

Managing Difficult Conversations



Tools and
Techniques for Talking
About Sensitive Topics

January 2017

Workshop Aim

- To increase your understanding of how to plan for and structure difficult conversations and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.

Road Map for Today

- What are difficult conversations?
- Why are some conversations “difficult?”
- Why do we see things differently?
- Tools to understand “both points of view”
- Conversation design and practice
- Insights and practical applications

Table Discussions

- How would you define a difficult conversation?
- Where and when do difficult conversations occur?
- What is the cost to us and to the organization of unresolved difficult conversations?
- What do you want to take away from today's session to improve your capacity to manage difficult conversations?

Some Difficult Conversation Topics – Manager Perspective

- Introducing a change
- Issues overlooked in the past
- Different perspective on performance
- Inconsistent results
- Need more productivity
- Excessive absences
- Improper time reporting
- Sloppy work
- Doesn't play well with others
- Doesn't follow instructions
- Misses deadlines
- Weak communication or technical skills

Some Difficult Conversation Topics - Employee Perspective

- Asking for help
- Interpersonal/relationship challenges
- Unclear expectations
- Conflicting directions
- Different perspective on performance
- Challenges with peers and co-workers
- Work/life balance issues
- Asking for career guidance
- Asking for clear, unvarnished feedback
- Boredom

Some Reasons Why Communication Can Be Challenging and Difficult

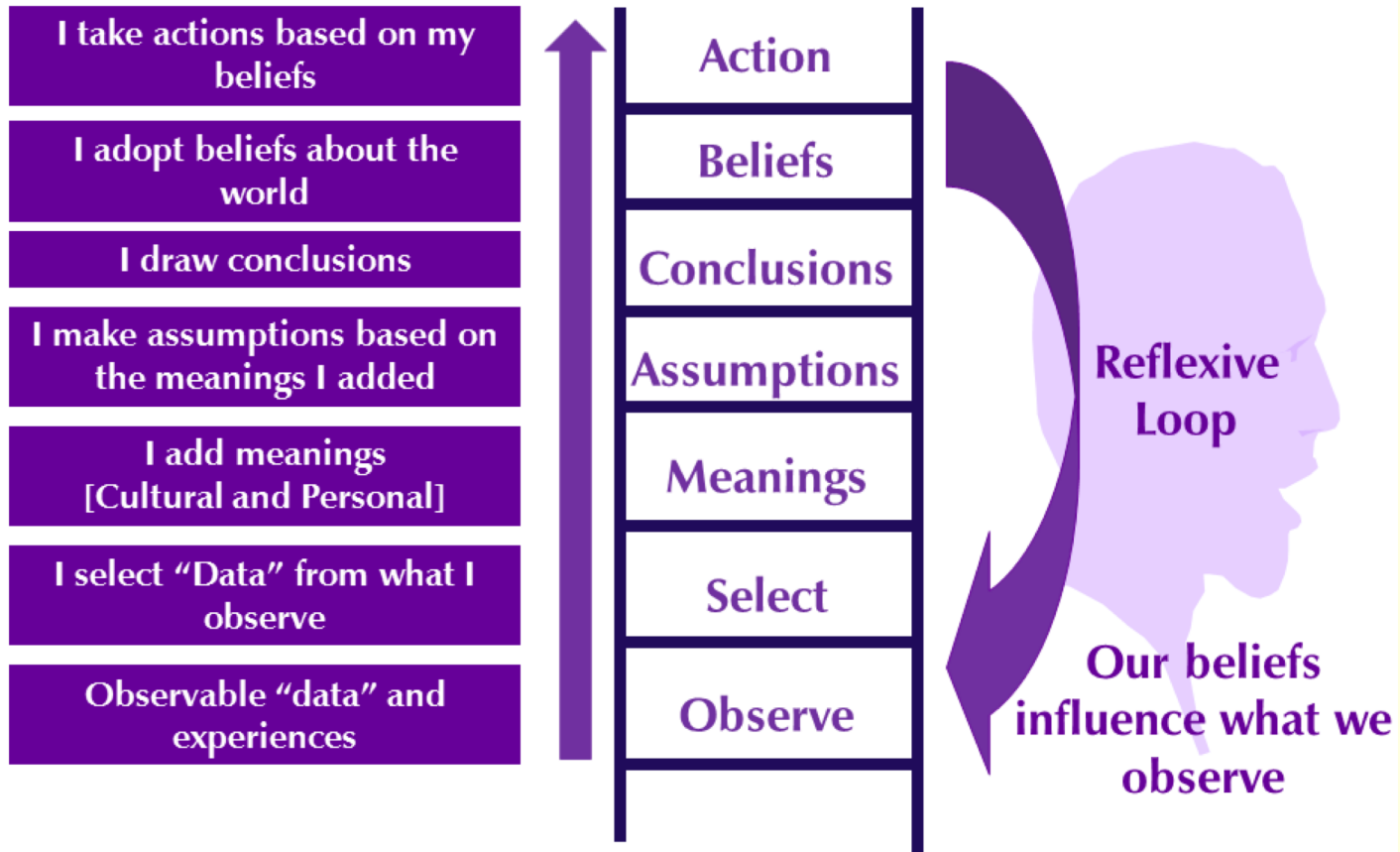
- As much as 80% of the message being sent is nonverbal
- A word means exactly what you mean it to, and something completely different to another person
- The connotations of a word are just as important, perhaps more so, than the meaning
- With anyone with whom you communicate regularly and intimately, there will develop a private language of shorthand references, special terms and private meanings, in which case the conventional meanings of words may disappear
 - You're in a sense speaking your own foreign language
- If you are with someone, you are communicating; whether you 'mean to' or not
- 87% of the information that reaches our brains comes in through our eyes
- Most people use words to hide meaning, not reveal it
- People have very different communication styles and sometimes they don't meet or match at all
- Assume the next message that you send will be misunderstood
- Don't worry about being clear; worry about being understood

Exercise: Fact Versus Inference

| | Fact | Inference |
|--|-------------|------------------|
| A. Mr. Jones is a buyer | | |
| B. Jones was supposed to meet Smith | | |
| C. Jones was scheduled for a 10 o'clock meeting | | |
| D. The accident occurred at the XYZ Company | | |
| E. Jones was taken to the hospital for x-rays | | |
| F. No one at the hospital which Smith called knew anything about Jones | | |
| G. Smith had called the wrong hospital | | |

H. WITHOUT DISCUSSION, write another fact taken from the story

The Ladder of Inference



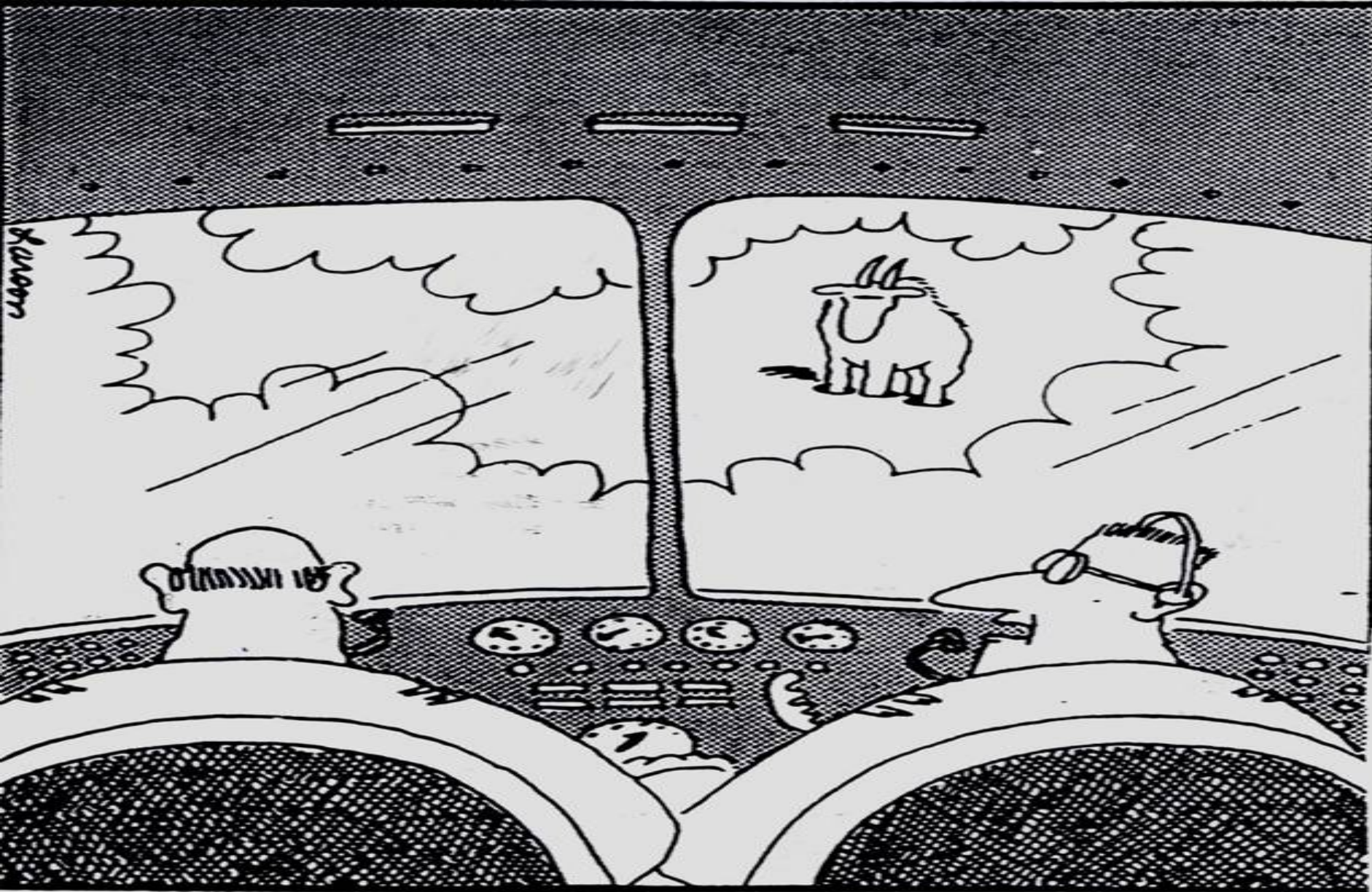
Self-Generating Beliefs (i.e. “Jumping to Conclusions”)



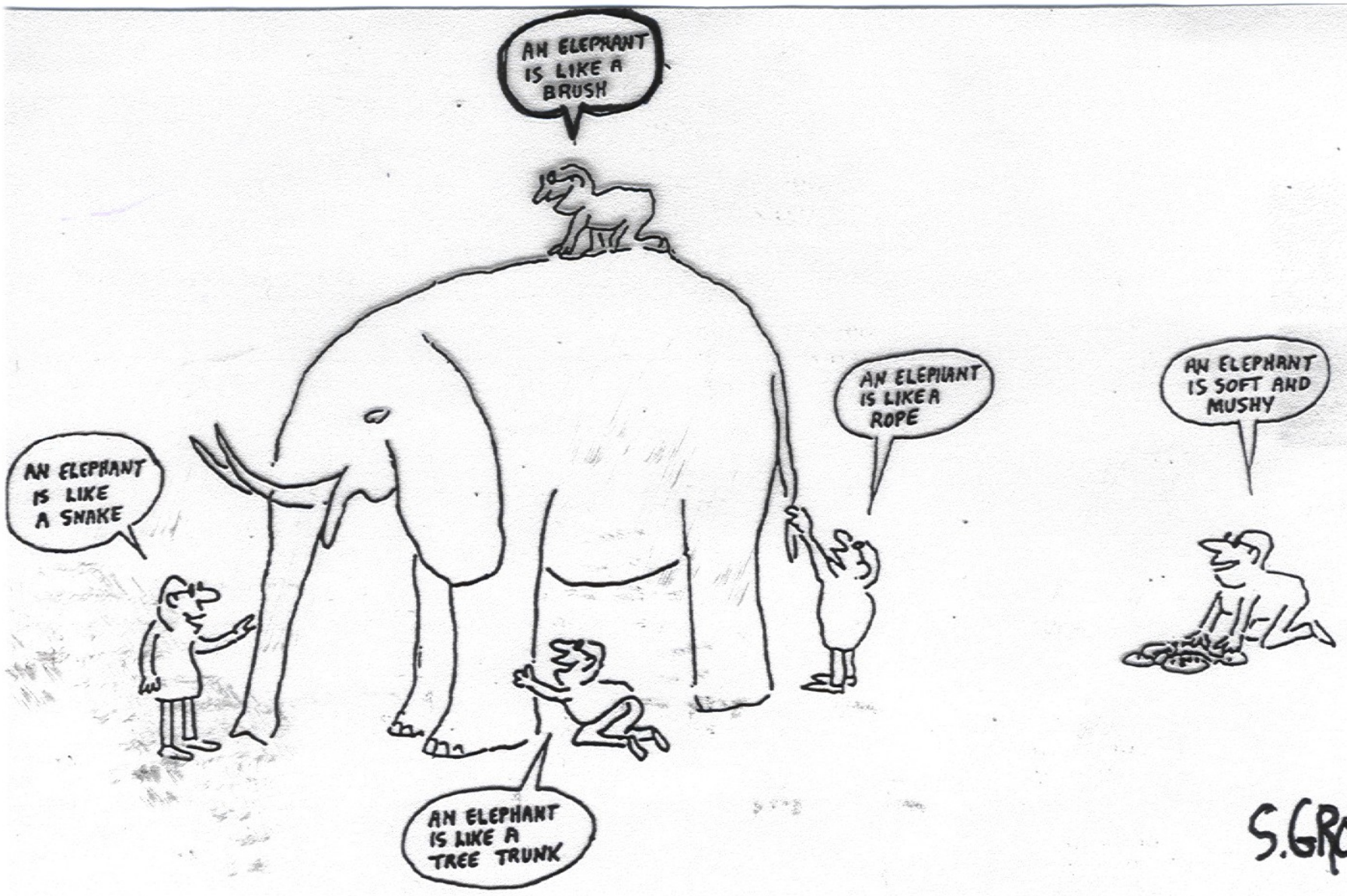
The Ladder of Inference is the thinking process we go through, usually without realizing it, to get from a fact to a decision or action.

Our ability to achieve the results we truly desire is eroded by our feelings that:

- Our beliefs are *the* truth
- The truth is obvious
- Our beliefs are based on real data
- The data we select is the real data

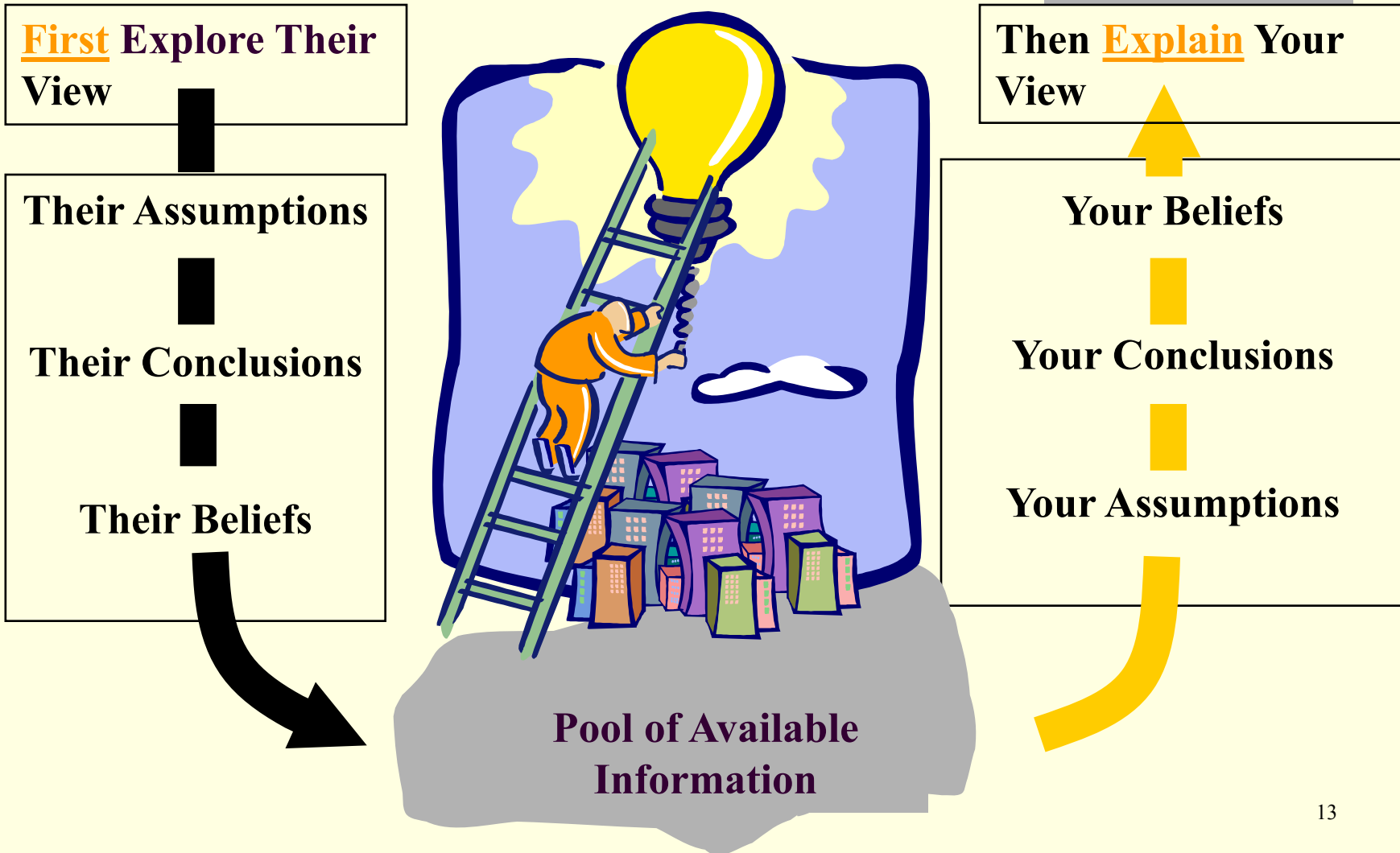


“Say . . . what’s a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?”



S.GROSS

Using The Ladder of Inference to Explore Each Other's Reasoning



Walking Shoes

Great Spirit, help me never to judge another until I have walked in his moccasins.

- Cherokee Proverb



Or Said Another Way...

“You never really know a man until you understand things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*



By HikingArtist.com

Examining a Difficult Conversation that “Went Nowhere”

- Think about an unsuccessful difficult conversation that you recently had
 - It probably had some emotions attached to it
- Take a snapshot of the part of the conversation where it felt like the conversation got stuck
- In the right hand column of your handout, capture what was actually said by both you and the other person
 - About six lines of dialogue are enough
- Now fill in the left hand column. What were you thinking and or feeling that you did not say?

Left-Hand Column (LHC) Exercise

What Was Actually Said

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

The Left-Hand Column (LHC) Exercise

What I Was Thinking
and Feeling

What Was Actually Said

For every statement you
made, reflect on and write
down what you were
thinking and/or feeling
but did not say

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

A Typical Conversation

*Totally useless!
What a jerk!*

Very helpful.
Thank you.

You need to be
more productive.

*What a
loser! She'll
never get it!*



Left-Hand Column (LHC) Exercise

What I Was Thinking
and Feeling

What Was Actually Said

For every statement you
made, reflect on your
purpose for saying what
you did

I said:

T said:

I said:

T said:

If you were **really** trying to
understand the other's point of
view, mark your statement with
an (I)

I said:

T said:

If, however, you were trying to
get them to understand your view,
mark your statement with an (A)

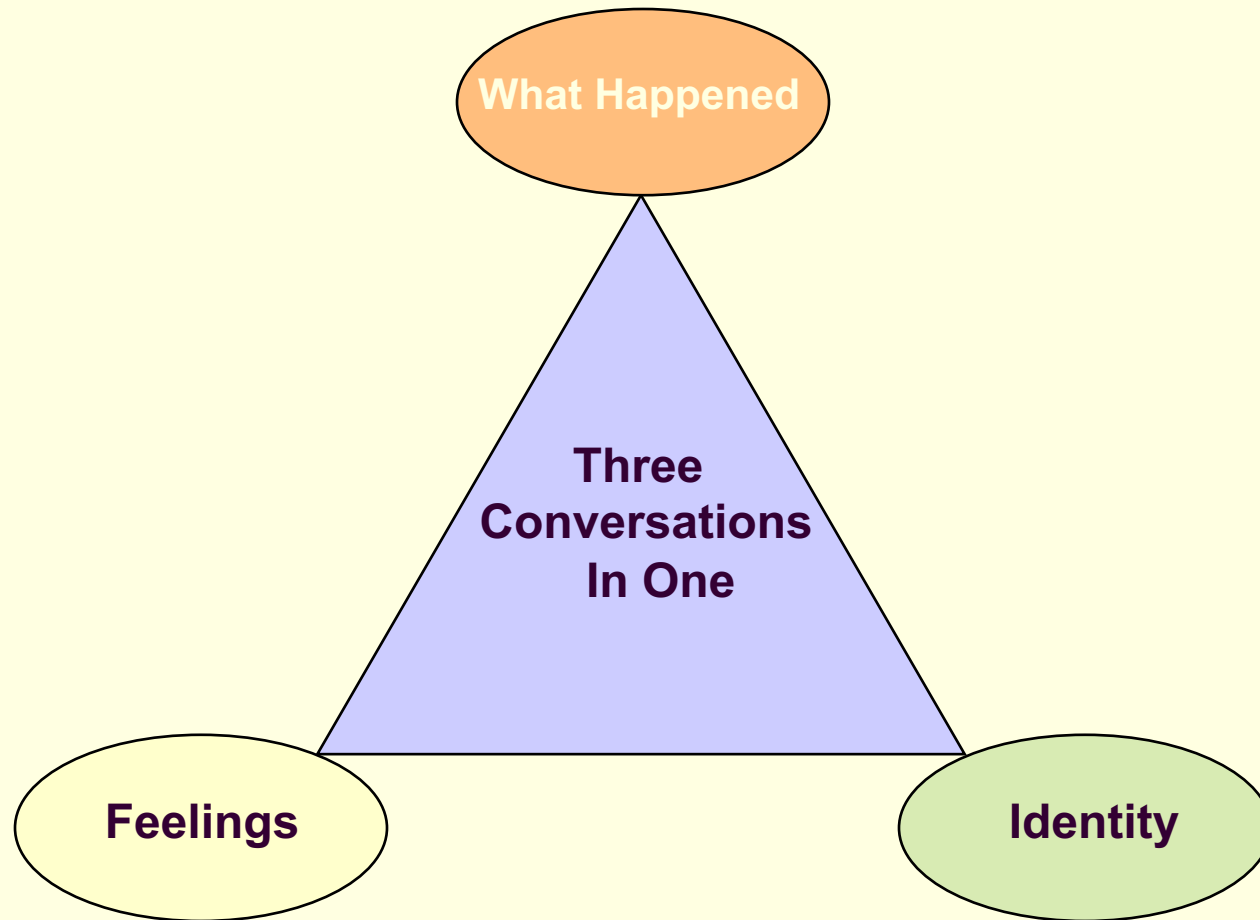
I said:

T said:

Table Discussion: Reviewing Your Left Hand Column

- What percentage of your RHC (what you actually said) was asking questions versus “telling your story?”
 - What sort of questions were being asked?
 - Were they effective questions for getting an understanding of the situation?
- Consider where you were on the Ladder of Inference
 - Were you curious about their point of view or certain that you were right?
 - What has really led me to think and feel this way?
 - What beliefs do I have that might have caused the communication to happen in the way that it did?
 - How might my comments have contributed to the difficulties?
 - Why didn't I say what was in my left-hand column?
 - What assumptions am I making about the other person or people?
- How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve our communications?

Understanding the Context



Acknowledging the Head and the Heart



"The most confused we get is when we try to convince our heads of something our hearts know is a lie."

- Karen Moning

Using the Ladder of Inference to Have Better Conversations



- Inquiry: Ask questions that enable you to understand the other's point of view
- Acknowledgement: Let the other person know that you understand them
 - Doesn't mean agree!
- Advocacy: Tell your side of the story in a way that they can hear

One Way to Share What's Happening from Your Point of View

Invitation

“What do you think?”
“Where are you with this?”

Wants

“This is what I would like...”

Feelings

“This is what I am feeling...”

Perceptions - Beliefs

“This is my interpretation...”

Data

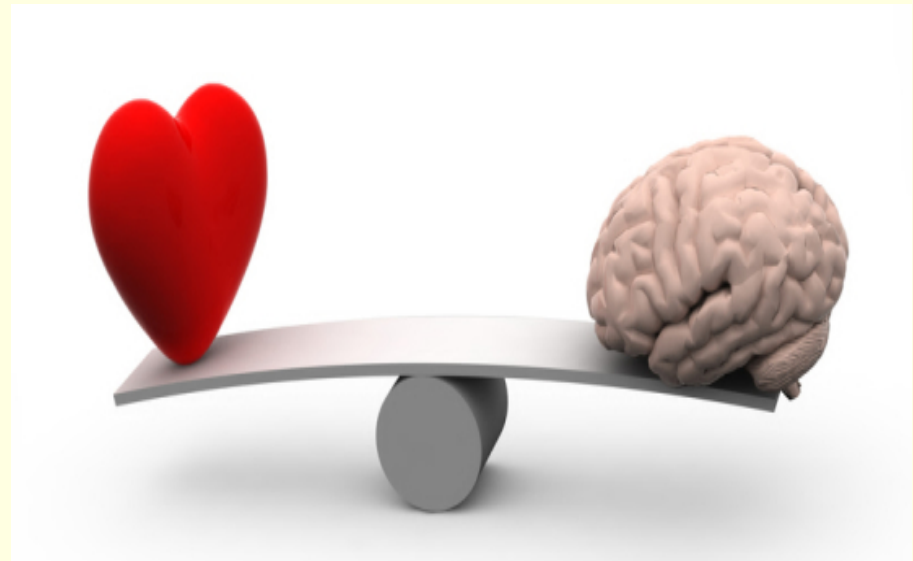
“This is what I see...”²⁵

L-C-S Tool

Like

Concern

Suggestion



A Great Idea!

- “SUNY Cobleskill should open a veterinary school on the Coby Farm.”


Reflection, Preparation, Practice

- Role play (Kelly and Dean) in pairs
 - Each of you needs to have a difficult conversation
 - Read your part and then prepare for the conversation
- Work through the conversation, and explain your point of view, to the point of understanding the situation from both perspectives
 - Don't have to work through the actions

Table Discussion: Reflecting on the Conversations

- To what extent were you...
 - Advocating?
 - Acknowledging the other's position?
 - Inquiring to understand?
 - Using the ladder of inference?
 - What types of questions were being asked?
 - Where did you get stuck/unstuck? Why?
 - What would you do differently next time?
- *Discuss and be prepared to share key learnings with the larger group*

CONVERSATION PLANNING TOOL

| QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW | |  | SHARE YOUR POINT OF VIEW | |
|---|------------------------|--|--------------------------|------------------------|
| ACCOMPLISH THE TASK | BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP | | ACCOMPLISH THE TASK | BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP |
| | | <p>G GOAL</p> | | |
| | | <p>R CURRENT REALITY</p> | | |
| | | <p>O OPTIONS</p> | | |
| | | <p>W WAY FORWARD</p> | | |

GROW: Goal Questions

- What is your desired outcome for this conversation?
- What would you like us to accomplish today?
- What are the consequences of not accomplishing it?

GROW: Reality Questions

- What has been happening for you?
- What is your experience with this?
- What are you feeling?
- What have you tried so far?
 - What were the results?
 - What are the obstacles?

GROW: Options Questions

- What ideas have you considered?
- If any solution at all were possible, what would it be?
- In a perfect world, what would you do?
- If you were to put yourself in the other person's (my) shoes, what would you do?
- If you were a fly on the wall, listening to this conversation, what would you recommend?
- Would you like suggestions from me?

GROW: Way Forward Questions

- Do any of the options that we discussed interest you enough to explore further?
- If we were to do this, how might we go about it?
- What might get in the way?
 - How might we manage that?
- What would success look like?
- What are our next steps?

CONVERSATION PLANNING TOOL

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW



SHARE YOUR POINT OF VIEW

ACCOMPLISH THE TASK

BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP

G

GOAL

R

CURRENT
REALITY

O

OPTIONS

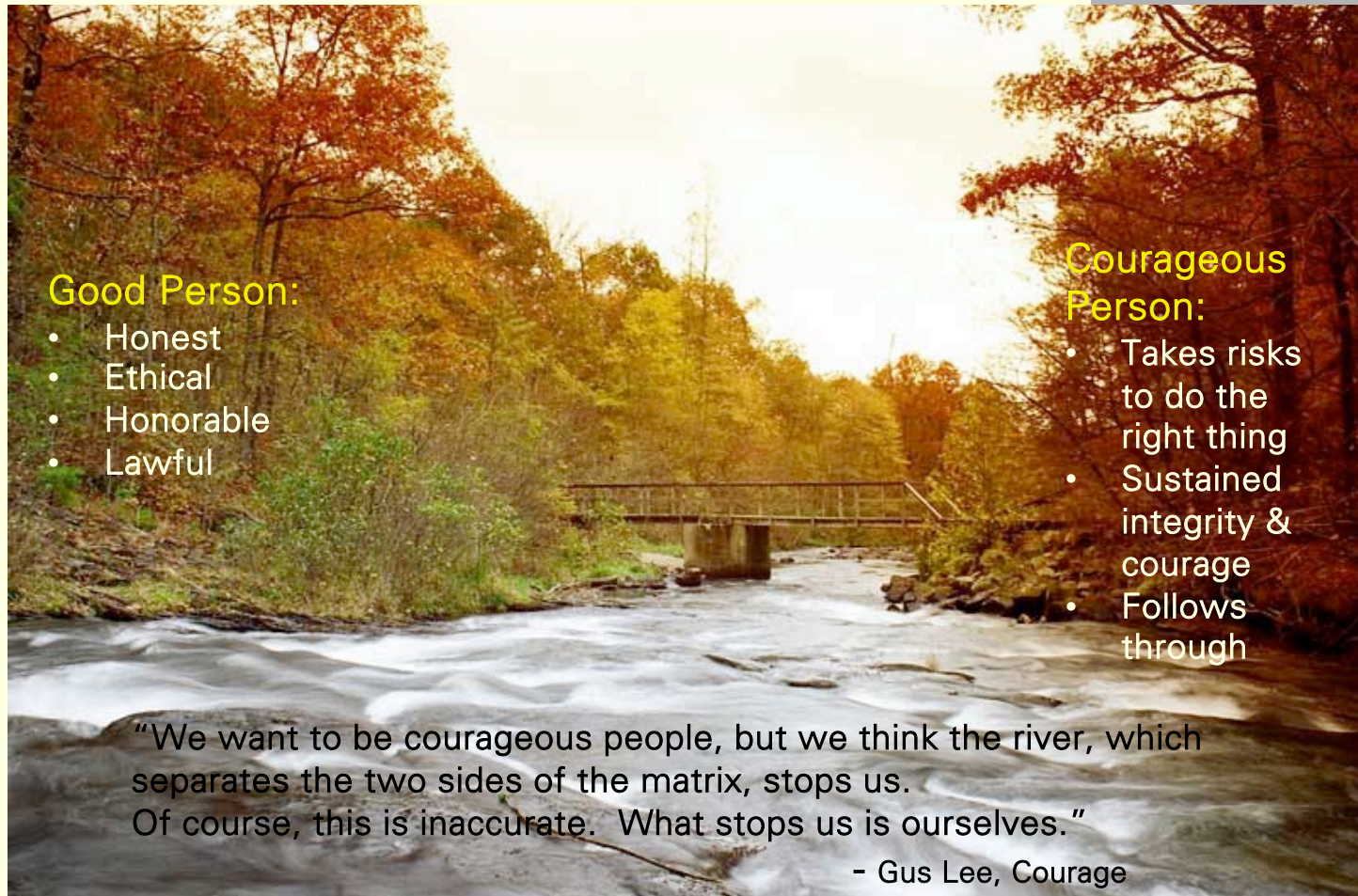
W

WAY
FORWARD

Conversation Bridges

- Could it be that...
- I wonder if...
- Would you consider this idea...
- What I am hearing...
- Correct me if I am wrong, is it possible...
- This is what I think I hear you saying...
- Maybe you feel...
- Is it conceivable that...
- I'm not sure that I'm following you; do you mean...
- I'm not certain I understand...
- Does it sound reasonable that...
- Could this be what's going on...
- From where I stand...
- It appears you...
- I'm wondering if you're feeling...
- I somehow sense you feel...
- Is there any chance that you...
- Help me understand...
- Is that what you're seeing...
- Is that what you mean...
- Is that what you feel...
- I get the impression that...

Crossing the River of Fear



Good Person:

- Honest
- Ethical
- Honorable
- Lawful

Courageous Person:

- Takes risks to do the right thing
- Sustained integrity & courage
- Follows through

“We want to be courageous people, but we think the river, which separates the two sides of the matrix, stops us. Of course, this is inaccurate. What stops us is ourselves.”

- Gus Lee, Courage

Reflection, Preparation, Practice

- Role play (Randy and Sandy) in pairs
 - Each of you needs to have a difficult conversation
 - Read your part and then use the GROW worksheet to prepare for the conversation
- Work through the conversation, explaining your point of view, to the point of understanding the situation from both perspectives
 - Don't have to work through the actions

Table Discussion: Reflecting on the Conversations

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Homework:

Planning for a Real Conversation

- Think about a Difficult Conversation that you need to have
- Use the GROW planning sheet to plan for your conversation
 - What do you want to say? What is the other person likely to say?
- What questions will you need to ask?
- Use all of the tools you have learned today
- Where might you get stuck?
- How might you find a common ground?

When a Difficult Conversation Comes Looking for You

- Listen to ideas as if for the first time
 - Avoid building your case when someone else is speaking
 - Layers of the onion
 - Listen first to understand
 - Speak to acknowledge and then to be understood
- If you start getting emotional or sense the other person is...
 - Don't get hooked
 - Use time outs
- Diagnose the source(s) of the disagreement
 - Facts – What exactly happened? What is the data?
 - Goals – What is our objective?
 - Methods – How should we do what we need to do? Why do we think it must be done in a particular way?
 - Values – What do we believe in?
- Embrace the other's point of view using the Ladder of Inference
- Ask what data or logic might change their views

L-C-S Practice

- How can we improve this training program?

Recommended Reading

- **Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most** by Douglas Stone and Bruce Patton
- **Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High** by Kerry Patterson and Joseph Grenny
- **How to Have That Difficult Conversation You've Been Avoiding** by Henry Cloud and John Townsend
- **Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time** by Susan Scott
- **How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk** by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish