Someone from the engineering group put a blow-up children's swimming pool on the wall and the engineers started a game where you had to run and throw your body on the wall. Michael called me in my office and ordered me to do it. I refused. He threatened to fire me if I could not show appropriate "team spirit". I said, go ahead. He just told me I was a spoilsport and hung up.

190 4. A lead from another office (my peer) came to meet with me for two days, staying over a night at the adjacent hotel. I invited several leads from my office to dinner with this lady, including Michael. I commute and am dependent on train schedules, so I paid the bill and left along with a few other people after we finished eating. Apparently, a few left (including Michael) decided to take this lady out. Michael decided to take her to a strip club. She emailed me the following day, somewhat horrified, and begging me to make sure that it did not "get out". It did a little and I had department heads trying to find out what all had happened.

191 5. Michael posed a question to the company: If we were all suddenly trapped in the office, who would we eat first? He tended to name the same employees, for very derogatory reasons. Not so ironically, these people were subsequently fired or transferred. This degenerated into a sexual conversation, of course. He led it to: if only one man and one woman from our office were left in the world, would they repopulate the earth? He also another time asked for couplings in the office -- as in, for whom would any of the women leave their husbands?

192 6. He often had liquor in the office for events and would get terribly inebriated. One time, he grabbed me and kissed me. Another time he poured champagne on a woman employee's foot and licked it off.

193 7. He had power lunches with "The Boys Lunch Club" which obviously did not include women. He would include any man, but never a woman. They discussed company strategy and business and ideas, as well as talked about whether or not certain employees fit in. These were not restricted to management. A male friend in a position equal to mine was included and heard them talking about me. I was labeled a "boat rocker". I had three male employees who reported to me. Each was included at least once. I shudder to think what they heard Michael and other leaders say about me or others. I don't wonder where their insubordination came from. [A3, S3]

194 This isn't even all. I left out many things, including men in the office who sent out sexual and crude email. Some women at least said they just thought it was funny. It was all so cleverly disguised! Michael would pose questions and then people would participate in the conversations, probably not even thinking. Then everyone was an accomplice! He had several main participants. He didn't even have to carry on the conversations. But it's a slippery slope. Once he started this, it showed other more junior employees (male) that such behavior was okay and then it got really ugly. [S3]

195 I had a meeting with my three male employees in which I didn't so much as reprimand them as ask them to please carefully consider what was appropriate and inappropriate -- to remember that as friendly as it may be, it is still an office. They complained about this, and I was told to not be so restrictive. [S4]

196 I felt forced into situations where I had to at the very least listen to these things. Michael would start it at company lunches or meetings. At first, I felt like I had to go along with it. And, at first, it was much, much more minor. I thought it just came from the fact that several of the core employees had grown up together or had been in a fraternity in college together [S3]. As the behavior worsened, I didn't care why any longer. I began to avoid places where the incidents might happen, expressed concern and unhappiness about them to a couple of women in the office. We all agreed and decided to all avoid the lunches at least. All three of us lost our "places" amongst the "inner circle" and began to be left out of meetings and conversations (all of which were vital to us doing a good job) [P1, P3]. Michael recruited an employee from one of these ladies departments to work for him (the only male in her group) and never even told her!

197 It was horribly hostile and created a terrible undertone to the office. This definitely, I think, led engineers to assume attitudes that they did not have to include certain women-held positions in meetings, etc., and Michael never enforced otherwise. I don't even think he realized! This was one of my primary complaints. [S2, S3, P3]

198 I really wish none of this had happened; that it was as straightforward as it first seemed. But I think the leaders created an environment hostile to women, workers with families (who wanted to spend time with their families), and non-engineers. I think this bottom line generated some of the conflict situations, or contributed to them or their escalation. [A3]

The message revolves mainly around the Conflict Awareness Mandala's Theme S, i.e., the workplace's social culture. Within the framework of this theme, Jane gives examples of all four levels: perceiving the situation, taking a position, understanding the causal relations, and having a strategy for influencing the state of affairs.

Two months later the following message arrived:

199 It's interesting. I do think I am making better choices, but have had some instances in which I freeze up with fear [I1]. I think this last place was that traumatic that I worry I might throw the baby out with the bathwater.

200 Also interesting are the random communications I have with former colleagues. One lady told me that an employee of mine, with whom I had some odd troubles, replaced me. She said oddly, "This shouldn't surprise you terribly." and I flashed back to a comment a colleague made while I still worked there, "Jane, I wonder if you are missing some obvious signs. I think you misunderstand who is really causing trouble here. Is it possible Donald said something to Becky to make her think he could do that?" I believe I mentioned this to you. At the time, I felt defensive and thought he was referring to me as causing the trouble, or trying to sow dissension in my group. A new interpretation on this comment seems obvious. Perhaps Donald was insubordinate deliberately to cause trouble for me and benefit himself? This is my hypothesis now [J1, J2]. I also ran across, as I cleaned out home email, two emails and a letter involving my boss and this employee, and some concerns I had some time back about some of his actions. It's so odd how it keeps all coming back as I work to unravel new personal fears and worries that came out of this past situation. And it's difficult to resolve and complete the closure from outside. But I believe I am succeeding.

With this final comment, Jane reports a certain reinterpretation of the causal relations. This interpretation has features of a conspiracy theory – one in which Donald purposefully acted to get rid of Jane so as to advance in his own career. What is important here is that Jane knows that this *is* an interpretation. Many people involved in conflicts make similar assumptions as to the motives and intentions of others without understanding that they *are* merely assumptions. If one knows that interpretations are interpretations, the conditions are better for testing their validity by examining new information.

### Jane's interview mirrored in the Conflict Awareness Mandala

In the excerpts above, we have marked relevant parts of Jane's story with codes corresponding to the questions in Table 2.1. In this way, we can easily obtain an overall picture of the breadth of Jane's conscious reflections by coloring those cells of the Conflict Awareness Mandala represented in her story. When compiling the codes, we decided to compliment the mechanical count with four cells we feel were demonstrated in the interview text, even though no specific

sequences were found that could clearly be coded as representing these questions. These four cells are A1 and A2, description of and position on the course of events, respectively, as well as D2 and T1, position on the counterpart's interpretations and perception of the workplace's function in a larger, overall context, respectively. With these additions included, Jane's Conflict Awareness Mandala is shown in Figure 6.1.

Jane's Conflict Awareness Mandala illustrates how she has reflected considerably and deeply about other people and her workplace, but to a lesser extent about herself. Concerning the workplace, we see a lack of questions about why the workplace is as it is. Jane has, however, given considerable thought to how she could act to guide the workplace toward a more positive development.

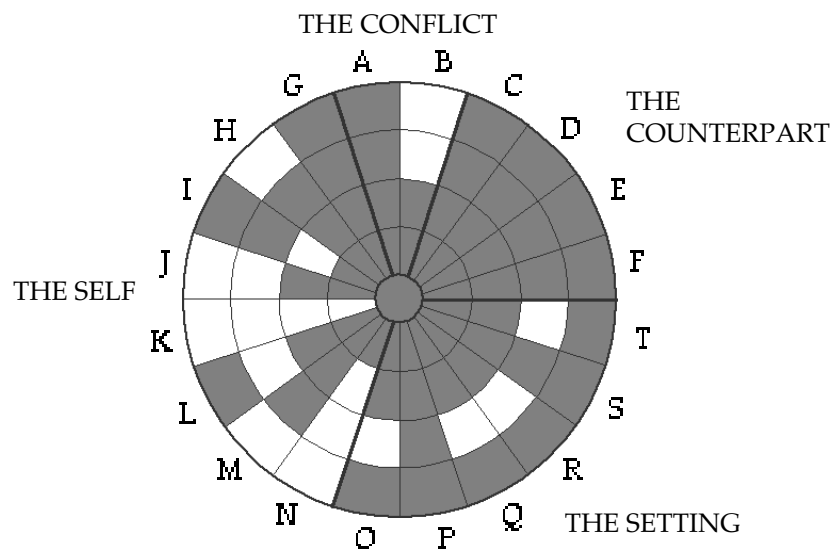


Figure 6.1 Jane's Conflict Awareness Mandala

We wish to point out again that mapping a person's degree of awareness in this way involves considerable arbitrariness. Another person might have coded the interview differently than we did. Moreover, coloring the various cells in a digital, on-off fashion means that vague and ambiguous formulations in the interviews are not represented, as they would be on a more continuous scale. Thus, the Conflict Awareness Mandala is not a scientific instrument for measuring conflict awareness. We believe, however, that it is a valuable heuristic tool, i.e., a tool that helps us to elucidate patterns and information, thereby giving rise to fruitful questions and insights.

## 7. Curriculum for development through conflicts

### Curriculum outline

One of our main purposes in this research project has been to develop instruments to elucidate the potential for learning and development that we feel exists in workplace conflicts. Our primary focus in this particular report has been on individual, as opposed to organizational, learning. We hope that the question typology in Chapter 2, the Conflict Awareness Mandala in Chapter 3, the concepts in Chapter 4, and the portraits in Chapter 5 will prove to be exactly the instruments we intended to create. A pervading idea in our account is that life-long development is possible. We also hope that our discussion in the previous chapter makes it clear that the individual process of development can take unique courses, varying from person to person. At the same time, there seems to be an inherent logic to the sub-elements of development, implying that certain aspects of awareness of one's own experience are prerequisites of others, and must therefore develop before the individual can move on. The portraits in Chapter 5 are intended to show how individuals can have very different starting points as concerns their perception, interpretation and management of conflict experiences. It is natural to imagine that every individual also has certain skills, instincts and aspects of consciousness that are next on the agenda to be developed. For people working professionally with workplace conflicts (e.g., as managers, by being called in as process facilitators for groups with problems; as consultants, to assist in handling an on-going conflict; or as trainers in continuing education courses), it should be important to adapt work efforts to the needs existing in each specific case. The portraits in Chapter 5 are intended to be sensitizing, i.e., to improve the reader's ability to recognize features of clients' attitudes toward conflicts as well as how they feel during the conflicts. Below, we will further stress the importance of adapting efforts to the individual's points of departure by outlining a four-step "curriculum" for conflict awareness. We have, thus, roughly divided some of the most important aspects of perception and interpretation of conflicts into four groups. The four steps are only preliminarily outlined here, mostly in order to emphasize a principle. We feel, however, that the idea can be developed and is worth working with further.

### Step 1: Basic level I

The first step in the "curriculum" is intended for people similar, in important respects, to "John" and "Helen" in Chapter 5. Some of the most important features of their perception, interpretation and management of conflicts are: (1) that they do not reflect upon what has happened, and have no general view of the context surrounding a course of events and thereby no good chances of actively determining how situations should be handled; (2) that they are not truly aware that their assumptions as to others' intentions and as to causal relations are their own interpretations based on incomplete insight; (3) that their own spontaneous opinions about others and about events totally determine how they react and act, i.e., their attitudes are not tempered by a generally applicable system of norms; (4) that what they experience as central to their motivation and satisfaction in work is their own immediate work situation, whereas more long-term and fundamental aspirations are of marginal importance.

Also important in this context is that unawareness of one's own interpretations and opinions, in combination with a limited outlook on time and range of vision, implies that these people are often unsympathetic (and negative) toward initiatives aimed at increasing understanding of others' perspectives, learning and skill development. Thus, it can be necessary to devote considerable attention to how they can become motivated to participate in processes aimed at increased awareness and development of social skills. Figure 7.1 shows some of the most important tasks for people in this group. Using terms from the Conflict Awareness Mandala, this largely involves bringing up the "What questions," i.e. Ring I of the Mandala. It can also be important to draw attention to how the work team functions as a whole, i.e., to widen their range of vision from only comprising their own immediate situations to also including how coworkers can work together to serve a common purpose.

	<b>The Conflict</b>	<b>The Other</b>	<b>The Setting</b>	<b>The Self</b>
<b>Step 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construct a picture of the conflict events</li> <li>• Take a position on concrete and specific aspects of the conflict</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate what the counterpart has actually done from sweeping value judgements and generalizations</li> <li>• Develop awareness that the counterpart has a different understanding of the situation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceive the work team as a unit that should function to serve a certain purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify the questions important to oneself</li> <li>• Perceive one's own actions and their consequences</li> <li>• Establish conceptions of generally applicable norms for interpersonal rights (e.g., respect for integrity and individuality) within a framework of one's obligations</li> <li>• Perceive one's own value judgements as value judgements, and thereby refrain from indiscriminately judging others</li> <li>• Be aware that one's own interpretations are interpretations, which can accordingly require testing and revaluation</li> </ul>

*Figure 7.1 Step 1*

## Step 2: Basic level II

The second step is intended for people who perceive, interpret and act during workplace conflicts in a manner similar to that of "Andrew." Characteristic of these people are: (1) that they certainly have a detailed picture of the conflict, but see the events from a first-person perspective only; (2) that they do not reflect more than superficially upon how others involved have experienced and currently experience the situation; (3) that they do not weigh in the workplace's external conditions in their interpretation of the course of events; (4) that what they feel is important is focussed on their own workmanship, i.e., doing their own work well according to criteria of the trade; (5) that they are vulnerable when the negative judgements of others are directed at them.

Since they are enveloped in their own picture of the events, and thus have limited contact with others' pictures, they easily become caught in feelings of having been treated unjustly. A very

important task in this step is to raise their awareness of the fact that the world and events look very different from different perspectives, and that one, accordingly, often lacks insight into how situations are experienced by others. Awareness that one's own assumptions are interpretations based on what one believes is important leads to an increased inclination to try to see events from a third-person perspective (see Chapter 4). This also creates increased sensitiveness to the advantage of truly listening to other people's thoughts, feelings and wishes. It is further important that these people develop their perception of their own feelings so that these can be worked through.

	<b>The Conflict</b>	<b>The Other</b>	<b>The Setting</b>	<b>The Self</b>
<b>Step 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a third-person perspective on the conflict, i.e., observe it from a decentered perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask oneself how the counterpart understands the situation, what he/she is feeling</li> <li>• Develop tolerance for the fact that other people have limits and personality traits for which they are actually not to blame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect upon the significance of the organization's character for the genesis and course of the conflict</li> <li>• Perceive the overall values and goals the organization is intended to serve, and adapt one's own work to this totality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware that one's own interpretations are interpretations, which can accordingly require testing and reevaluation</li> <li>• Develop the ability to listen by realizing that one's own picture is incomplete</li> <li>• Develop one's own norms for evaluating oneself</li> <li>• Develop a clearer picture of one's own personality and values</li> <li>• Perceive one's own feelings and moods</li> <li>• Perceive and take a position on whether one's own opinions are satisfactory</li> </ul>

*Figure 7.2 Step 2*

### Step 3: Continuation level

The third step is adapted to people similar to "Karen" in their way of functioning. Characteristic of these people are: (1) that they have a relatively well developed third-person perspective as regards the "visible" aspects of workplace conflicts, but interpret the context using primarily linear causality; (2) that they certainly strive to be objective in their judgement of others, but have not reflected to any great extent upon how the inner worlds of others are constituted; (3) that they perceive themselves as quality conscious and committed to overall values, but have not considered to any great extent how the workplace as a system could be changed; (4) that they are quite cognizant of their own strong and weak sides, but do not give much attention to exploring why they are as they are and how they would like to change.

In this step, the "Why questions," and to a certain extent the "What-can-I-do questions," dominate, i.e., Rings III and IV of the Conflict Awareness Mandala. Complex causality is an important theme, as regards how people as well as workplaces function. Questions about the counterpart are deepened such that one can begin to imagine how it feels to be a person who



functions in an entirely different way from oneself. Questions concerning the self lead to an ability to identify characteristic thought patterns, values, emotional reactions, etc., thereby creating a number of opportunities for personal development. In this way, learning can develop, from being primarily a question of improving skills and insights, to being transformative, i.e., implying that one can actively work with changing one's way of being.

	<b>The Conflict</b>	<b>The Other</b>	<b>The Setting</b>	<b>The Self</b>
<b>Step 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceive the course of the conflict as a whole, and develop strategies for influencing the dynamics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop understanding of complex psychological causality</li> <li>• Develop an advanced second-person perspective, i.e., be able to imagine how it feels to be another person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceive informal roles</li> <li>• Perceive and manage the organization's external conditions</li> <li>• Take a position on the organization's goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and represent personally established values and goals in the organization</li> <li>• Explore one's own personality system as well as causes for one's own personality traits</li> <li>• Integrate learning as an everyday activity by perceiving one's own inner processes, as well as by seeing events as examples of universal phenomena</li> </ul>

*Figure 7.3 Step 3*

#### Step 4: Advanced level

The fourth step is intended for people similar, in important respects, to "Michael" and "Elisabeth". Characteristic of these people are: (1) that they have a strong commitment to values of a fundamental (as opposed to personal) nature; (2) that they reflect upon many aspects of a workplace conflict; (3) that they have good self-confidence and good self-knowledge; (4) that they do not reflect actively upon how their own basic perspective is constituted.

	<b>The Conflict</b>	<b>The Other</b>	<b>The Setting</b>	<b>The Self</b>
<b>Step 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use insights into the conditions of the conflict to develop strategies for constructively influencing its course</li> <li>• Develop a sensitivity for situations in which further efforts are likely fruitless as well as an ability to withdraw and focus on something else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop strategies to enable, to the extent possible, the counterpart's qualities to be shown to their advantage, and to reduce the significance of his/her problematic sides</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work actively to influence the organization's structure, informal roles, goals, function, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work actively on self-transformation</li> <li>• Examine the nature of one's own perspective, and work to develop it</li> <li>• Develop the ability to handle one's own feelings, opinions and behavior during ongoing events</li> </ul>

*Figure 7.4 Step 4*

These people perceive a great deal, particularly in the world around them and as concerns others. They also interpret events in terms of whole contexts, such as cultures, organizational structures and role systems. They can develop further, however, by also considering what they experience as urgent, and scrutinizing more closely whether this is what they really wish. They often find it difficult to let go of causes they feel are important, even if their visions are unrealizable due to inertia and resistance in the environment, particularly in other people.

## Conclusion

In this report, we feel we have laid the groundwork for continued research and development work within the area of workplace conflicts. Most of what we have presented in various parts of the report are outlines, which we will continue to work with along various lines. This work consists partly of thoroughly revising the report's various components to form a more finished product, and partly of deepening our analysis of the various themes. In closing, we wish to point out several themes that *per se* constitute areas for further research and development work.

Within the framework of this study, we have interviewed people who self-selected participation in our interview series. Most of these people have been, in various ways, at a disadvantage during their respective conflicts. If we view these stories about workplace conflicts from the perspective we have developed, it is reasonable to hypothesize that a very common cause of such conflicts is that those involved lack awareness of their own opinions of others and of the fact that their interpretations of causal relations are subjective and biased. This unawareness leads to a view that it is right and proper to treat other people badly. We believe it would be very meaningful to study this interpretation of conflict dynamics more thoroughly, perhaps using methods different from those used here.

Another topic for further study has emerged from the observation that one very important factor in many workplace conflicts is that one or several parties obstruct, in various ways, communication concerning the problem. In Chapter 4, in the section on pictures of the counterpart, we point out that an important factor leading to unwillingness to communicate is the type of pictures the parties to the conflict form of other people. If a person is construed as a set of fixed traits, and particularly if one's own opinions are experienced as constituting these traits, then it is understandable that one reacts to a negative picture of that person by creating as much distance as possible between him/her and oneself. This topic is very important and, moreover, is likely quite complex. We need more in-depth studies of why many are unwilling to communicate in situations that can lead to conflicts, and of which conscious and unconscious behaviors are used to block communication. There are many examples in our interview material, but we have not been able to look systematically at this issue.

A third theme is perhaps not a task for research, but instead an educational project. In this chapter, we have – in a very preliminary and sketchy way – indicated that different skills with respect to awareness and conflict management belong to different steps, from a beginner to a

quite sophisticated level. Using the tools developed within this project, it should be possible to position the various methods and efforts found in the conflict management literature in relation to the degrees of awareness discussed here. This could enable a deeper understanding of the aim of specific methods and intervention techniques, as well as facilitate a more informed choice of methods on the basis of the people and situations in question in a given case.

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## **APPENDIX I: Guideline for interviews on workplace conflicts**

*The purpose of this interview guide is to be a checklist for the interviews. Each interview deals with a unique case story, told by a unique individual. Therefore, it is not possible to slavishly follow a standardized interview format. The interviewer must go along with the natural flow of the conversation, keeping in mind that in the end, all of the important issues must have been covered. It is very important that the interviewee's way of responding is as free as possible from external influences (e.g. by suggestive questions) in the first part of the interview. We will want the interviewee to present his/her case in the language and concepts that seem natural to him/her. Therefore, more suggestive or interfering questions should be saved for the last part of the interview.*

### **I. Introductory question**

Can you describe as comprehensively as possible the workplace conflict you have been involved in? It would be helpful if you include information about the setting (e.g. type of workplace, number of team members, time period), parties, issues and important events.

### **II. Follow-up questions on background and course of events**

Clarifying questions regarding work tasks, role assignments, organizational structures, etc.

Can you give a concrete example of xxx? (If the interviewee makes sweeping formulations about the behaviour of the counterpart, for example.)

Are there any other important events you would like to add to your story?

Did anything significant happen before the incidents you describe?

When did you first meet X?

How did you react to the incidents you described? What did you do/think/feel?

How did your counterpart react to the incidents?

To what extent are/were other persons involved in the conflict?

### **III. Questions on interpretations of parties and causal relationships**

If you try to make a summary of what you think are the main causes that this conflict arose, what would have to be mentioned?

(This issue usually necessitates several follow-up questions)

How would you describe your counterpart?

Why did he/she/they act as they did?

Did any other significant circumstances influence the course of events?

Which are your counterpart's motives, do you think?

Are there any other significant things to say about your counterpart?

Does your counterpart have any qualities you appreciate?

Can you imagine how it felt to be your counterpart in a certain situation?

Which concerns and feelings were important for him/her?

Did you think about how the situation must have appeared for your counterpart during critical incidents?

If yes, did you in any way adapt your behaviour on the basis of your understanding of him/her, in order to influence the situation in a constructive direction?

What are the main reasons for the difficulties in resolving the conflict in a sensible way?

What do your colleagues think about the situation?

#### IV. Questions on own motivation and conduct

What is/was important for you in this conflict? Why?

Why did you react with anger/frustration/anxiety?

What could have changed your perception of critical events?

How do you evaluate your own role/conduct?

Did you at any stage consider ethical points of view?

What is generally most important for you in your job?

Do you think that your own personality has influenced the development of the conflict?

#### V. Questions about alternatives

Can you imagine a possible way to satisfy the basic interests of both parties?

How do you think other persons think about the causes of the conflict?

What do you think an external observer would say about the situation?

Could the conflict have been prevented? How?

#### VI. Questions about learning

Is there anything about this conflict that has been positive?

Can you say that you have learned something about yourself through this experience?

Has this interview lead you to think about things you wouldn't have thought about spontaneously?

Did our conversation about your experience in any way influence what you think and feel in the present situation?

What was your motive for participating in this interview series?

## APPENDIX II: Advertisement texts

Swedish newspaper advertisement, january 1999:

### ***Har du varit inblandad i en konflikt på jobbet?***

För en studie om arbetsplatskonflikter söker jag personer som vill berätta om sina erfarenheter av en arbetsplatskonflikt.

Om du är intresserad av att delta och bli intervjuad om dina erfarenheter vore jag tacksam om du kontaktar mig på nedanstående telefonnummer eller adress. All information behandlas konfidentiellt.

**Titti Lundin**, forskare, Göteborgs Universitet, Forum för tvärvetenskap,  
Brogatan 4, 413 01 Göteborg. **Tel. 031-7731415**

Advertisement text used on the Usenet and on WWW bulletin boards:

Have you been involved in a workplace conflict?

As part of a research project, I want to make e-mail interviews with people who have been (or are) involved in workplace conflicts. If you volunteer for an interview, we will have an open-ended talk about the your experiences with one particular workplace conflict. Your conflict should involve issues not easily resolved, and it should have had a duration of at least several weeks. It doesn't matter if it is a conflict between you and your boss, between you and your colleagues, between groups of co-workers, or between different departments. What you tell me will be treated as confidential material, and will only be used in forms that ensure complete anonymity for all persons and organizations involved. The benefit for you if you choose to participate is an unique opportunity to talk about your conflict with an impartial and experienced outsider. This type of interview is usually very interesting to both interviewed and interviewer. If you want more information, please send me an e-mail.

Thomas Jordan (Dr.)

Gothenburg University, Sweden

Thomas.JordanGU@t-online.de



**APPENDIX III: Professions represented among the participants**

Administration manager  
Administrative official  
Architect  
Care worker  
Chief nurse  
Chief Operating Officer  
Dentist  
Electrician  
Factory worker  
Insurance agent  
Laboratory assistant  
Lawyer  
Maintenance technician  
Mediator  
Mental care worker  
Military officer  
Nurse  
Nursing assistant  
Plumber  
Police officer  
Programmer  
Property manager  
Psychologist  
Psychotherapist  
Researcher  
Sales clerk  
Sales manager  
Secretary  
Shipping agent  
Social worker  
Staff manager  
Supervisor  
Systems analyst  
Teacher  
Team lead  
Theatre producer  
University lecturer  
Vocational guide officer  
Waitress

## **APPENDIX IV: Information page to participants**

[Only the English text used for the e-mail interview series]

### **Interviews on workplace conflicts**

I am glad for your interest in my research on workplace conflicts. I value the opportunity to share in your experiences in an area which most probably involves personally significant events for you.

The purpose of my research is to study how people experience and think about protracted workplace conflicts. This involves such questions as how they experienced the conflict process, how they perceive the other persons involved, and how they think about the actual or possible outcomes. I want to study if there are fundamentally different ways of making meaning out of personal conflict experiences. Knowledge about such differences might, for example, contribute to developing better conflict management methods.

This kind of interview is usually interesting and stimulating for both parties. You will have a unique opportunity to reflect on events that are or were significant to you, together with a person who has no personal stake whatsoever in the conflict you are reflecting on.

Participation in this project includes two parts. The first is to fill out a Sentence Completion Test. You will be presented with 36 sentence stems and invited to complete each one in any way you wish. This should not take more than 20-60 minutes. Your answers will be evaluated to yield a general picture of your way of making meaning of your experience. The second, and main, part of this study is an open-ended e-mail interview about a workplace conflict you have been personally involved in. In the first round, I will ask you to describe the setting, the issues, the persons involved, and major events. After having received your response, I will pose follow-up questions in order to understand what happened and how you experienced various aspects of the conflict. I expect that it will be necessary to make about 4-6 rounds of questions and answers, somewhat dependent on the circumstances.

So far about 60 interviews have been made, and I plan for at least 20 more. I will use the interviews as a basis for discerning and describing different ways of dealing with workplace conflicts. The study will be reported in a research report and in an article in a scientific journal. These publications may include brief excerpts from the interviews. Before making any such excerpts, all references to real persons, organizations and places will be changed to ensure complete confidentiality for you and other persons involved.

If you have any further questions, please contact me. If you want to participate on the basis of this information, please read the enclosed agreement form and follow the instructions there.

Thomas Jordan, Ph. D.

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

**APPENDIX V: Agreement form**

[Only the English form]

**INTERVIEW AGREEMENT FORM**

I agree to participate in an e-mail interview for a study about how people experience and think about workplace conflicts. I understand (1) that the interview involves questions about personal experiences of conflicts; (2) that I do not have to answer any questions I do not choose to answer; (3) that any excerpts taken from this interview will disguise all names of persons and places so as to preserve my anonymity and privacy; (4) that I will not receive any feedback on the scientific evaluation of the Sentence Completion Test or the interview; and (5) that although most people find these interviews engaging and interesting, should I feel like discontinuing the interview for any reason I may do so at any time. I grant permission for the interview material to be used for research purposes, e.g. as source material for research reports and scientific articles.

If you accept these conditions, please reply to this e-mail, include the text above, type your name or nickname below the text, and send the e-mail to me.

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Note: Point 4 doesn't mean you will not get any comments or suggestions regarding your case, just that I will not give each participant an extensive scientific evaluation of their approach to conflicts compared to other participants.

## **APPENDIX VI: Template for interview analysis**

The Swedish interview analysis template comprises eleven pages. The complete, formatted template is not available in English. Below, only the questions used in the template are reproduced.

### **PAGE 1; FREE OBSERVATIONS**

Write here in free form your general observations and impressions after a first read of the interview

### **PAGE 2: ARTICULATION**

1. How clearly does the interviewee articulate what the conflict was about?
2. How clearly does the interviewee articulate his/her own feelings during conflict events?
3. How clearly does the interviewee articulate what was important for him-/herself and for other parties to the conflict? (Issues, interests)
4. Does the interviewee in any articulate the particular perspective from which he/she observes and interprets the conflict? Are there any signs of an awareness that the interviewee has a particular perspective?

### **PAGE 3.1: DIFFERENTIATIONS**

1. Does the interviewee show any awareness that his/her interpretations of reasons, motives, etc. are interpretations that may be biased?
2. Does the interviewee in any way differentiate between concrete positions and underlying needs of a more basic and general nature?
3. Does the interviewee reflect on his/her own motives, intentions and interests, and how they relate to those of other people involved?
4. Does the interviewee differentiate between opinions based on spontaneous dislike and assessments made with a 3rd person perspective?
5. Does the interviewee reflect on his/her own conduct during the conflict?

### **PAGE 3.2 DIFFERENTIATIONS, CONT.**

6. Does the interviewee see his/her behaviour or attitude as contributing negatively to the conflict events?

7. Does the interviewee mention the possibility of unintended consequences for others of their own actions?
8. Does the interviewee mention the possibility of own defensive reactions, for instance avoidance?
9. Does the interviewee refer to the conflict experience's potential for learning and development?
10. Are there any instances of role-taking in the interview, i.e. reflections on how other people have experienced the situation?
11. Does the interviewee show any signs of interest in/empathy for the feelings and predicament of the counterpart?

PAGE 3.3 DIFFERENTIATIONS, CONT.

12. Does the interviewee reflect on his/her own or others' integrity boundaries?
13. Does the interviewee refer to the work group as an entity that serves overarching goals and needs?
14. Does the interviewee reflect on the norms of interaction in the workplace (conventions, norms, jargon, etc.)?
15. Does the interviewee refer to informal role attributions in the work group?
16. Does the interviewee notice and mention the collective moods and feelings in the workplace?
17. Is longterm development of the team a concern for the interviewee?

PAGE 4.1 CONSTRUCTIONS

1. How does the interviewee construct the reasons for the conflict?
2. How does the interviewee characterize him-/herself?
3. How does the interviewee construct the counterpart(-s)?

PAGE 4.2 CONSTRUCTIONS, CONT.

4. Does the interviewee refer to personal relationships as phenomena with durable and distinct qualities?
5. Which types of issues and concerns were important to the interviewee during the conflict, and in general?

6. What kinds of ideas does the interviewee have about alternative ways of dealing with the conflict?

PAGE 5.1 OTHER QUESTIONS

1. How does the interviewee handle his/her own frustration?
2. To what extent does the interviewee take responsibility for his/her own life situation? Does the interviewee feel in charge of his/her own life?
3. Did the interviewee take any initiatives to influence the conflict in a constructive direction?
4. Are there any signs that the interviewee used defense mechanisms? (like fixed diagnoses, physical and psychological avoidance, condemnations, fixation of standpoints)

PAGE 5.2 OTHER QUESTIONS, cont.

5. Which are the most sophisticated elements in the interview (from an ego development point of view)?
6. What does this person need most of all in order not to fare badly in conflicts?
7. Which abilities are first on the agenda for this person?

PAGE 6: SUMMARY

Make a summary of how this person deals with conflicts. What kind of meaning-making is involved? What are the salient aspects of the inner logic of this person?

**APPENDIX VII: Conflict Awareness Mandala for self-diagnosis**

