

Perceiving, interpreting and handling conflicts in the workplace – A study of the differences in individual experience

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Perceiving, interpreting and handling conflicts in the workplace – A study of the differences in individual meaning-making

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This is a brief summary of a comprehensive research report (ca. 140 pages) in Swedish, to be published in February/March 2001. We are looking for ways of funding a full translation of the report to English. We also hope that we will be able to write a few articles in English on the basis of the full report.

Ch. 1 The conflict experience from the individual's perspective – Introduction

The purpose of this two-year study was to develop an analytical framework for describing and understanding differences in how individuals experience and react in workplace conflicts. The results are based on over 80 interviews with persons who had been involved in a workplace conflict.

Ch. 2 What goes on in the minds of persons involved in a workplace conflict?

During the course of the research work, we have searched for a way of visualizing the large differences that exist between individuals regarding how they perceive, interpret and handle conflict experiences. We have asked ourselves if it is possible to describe the many specific elements of the conflict experience that might or might not be something that appears as distinct gestalts in the awareness of the individual. Our idea was to create an overview that systematically describes different types of elements in the 'conflict cognition' of the individual. Such an overview might be useful for identifying salient differences in the way individuals perceive, react to and handle conflict experiences. The approach we have chosen is to formulate the elements that might be present as objects of reflection in the form of *questions* that a person might ask him- or herself and search for answers to. We find that this is a powerful way of approaching the role of reflection in the ways individuals deal with conflict experiences, partly because the nature of perception and reflection can be described with good precision by identifying what kinds of questions a person normally reflects on, and partly because a typology of questions is a form for describing cognition that is easy to grasp and useful for a broad audience.

It is very important to point out that when we talk about what kinds of questions a person actively reflects on during a conflict experience, we use the word "reflect" in a narrow sense. In order to be able to reflect on a phenomenon (e.g. the causes of the behaviour of other people, own feelings, or the informal roles in the workplace) in the sense of the word we adopt here, the phenomenon must be constructed as a distinct gestalt in the

mind, the person must ask him- or herself a question about the phenomenon and he or she must look for an answer to the question. If we accept this use of the word “reflect” we have to conclude that many persons live their daily lives practically without any reflection at all. It is even possible to go through an intensive and protracted conflict experience without really reflecting about what is happening and why.

A central part of our research has been to study the scope of variation in what individuals reflect about. Through a dialectical process where we have read the interviews using a preliminary theoretical framework, compared interviews with each other, and noted and organized particular observations, we have arrived at a typology of questions that might occur in the individual’s perception, interpretation and handling of workplace conflicts. This typology is presented in table 2.1.

The table is organized by ordering the questions into four main themes (*The Conflict, The Other, The Self* and *The Scene*) with in all twenty subthemes, as well as discerning four types of questions (*What? What do I feel about it? Why?* and *What can I do?*). The four questions largely follow a sequence from simpler to more sophisticated issues. Questions of the type *What?* primarily cover perception, i.e. and imply noticing a certain type of issue and thereby making the issue available for conscious reflection. Questions of the type *What do I feel about it?* go one step further and mean that the individual in some way evaluates and develops an opinion about some aspects of the issue. Questions of the type *Why?* mean that the individuals searches for underlying causes to the phenomenon. Questions of the type *What can I do?*, finally, mean that the individual looks for ways of influencing the situation in a desired direction.

This typology is based on our choices of what to include and how to formulate the issues, and there is nothing final about the structure we present here. However, we have found that the typology works well for identifying the particulars of an individual’s typical patterns of perceiving and interpreting conflict experiences. In the full report, we present and explain the meaning of each of the 80 questions in table 2.1, and we include many quotes from our interviews in order to illustrate characteristic patterns.

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

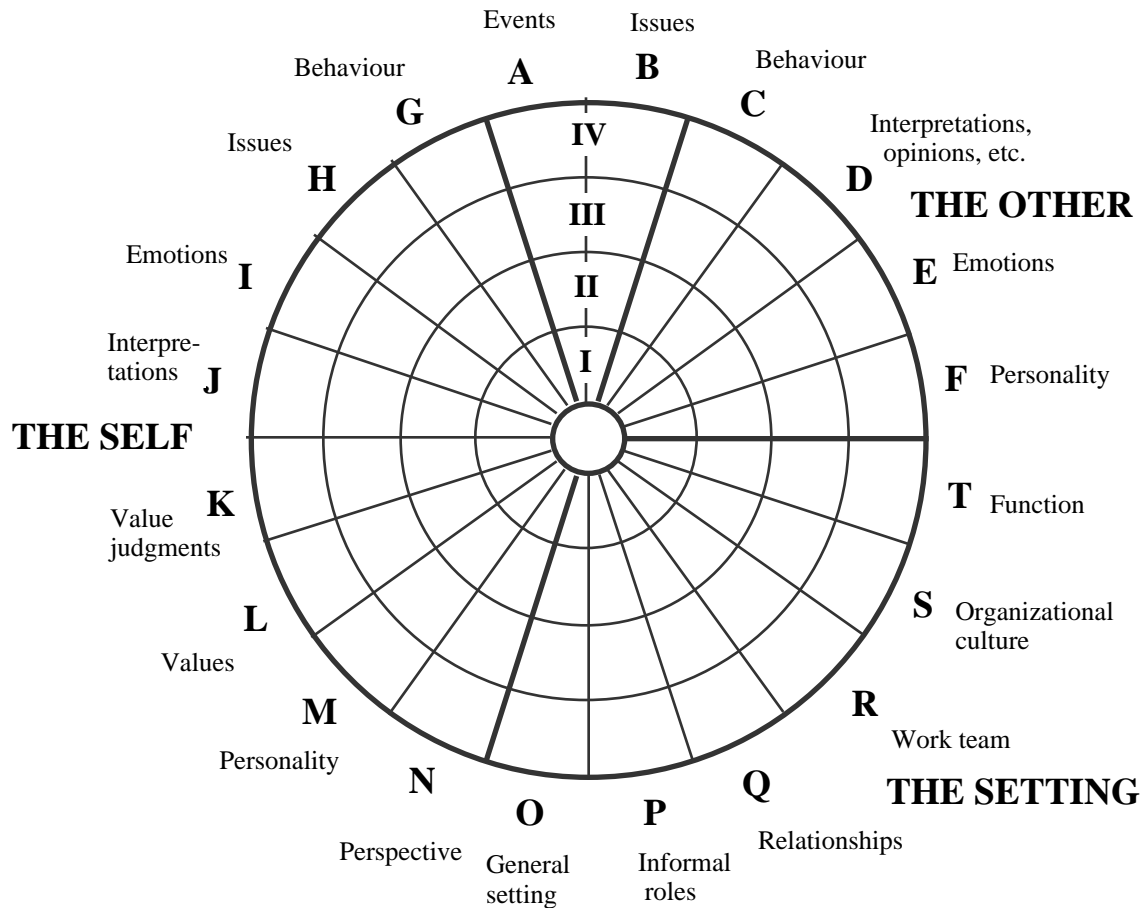
In chapter 2 we presented in considerable detail the specific questions an individual may reflect on during a workplace conflict. Since the typology involves many different issues and levels we have searched for a way to present a graphical overview that summarizes all the particular items of the typology. 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

	WHAT?	WHAT DO I FEEL ABOUT IT?	WHY?	WHAT DO I DO?
THE CONFLICT				
Events	What has happened?	What was important to me in the events?	Why did it happen??	How can I influence the course of events?
The conflict issues	Which are the core issues in the conflict?	Do I feel that the issues that are brought up are important?	Are there deeper needs and interests behind the presented problems?	Is there anything I can do to bring forth underlying needs and interests?
THE OTHER				
Behaviour	What has my counterpart actually done?	What do I dislike in the behaviour of my counterpart?	Which motives does my counterpart have for his/her behaviour?	How can I change my own attitudes in order to influence the behaviour of my counterpart?
Interpretations, opinions, issues, etc.	What does the situation look like from my counterpart's point of view? Which issues are important for my counterpart?	What do I think about the way my counterpart perceives the situation?	Are there important reasons to the way my counterpart perceives the situation??	Can I do something to encourage my counterpart to reevaluate his/her interpretation of the situation?
Emotions	What does my counterpart feel?	What do I think about my counterpart feeling the way he/she feels?	Are there important reasons for my counterpart to feel the way he/she feels?	What can I do to enable a constructive transformation in the way my counterpart feels?
Personality	What kind of person is my counterpart??	Which aspects of my counterpart do I like/dislike? Is my image of my counterpart fair?	Are there important reasons that explain that my counterpart has particular traits?	What can I do to strengthen the aspects of my counterpart that I like, and reduce the role of the aspects I dislike?
THE SELF				
Behaviour	How have I acted during the conflict? Have my actions had consequences I was not fully aware of?	What do I think about the way I acted?	Why did I act in the particular way I did during the course of events?	What can I do to change certain aspects of how I usually behave?
Issues	Which issues, goals, interests and needs were important to me during the conflict?	Do I feel that the issues that appeared important to me really are what I want to regard as important?	Are there underlying reasons that explain why I feel that certain issues and values are important to me?	What can I do to reevaluate what I perceive as important goals and needs, in order to align them with my deepest commitments, feelings and values?
Emotions	What emotions did I experience during the conflict?	Were/are my emotions appropriate to the circumstances and good for me?	Why did I feel the way I did?	What can I do to change my emotional state and mood?
Interpretations	Which assumptions did I make during the conflict about the motives and rationales of others?	Were my assumptions and interpretations well-founded? Are there other reasonable interpretations?	Are there important reasons to my making the specific interpretations I made?	How can I test if my interpretations are reasonable?
Value judgments	Which value judgments did I make during the conflict?	Were my opinions well-founded?	Are there any significant reasons that explain why I felt as I did about specific events and people?	Can I do anything to influence the attitudes and opinions I have in a positive direction?

Values	Which values and norms played a role for me during the conflict?	Do I feel that the norms and values I have acted from so far are the ones I really want to be committed to?	Are there important reasons to my having the values and norms I have?	What can I do to develop and refine my value and norm system?
Personality traits	Which personality traits do I have that are relevant in this context?	Are there any aspects of my own personality that I would like to change?	Are there important reasons to my having the values and norms I have?	What can I do in order to change the aspects of my personality that I would like to change?
Perspective	What kind of perspective do I use when I behold the conflict events?	Do I think that the perspective I normally use is adequate?	Why does my perspective have the particular features it has?	What can I do in order to develop my perspective, and to be more conscious of the ways in which my perspective influences my interpretations?
THE SCENE				
General setting	Which general conditions and circumstances are important in order to understand the nature of the conflict?	Are there any general conditions I find negative, and which might be changed?	Are there any important reasons that explain why the general conditions are as they are?	What can I do in order to influence the general conditions?
Informal roles	Are there any informal roles in my workplace?	Are there informal roles that I find unsmooth?	Are there important reasons for the present informal role structure?	What can I do in order to change existing unsmooth informal roles?
Relationships	What kinds of relationships do I have to my colleagues?	What do I feel about the qualities of the relationships I have to my colleagues?	Why do the relationships have the characteristic qualities they have?	What can I do in order to improve the relationships I have to my colleagues?
The work team	How does the work team function as a whole, in relation to the tasks we have?	What opinion do I have about the way our team functions now?	Are there important reasons that explain how the team functions now?	What can I do in order to contribute to improve the way the team functions?
Organizational culture	Which style dominates the interactions and the atmosphere at the workplace?	What do I feel about the prevailing style of interaction?	Are there important reasons behind the prevailing organizational culture?	What can I do in order to influence the current interaction style in a positive direction?
Function	Which general goals and functions do my workplace serve?	Do I think that the organization's goals are good? Do I feel that the workplace serves its purposes in a good way?	Are there important reasons that the goals are formulated in a certain way, or that there are deficiencies in the fulfilling of the goals?	What can I do in order to contribute to an improved capacity to fulfill the organization's goals?
Other questions				
	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

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

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 Scene*). These main themes are demarcated in the chart by thicker lines. *Self* and *Other* have been placed opposing each other, whereas *The Conflict* and *The Setting* have been placed in-between them. As has been explained in the main report, 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 schematical image 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 other 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

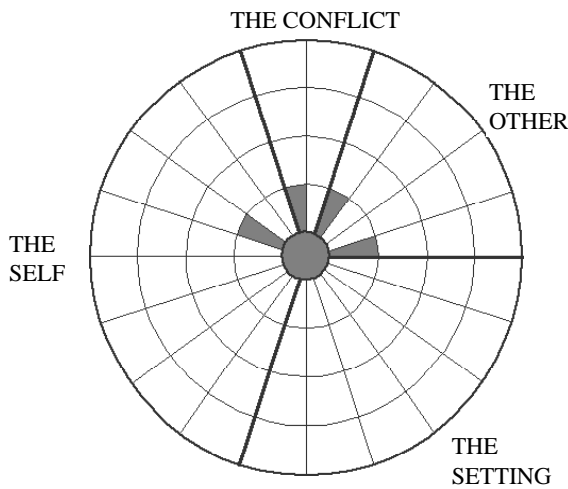


Figure 3.2

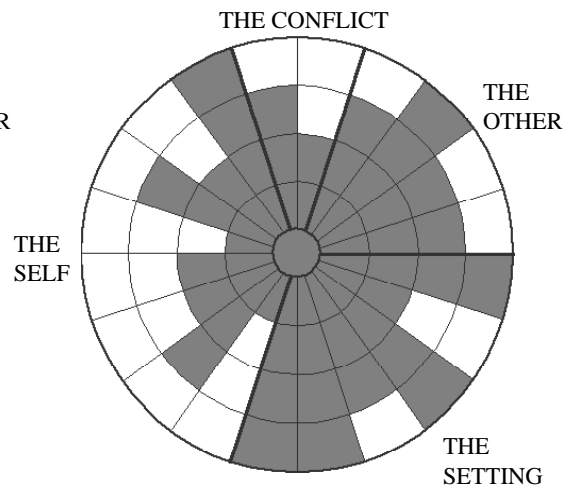


Figure 3.3

reflection as an instrument of orientation in daily life. These persons deal with 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 the depth of their 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 for 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.

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.

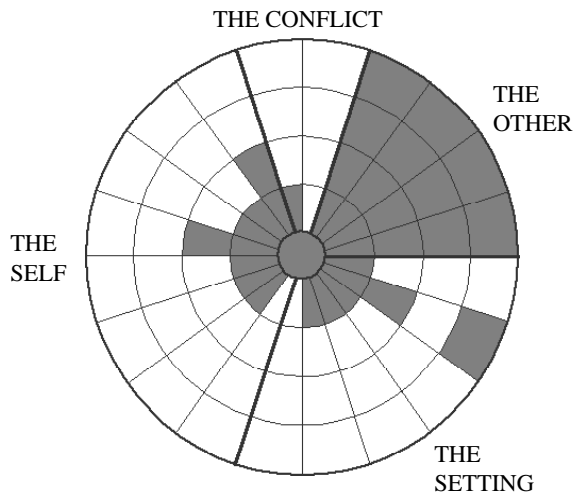


Figure 3.4

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.

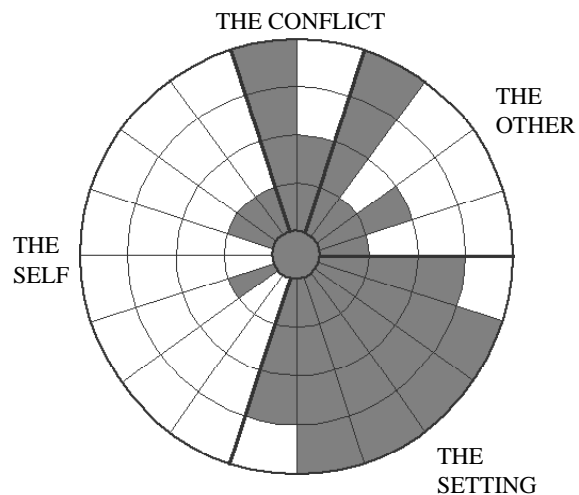


Figure 3.5

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.

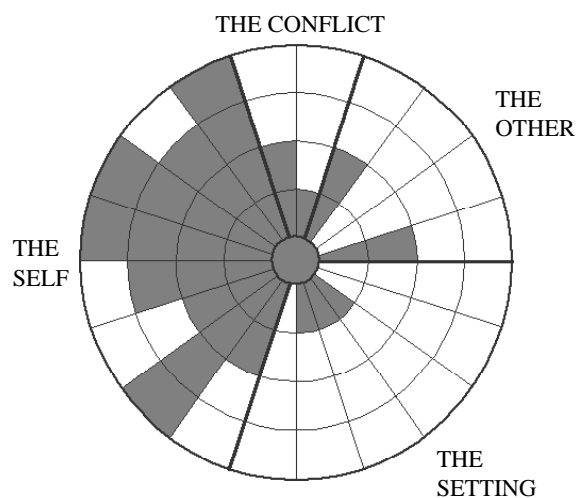


Figure 3.6

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.

Ch. 4 The depth of reflections

The conflict awareness mandala presented in chapter 3 is intended to map the *scope* of an individual’s consciousness. However, it is not well suited to represent the *depth* of the reflections involved. In chapter 4 we develop a conceptual framework for discerning differences in: (1) how individuals conceive other persons; (2) what kinds of goals and issues individuals regard as important in their worklife; and (3) types of learning from and development through personal conflict experiences.

We have found that the images of other persons that people construct can be described according to two dimensions. The first concerns the perspective from which the individual perceives other persons. We discern here between first person, second person and third person perspectives. In first person perspectives, the individual perceives other people through their own subjective impressions and opinions. The image of the other is highly influenced by the impact the other person has on oneself, and what one feels and thinks as a consequence of this. There is no effort to step out of one’s own point of view. In the second person perspective the individual tries to imagine what the other person perceives, feels and thinks, in short what it is like to be the other person in a particular situation. In the third person perspective, the individual tries to figure out how the other person functions as a personality, regardless of the specific feelings and subjective opinions the individual might have about the other. Here there is an emphasis on getting a realistic and objective understanding of the other. The second dimension of images of others concerns the depth of

the reflections about the other. We discern between fixed traits, linear psychological causality and complex psychological causality. In the first case, the individual thinks about other persons as bundles of certain characteristics. There are not conceptions about where these characteristics come from, or internal cause and effect networks. Therefore, people who think about others in terms of fixed traits tend to make up an image of how others “are,” and stick to this image. If one concludes that someone is difficult, arrogant, deceitful or something similar, the natural consequence is to try to avoid this person as much as possible. There is no consideration of underlying reasons for certain behaviours and attitudes, and consequently no reasoning about how the circumstances might be changed in order to attain a change of strained relations. Linear psychological causality is when certain aspects of other peoples’ behaviour are explained with simple cause-and-effect ideas, e.g. that someone is afraid of losing his job. Complex psychological causation is when individuals make up internal “models” of the personality systems of other people, where the actual structure of the personality is seen as the cause of their behaviour and attitudes. This kind of images usually imply that the individual perceives other people to be, to a considerable extent, captives of their own personalities. With such images of other people, the propensity of blaming individuals for conflicts is usually low: the “guilt” is spread out over a complex web of causes, where no single culprit can be made responsible.

In the rest of this chapter, we discuss the variation in the scope of the concerns individuals have in their worklife and the different types of learning that can be observed in the comments our respondents have made. We will not try to summarize the conclusions here, due to the complexity of these themes.

Ch. 5 Perceiving, interpreting and dealing with workplace conflicts: Six portraits

In this chapter we present six portraits of characteristic ways of perceiving, interpreting and dealing with workplace conflicts. The purpose of these portraits is to show how different levels of consciousness lead to very different basic orientations in conflict situations. In earlier chapters we have used an analytic approach, looking at single elements of the conflict experience of individuals. Such an approach does not say very much about how real persons make sense of their experience. Here we take a more holistic perspective and present portraits of the way persons might understand and react when confronted with a workplace conflict. The six portraits are based on selected interviews in our database, but the characteristics have been stylized in order to be representative for common ways of perceiving, interpreting and reacting to conflicts.

Ch. 6 Jane gets sacked

Chapter 6 presents a whole interview with an individual who reflects on a very broad spectrum of questions, as defined by the conflict awareness mandala. The interview is reproduced a couple of sections at a time, which are then commented by the authors. We

point out salient features of the interview, in particular what kinds of issues Jane reflects on and tries to do something about. Throughout the interview text, we also insert scores that show which of the questions in table 2.1 are present in Jane's narrative.

Ch. 7 Curriculum for development through conflict experiences

The concluding chapter summarizes the framework presented in the report into a four-level curriculum for developing increasing awareness in conflict situations. We outline what kinds of questions and skills are next on the agenda for individuals at different levels of conflict awareness.

We also report three general and interlinked observations we made from the interviews. A first observation is that the conflicts our participants reported about were seldom of the "dispute" type, i.e. a conflict where there are different parties with incompatible goals or standpoints. In disputes, the parties know what they want and they agree that there is a conflict. In most of our cases the conflicts were characterized by difficult interpersonal relationships where one of several of the involved denied that there was a conflict, or at least blocked all attempts at communicating about perceived problems. These conflicts were not centered on well-defined issues, but rather on frustrating working conditions. We suggest that further investigations into the strategies used for blocking communication in troubled relationships, and the underlying causes for such behaviours would have a great potential for leading to interesting results.

A second observation is that a high level of consciousness about the different aspects of the conflict and highly developed communication skills and other social competences is no guarantee for constructive outcomes of conflicts. We have seen several cases where individuals have been very insightful and inventive, but where they have miserably failed in achieving a reasonable resolution of the problems. The reason was, as we interpret our cases, mostly that when one or several parties refuse to communicate about important issues, for whatever reason, an individual might be rather powerless to do anything effective about it. Consequently, developing individual skills is far from a panacea for workplace conflicts. Many conflicts can only be managed constructively if there are suitable organizational structures, policies and procedures.

A third observation is that even if a high propensity to reflect on a broad range of aspects of the conflict does not constitute a guarantee for constructive outcomes, our material indicates that persons who feel they understand the reasons behind the conflict events generally have a much lower risk of suffering emotionally in workplace conflicts. A wide-ranging understanding of how people function and how specific circumstances and conditions in the workplace contribute to the emergence of conflicts lessens the propensity to become cynical and bitter even though the experiences may be painful and disappointing. A person whose scope and depth of awareness are great also has more opportunities to learn from and develop through conflict experiences.