

The Wonder of Interpersonal Relationships VIe: Strategies for Sustaining Relationships Midst Differences

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I propose that fundamental viewpoints in our life tend to reside in one of three domains: information, intentions and ideas. Much as in the case of the domains that dominated life in medieval Europe, each of these three domains has its own operational rules, its own desired outcomes, and its own skill sets. Furthermore, significant differences of opinion often arise in each of these three domains. These differences must be addressed in quite different ways if there is major disagreement about the current state of affairs (domain of information), desired states of affairs (domain of intentions) or pathways for moving from the current to desired state of affairs (domain of ideas).

I turn now to these ways of dealing with diverse differences. I will consider ways in which to address differences of viewpoint as they are manifest in the three distinct domains. Different strategies should be engaged in each of these three domains—for the interpersonal dynamics and problem-solving strategies to be engaged in each domain are quite different (Bergquist, Sandstrom and Mura, 2023). I begin with the domain of information.

Domain of Information

This is the domain in which differences are most readily addressed and resolved: “Just find out what is really happening!” Unfortunately, with the polarization that is occurring in many societies right now and with the massive distribution of misinformation (Weitz and Bergquist, 2022), this resolution of differences is not quite as easy as, perhaps, it once was. At the very least, each party to the differences in viewpoint regarding information might try answering some basic questions.

Basic Questions

Given different perspectives, here are some questions to ask of both parties to the disagreement regarding information:

- What are the most salient facts with regard to the circumstance in which you now find yourself?
- What are the “facts” about which you are most uncertain at the present time? How could you check on the validity of these facts?
- What are alternative ways in which you could interpret the meaning or implications of the facts that you do believe to be valid?
- Where might the other party be correct regarding what they believe to be the facts?
- Where are you and the other party in agreement regarding the facts?

These questions might be asked to determine the type of information to be collected and the ways this information could be used.

Discovering what is Real

If answers to these basic questions doesn't lead to shared viewpoints, then a straight-forward strategy might be engaged that helps to address the differences of view point. The first step is to ask a simple

question: “what additional data do we need to gather that will resolve our differences. Unfortunately, unlike in many sports we have no “replay cameras” to record what is the “real” state of affairs. However, we do have the capacity to gather new information.

I would suggest that a triangulation strategy can be of great value here. This strategy involves the collection of information using three methods and three sources of information—in this way there will usually be concurrence in the information obtained using two of the methods and two of the sources. Even a method or source that serves as an “outlier” can be of value in seeking to understand and appreciative ways in which a specific event or object can be viewed in different ways.

For instance, two people might hold quite different views regarding the impact which a new housing policy has had on the price of homes in the community where they serve on the city council. Data can be collected from three sources: (1) a sampling of people in the community who have been looking to purchase a home (or have recently purchased a home), (2) a sampling of people in the community who are planning to sell their home (or have already sold it) and (3) a small group of real estate experts or community development consultants who are knowledgeable about the new policy and have diverse opinions about its impact.

Three of the methods that might be used in collecting this data include: (1) personal interviews, (2) group (focus-group) interviews, and (3) gathering of archival information from before and after policy went into effect (e.g. number of home sold, cost of homes sold, and any surveys available regarding seller and buyer satisfaction ratings). Other methods might be used to complete the triangulation—such as direct observation of citizens while they are trying to buy or sell a home, email/digital surveys of citizen attitudes about the new policy, or review of articles written about the new policy (local newspapers, social media postings, etc.).

A Third Perspective

While these multiple methods and multiple sources will tend to yield diverse information—perhaps making the struggle to find consensus that much more difficult—they will also tend to open up both parties to new perspectives on what is “true” and “accurate.” Often, a third perspective is produced which differs from both of the currently debated perspectives – and this perspective is like to be more nuanced and can serve as a valuable guide for refinement in the newly enacted policy.

Unfortunately, in our highly polarized society, this type of thoughtful analysis of differing views regarding information doesn’t always take place. This is a form of “slow thinking” that Daniel Kahneman (2011) would applaud. However, these differences of opinion are often invested with considerable emotion and Kahneman’s “fast thinking” is likely to prevail—with its reliance on outmoded heuristics and a heavy dose of bias, fear and suspicion of the other person’s “true” motives.

This being the case, I would suggest that one of three strategies be engaged that all involve a reframing of the information gathering and analyzing process. In some cases, a third party (mediator/facilitator) assists in the engagement of this reframing process.

Comparing Lists

The first step when engaging this strategy involves a “cooling off” period of time for both parties to the disagreement and a “homework” assignment that both are to complete. The assignment involves

preparing a list of the “reasons” why each person believes that their version of “reality” is valid. In addition, there is some reframing to take place.

Each person is to prepare a list (usually much shorter) on which any “reasons” why the other person’s viewpoint might be “valid” or at least “not easily dismissed.” There is an additional task to be completed. Each person is to prepare a third list which is their prediction regarding what will be on the other person’s two lists (including what they think the other person will place on their “opponent’s” list.

The two parties now come together after their time of “cooling off” and “reflecting.” They compare their lists and focus on where they are “surprised” (often pleasantly) and where they are in agreement. Together they now prepare an “integrated” list contains elements from both lists. While they might find themselves still in disagreement, they are likely to find that they together have generated some new information and may have even generated a new shared perspective that can guide them in moving forward on the issue being addressed—such as review of the new housing policy.

What if They are Right!

The second strategy is particularly appropriate if there is considerable emotion invested in the version of reality held by both parties. This strategy involves addressing a challenging question: “what if your “opponent” is accurate? What are the implications.” As one of the parties begins to address the matter of implications then their fears are likely to emerge along with other emotions that might be swirling around the two opposing viewpoints.

Exaggerated negative outcomes (related to catastrophic thinking) often are articulated and are subject to the “cold hard reality” of slow, reflective thinking (often facilitated by a mediator). While the revelation of emotion-laded beliefs and fears can be quite embarrassing, there can also be a moment of “relief” – especially when these fears are being revealed by both parties. There can even be a bit of laughter and self-humor as both parties try to move beyond their fearful envisioning to find a place where they can both find comfort in the facts. This is usually somewhere between their polarized positions.

Reflective Inquiry

The third strategy requires more energy and attention on the part of both parties. It is particularly appropriate if the information being debated is multi-tiered and filled with contradiction. It is also appropriate if decisions made regarding the validity and application of the information has brought impact.

Careful engagement in this strategy often requires a third party—serving as a coach to those who are in disagreement regarding important information (“facts”). Specifically, I am introducing the processes of reflective inquiry—initially championed by Donald Schön (1983) and later refined by Peter Senge (1990).

While reflective inquiry is often an unpredictable process—similar to improvisational jazz and theater in many respects—there are, still, a few reflective moves that have been found to be particularly effective when engaged in a coaching process that helps to establish the validity of specific information. Specially, I propose that an effective reflective process often involves moving back and forth through seven specific levels of analysis. Each level offers a different perspective and a different reflective lens.

1. The reflective process often begins at Level One with each party reporting on their *Observation* of a specific event. The reflective coach will begin with a request of each party: “Tell me what happened.” or “Tell me what each of you are seeing in this email.” Even if the two parties have observed the same event or same piece of data, they might place it in differing contexts or punctuate it differently (begin and end at a different place).

2. Given this initial observation (and the narrative or brief story accompanying this observation), a coach and their two clients can begin moving toward Level Two: an examination of the *Data* that has been obtained. The coach asks of each party: “What did you see that is relevant to your immediate concerns and interests?” Here is where the “hidden agenda” of each party often emerges and where important biases of observation and analysis might first emerge.

3. From here a coach and their two clients can move to a Third Level, which is concerned with the *Meanings* that each client assigns to the Data that has been gathered. A relevant question is: “What does this mean for you?” or “How does this data relate to an important issue?” Differences in meaning often emerge for the two parties. They recognize that not only do their two viewpoints differ, but also the way in which their viewpoint is informed by their values and priorities (domain of intentions).

4. Level Four involves the identification of and analysis of *Assumptions* that underlie the Meaning that each person has assigned to the Data. The coach asks: “How do you know that your observation is accurate?” “How do you know that the meaning you assigned to this data is appropriate?” This will either help validate the assumptions each client makes, or will clarify any misperceptions either client has formed about the other client. This can even lead at this point to a total shift in perspective by both parties.

5. At Level Five, the coach is helping their clients access some *Conclusions*. Several questions are often asked at this level: “What do you want to do about this situation?” “What can be done to address your concerns about what each of you have observed?” Here is where the domain of ideas comes to bear on the use as well as valid of the information accepted and analyzed by both parties.

6. These questions inevitably move the two client and coach to Level Six, which is concerned with *Beliefs*. The coach asks of each client: “Why do you think your version of reality is both accurate and relevant?” “What makes you think that your interpretation of the current state will lead to better decisions and a more desirable future?” “How confident are you that you are right?”

7. Finally, at Level Seven, *Action* is contemplated by each party and may be initiated by each party as a pilot or demonstration project, based on the Conclusions reached and the Beliefs that support these conclusions. In post-Action reviews, the coach will be encouraging her clients to reflect on the actions that would result from their acceptance and interpretation of information by asking: “What would you actually like to do or be done by others?” “What do you think will occur when action is taken based on the information you consider valid and useful?”

This is where “the rubber hits the road.” Both parties are encouraged (even forced) to trace out the implications of what they believe to be “reality.” It is at this point that two parties often come to a recognition that a broader, more diverse, view of the current situation is needed if real progress is to be made. While a “breakthrough” can occur at any of the seven levels – this seventh level is often the one

that creates the condition for formulation of an integrated, “practical” viewpoint regarding the current situation in which both parties find themselves.

A coach and their two clients can reverse the levels of analysis during subsequent sessions of reflective inquiry. They can begin with Level Seven in reviewing how the information is actually being used (or has been used). Post-action review questions are already associated with this level: “What did you do?” and “What occurred when you took action based on your information [what were the consequences]?” “What seemed to be accurate and useful about the information and what was less accurate and/or less useful. What worked, what didn’t work, in your view?”

They then return to Level Six and a focus on Beliefs. In encouraging the two clients to reflect at this level the coach now asks: “What does the way in which this action went (successful or unsuccessful) tell each of you about the world and about you in this world?” The Fifth Level is now concerned with how our clients reached Conclusions with regard to the world they engage. A coach accesses this level when asking: “What have you learned from this reflective process—and what have you learned from your divergent colleague?”

At the Fourth Level, a coach now encourages her clients to reexamine the Assumptions being made by each of them (based on the Conclusions reached). One of the questions that might be asked by the coach encourages their clients to enter the Domain of Information: “How do each of you know you are accurate in your assessment of this action and its actual or potential impact?” Another question encourages the clients to move into the Domain of Intentions: “What was this action intended to accomplish?” Yet another question encourages movement into the Domain of Ideas: “Why do each of you think this was the appropriate action to take?”

From here a coach and clients can move back to the Third Level, which is concerned with the Meanings that a client assigns to the specific Assumption or set of Assumptions they have made that led ultimately to their Beliefs regarding outcomes and the Actions taken (and more immediately to the Conclusions reached). Relevant questions include: “How does an important issue in your life relate to the action each of you took?” and “What are both of you discovering/learning about the resolution of this important issue by virtue of the specific action path you took?”

The coach is now ready to assist her clients in moving back to the first two levels. At Level Two, the clients revisit the Data that has been collected—now with greater clarity regarding the lens through which each of them is gathering (and interpreting) this data. The coach will ask each of their clients such questions as: “What do you now think are the most important facts to know about the situation you confronted?” “About what facts are you most confident and about what are you now less certain?”

The reflective coach is not so much challenging the validity of her two client’s data as encouraging her clients to revisit their data analysis—and realize that there are other interpretations that might be entertained and other perspectives that might be taken when viewing the current situation. These alternative interpretations and perspective may, in turn, have led, eventually, to different decisions and a different course of action.

Finally, at Level One, the coach encourages her clients to reconsider the Observation they initially made. The coach now asks: “Tell me what you now think happened?” The reflective coach encourages her clients to construct a new narrative, based on their journey up and down the levels of analysis. In many

cases, the two clients will now become better leaders, problem-solvers and collaborators with people who hold differing perspectives.

Domain of Intentions

What if the difference of viewpoint resides in the domain of intention? What if there is disagreement regarding goals, values, purposes, or desired outcomes? We are now dealing with the heart rather than the head. People have considerably invested in what they value most and are not easily persuaded to abandon that which they place as a high priority in their life and work. Given this investment, how might one best deal with differences in intentions—whether being one of the two parties to this difference or someone seeking to facilitate some reproachment regarding this significant difference.

Higher order mission

The most often suggested strategy for addressing the difference relates to finding a higher-order intention which both parties believe to be important. What is the greater good? What is it that underlies both of our reasons for focusing on this issue? We saw this strategy in operation when examining Abraham Lincoln's team of rivals (Bergquist, 2023b). There were major disagreements among Lincoln's cabinet members with regard to what they most valued (including their own election to the American presidency). Yet, Lincoln was able to bring them together around a shared goal: winning the war. We might also point to Carol Gilligan and Lawrence Kohlberg (Bergquist, 2023c). They shared an interest in the study of moral reasoning and a goal in better understanding the ways in which this reasoning changes over time.

At a deeper and historical level, we can point to the many theological traditions that call on people to find a common purpose—under transcendent guidance. The Greek term, *Agape*, points to a form of love that is based on a shared commitment to some higher power or principle. Similarly, we find in Martin Buber's (2000) concept of *I-Thou* (rather than *I-It*) a higher-order spiritual devotion. In many religious traditions, we find that our love for other people is based on the recognition that we are all creations of some divine entity. We might apply this same perspective to the secular matter of dealing with differences in intentions: "we might disagree about xyz but do live in the same community/nation/world and share a deep commitment to the sustained welfare of this community/nation/world. Perhaps we can work from this shared commitment."

Sequencing

A second approach concerns a reframing of differing intentions. Rather than "argue" regarding priorities, one can "strategize" regarding the appropriate order in which both priorities can be addressed. It becomes a matter of sequencing both priorities rather than picking one over the other. For instance, the "low hanging fruit" (most easily accomplished goal) might be the initial focus. Then with its successful accomplishment, the more challenging goal (residing higher on the tree) might be easier to address. Similarly, the least controversial initiative might be given initial attention; the "good faith" that would be associated with its successful accomplishment could help to sustain efforts to achieve the more controversial initiative.

Sequencing decisions might also be based on "timeliness." Which of the high priority intentions is of greatest immediate concern. Or which priority is best addressed right now—when "the time is ripe."

Can one of the priorities “wait a bit.” Or does one of the priorities not fit very well right now with what is going on. As noted in the Jewish Torah (and Christian Bible) “there is a time for every season.” One of the competing priorities might be best addressed when things are quiet (and perhaps even a bit stagnant), while the other priority might be best addressed when things are a bit unstable or when there are opportunistic openings (the cracks that allow for creativity).

Enablement

A third approach can be taken that closely relates to the matter of sequencing. All too often, we tend to assign highest value to a specific initiative that holds the greatest promise of itself, in isolation, yield a benefit. We set everything else aside so that this one initiative can be successful. Yet, this approach is often counterproductive. Most initiatives are engaged in a complex setting where everything is intertwined with everything else (Miller and Page, 2007). When one initiative is engaged at the expense of other operations in any system, then this system will ultimately suffer rather than benefit from the enactment of this isolated initiative.

A more systemic perspective results in recognition that some initiatives are beneficial not because they are important themselves but because they enable other initiatives to be successful. A new procurement system might not itself be very “sexy”; however, it might enable an organization to do a better job of gathering resources for launching of a new product. A new accounting system might enable an organization to do a better job with its new Return-on-Investment initiative.

We need to judge the potential value of competing priorities based not just on their isolated value, but also their enablement value. Differing views on specific priorities can often be resolved when one of the parties finds that successful achievement of the competing priority will increase the chances that their own initiative can be successfully engaged—“so bring on the other project and I will cheer for its accomplishment!”

Noise versus Bias

I wish to introduce a fourth perspective on differences to be found in the domain of intentions. This perspective comes from a book recently published by Daniel Kahneman—the Noble-prize winning behavioral economist who has served as an important guide throughout this series of essays on relationship being sustained despite differences. Daniel Kahneman and his two colleagues, Olivier Sibony and Cass Sustein (2021) write about the distinction between bias and noise. This distinction is important to make when considering the impact of differing viewpoints regarding intentions. It seems that these differences might be a good thing!!

Kahneman and his colleagues begin with a story about assessing the success of someone shooting arrows into a target. One desirable outcome would be for all the arrows to hit the target in the same area. When this occurs, we can applaud the consistency of the archer. Another outcome would be for the arrows to arrive all over the target. Typically, we devalue this outcome. The archer has not been consistent in directing arrows toward the target.

Along with his co-authors Kahneman suggests that these assessments of success should be questioned. The first outcome indicates only that there is consistency—not that the arrows have arrived at or near the bullseye. The arrows could cluster at some point at quite a distance from the bullseye. This

placement would reveal a BIAS. Conversely, arrows arriving at many places on the target reveal NOISE. Our authors suggest that these are quite different flaws in the performance of the archer—and that both Noise and Bias are to be found frequently in the judgements made by most of us.

When there are very few differences in the intentions being embraced by all members of an organization, community or nation then there is the potential of destructive Bias. We all want to go to war—and later find that warfare came at a great cost. All of us agree that this new community center is a good thing—after all who could ever disagree with helping out “old people.” Yet, the center is built and no one shows up. A little “Noise” might have helped—disagreements regarding engagement in a war or building a new center might have been of great benefit.

When differences of opinion regarding what is important are valued then constructive dialogue can take place. If someone finds safety in being a dissenter then everyone can feel safe in articulating their own opinions. J.S. Bach’s sons could tell their Dad that it is time to shift attention to the middle-class patron rather than to the rich and religious patrons (Bergquist, 2023a). While Papa Bach might have held on to his own desire to serve the “old” population, he could (like Wallace Davenport in New Orleans) have welcomed his sons’ “new Priorities”. They could, in turn, continue to respect, champion and preserve their own father’s work. When Noise is tolerated then music can emerge in a new form and with a new audience.

Asking the Right Questions

Keeping the distinction between NOISE and BIAS in mind, differing perspectives regarding intentions can be addressed by asking the following questions:

- How would you know if you have been successful in this endeavor?
- What would make you happy?
- Who else has an investment in this project and what do they want to happen?
- What would happen if you did not achieve this goal?
- What would happen if you did achieve this goal?
- What scares you most about not achieving this goal?
- What scares you most about achieving this goal?

If there is shared agreement regarding the answers to these questions, then a group needs to test its own assumptions. The process of collusion regarding intentions might be in full effect (Bergquist, 2013). BIAS might be fully in effect. Conversely, if there are multiple and often conflicting answers to these questions then NOISE is operating. While diversity of thought and perspective can often be beneficial (Miller and Page, 2007), this diversity can often pose quite a challenge. It is important to remain patient in addressing these differences—and to be appreciative in recognizing the value inherent in the articulation and expression of support for these differing perspectives. . Hopefully, the strategies I have just identified can be of use in addressing differences in intentions while sustaining the relationship among those confronting these differences.

Domain of Ideas

This third domain becomes the one where the stark reality of a current state bumps up against the dreams and aspirations of those who must confront this reality. A gap exists between the current state and desired state. This gap will often look quite different from divergent viewpoints arising in the domains of information and intentions.

Thus, a valuable initial step to be taken in the generation of creative and useful ideas is to focus on the nature of the gap that exists. We must first be sure that the information we have obtained is valid, useful and encompassing of the diverse viewpoints that are present when this specific gap is being analyzed, and that the intentions are clear and encompassing of the diverse priorities being considered regarding this gap.

Here are a set of questions that might be addressed when addressing the nature of a gap:

- How do you know that there is a gap here?
- To what extent do other people see this as a gap? If they don't, why don't they?
- How long has this gap existed? How big is it? Is there any pattern with regard to its increase or decrease in magnitude?
- What are the primary cause(s) of the gap? What is different when the gap does and does not exist? What remains the same whether or not the gap exists?
- Who benefits from the continuing existence of the gap? In what ways do some people benefit (even indirectly) from the continuing existence of this gap?
- What will you miss if and when this gap is reduced in size?

Having gained a clearer understanding regarding the nature of the gap that exists between the current and desired state, one's group can engage one or more of three strategies that not only allows for different ideas but also benefits from an appreciation of these differences.

Spectrum Analysis

Often there is a simple and straightforward way in which to generate good ideas within a setting where there is considerable divergence. As I noted in one of my previous essays in this series (Bergquist, 2023d), a spectrum analysis can be engaged that brings an appreciative perspective to all ideas that are offered in a problem-solving setting. Each idea resides somewhere on a line (spectrum) between great idea (regarding both current and desired state) to bad idea. There is always the kernel of a good idea in anyone that is presented. The most creative thing that can be done is identifying this kernel and building on it.

In this setting, it is the obligation not of the person presenting the idea but of other people to identify its merits. Psychological safety resides in this approach to the generation of useful ideas. The more diverse the population of those who are generating the ideas the richer will be not only the variety and scope of ideas being offered but also the variety and scope of suggestions made about the value inherent in each idea. It often takes a few minutes for spectrum analysis to be engaged for a creative yet practical idea

to be identified and accepted by the group. It is important to note that this appreciative approach goes beyond just the generation of ideas; it requires the appreciative analysis of each idea.

Divergence and Convergence

The most obvious (and often distracting) difference between ideas concerns how “out of the box” they are. Ideas are often dismissed in many settings because they are too creative or not creative enough. Some ideas are of value between they build on the current way this are done (staying close to the domain of information). These ideas are considered convergent and are often dismissed as “boring” or too conservative. Other ideas are more “blue sky” and highly creative (staying close to the domain of intentions). These ideas are considered divergent. They are often dismissed as being “crazy” or too radical. Both the divergent and convergent perspective can be of great value. It is a matter of finding time and setting up processes that facilitate both divergent and convergent thinking and imagining.

Idea generation usually involves two steps. The first is based on the value of expanding the range of possible actions. This is “divergent” problem-solving. Returning to the distinction between NOISE and BIAS, we are trying to increase the NOISE associated with our idea generation. The second step is based on the value of homing in on a small number of potential actions—selecting from the broader range of options identified in the first step. This second “convergent” step moves us toward greater clarity and commitment. It might be increasing the BIAS. Thoughtful, slow thinking (Kahneman, 2011) is required.

Many divergent “brainstorming” and “out of the box” planning tools are available to help open the doors for the production of diverse ideas. We are particularly fond of a tool called Morphological (Shape) Analysis (Bergquist and Phillips, 1979, pp. 150-154). A problem-solving team engages in divergent and creative processes when they change the shape of a situation (information). Instead of designing a program for fifty people, what if you first designed it for one person or for 500 people.

The shape of a target (intentions) can also be modified. What if a program is designed to bring together urbanites from New York City with members of a primitive tribe in Papua? Instead, the program can be directed toward teaching a new set of leadership skills not to adults but instead to five-year-old children. Finally, the shape of possible solutions (ideas) can be altered. The solutions can be absolutely “silly” or absurd. They can be absolutely unattainable or require massive financial outlays (or require no money at all).

Each of these changes in shape can not only open up previously neglected ideas but also surface previously untested assumptions (“What would be the benefits of offering this program to one person or many people at the same time?” “Why not bridge the big gap across cultures. What are the fundamental truths about human beings?” “Could we make this program so accessible and user friendly that it could work with children?” The challenges faced when doing Morphological Analysis are particularly appropriate when misinformation and untested assumptions are alive and well. By pushing the boundaries, we are more likely to surface what is and is not real about our world.

One final point. It is often even more important to ensure that those engaging in these divergent processes do themselves represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences. We are reminded of the founding work done by the Syntectic’s group that not only offered some very powerful divergent

processes (related to “spectrum analysis”) but also typically invited in people from many departments in an organization to work on a specific problem.

It is now time for convergence. We have sown many seeds (ideas) in a problem-solving venture, it is time to find out which seeds yield a healthy outgrowth. We can do this by allowing multiple projects to be engaged, and then determine which work and which don’t work. We can take a somewhat more realistic step by setting up several limited “pilot tests” that enable us to see how a particular idea plays out without devoting significant resources to these pilot efforts. Usually, we don’t have the luxury of engaging this “survival of the fittest” strategy (even if restricted to pilot tests). This is especially the case in a polarized setting where each side is waiting for the failure of the other side. Instead, we must make the difficult decision(s) to select one of the ideas or to combine several of the ideas and begin planning for their implementation.

We can evaluate an idea by returning to the domains of information and intentions. The questions to be asked are rather straightforward. With regard to the domain of information we can ask: “Does this idea fit with what we know about the real world in which this idea would be implemented?” The domain of intentions is added with an answer to the following question: “To what extent is this idea, if implemented, likely to move us toward one or more of the desired outcomes on our target?”

If we have done a good job with our domains of information and intentions, the answers to these questions are likely to be forthcoming and valuable. An appreciative analysis will also provide some of the answers when we begin to converge on a specific idea: “How does this idea relate to what we know about past successful attempts to address similar issues in our own system or in other comparable systems?”

Reframing of ideas

As I have suggested in addressing major differences in the domain of information and domain of intentions, it is sometimes appropriate to take an entirely different approach when working with diverse (and often fervently held) ideas. We can keep the diversity intact and allow the differing ideas to clash and even compete with one another. I offer an example of this reframing as described by Mary Rodgers—the daughter of Richard Rodgers, the noted Broadway musical composer (“Oklahoma,” “Carousel,” “Sound of Music”, etc.). Along with her mother (Dorothy Rodgers), Mary was invited to write a book offering the perspectives of both mother and daughter. In her remarkably autobiographical account called *Shy, Mary* (Rodgers and Green, 2022, p. 361) offers the following description of the working relationship with her mother:

The differences [between the two of us] were not just generational, though Mummy was sixtyish and I was not yet forty. They were also attitudinal. She was East Side; I was West Side. She had an orderly life with no children underfoot; I was basically Mother Hubbard. She was grand; I was anti-grand.

I am reminded of the differences between J.S. Bach and his sons. They were both generational and attitudinal (regarding the audience to be served and style of music to compose). While Papa Bach and his sons didn’t collaborate on a any music, Mary and her mother did work together—and the work did work! (Rodgers and Green, 2022, p. 361)

Despite that, our working relationship was good. She was unfailingly respectful of me as a writer, perhaps understanding that I provided a useful contrast to her very correct but not wildly imaginative style. She had such a highly developed and serene sense of taste that you could mistake it for originality, but she didn't have any fun with words. They were like pieces of furniture to her, to be put in the right place and left there. When she told a joke, it was someone else's.

Mary goes on to describe the way ("dialogue") in which they wrote the book together despite retaining their major differences in perspective (Rodgers and Green, 2022, pp. 361-362):

To emphasize the contrast between us instead of watering it down, we had to find a way of collaborating while remaining distinct. Writing together directly would have left us with what Steve (Mary's dear friend, Stephen Sondheim, the noted composer of Broadway musicals) called a "muddle in the middle."* After trying a few ideas, we finally came up with one I referred to, in my half of the book's introduction, as a "dialogue": a text that's continuous but "in which we interrupt each other, frequently in some chapters, less frequently in others, with comments, embellishments, occasional gentle gibes, and a few arguments."

The differences between Mary and Dorothy were not hidden in the book they wrote. Rather, the differences were highlighted (Rodgers and Green, 2022, p. 362):

To distinguish between our voices, though a deaf dog could have done it, we had the bright idea of printing her portions in black and mine in brown.

The remarkable dialogue between Mary and her mother produced a quite successful book ("A Word to the Wives"). The differences between these two remarkable (and quite independent) women were never resolved—in the book or in real life—though Mary reported that their relationship improved temporarily while they were working on this book together.

The reframing worked—as it does with the competition that can occur between two competing projects. Two programs are initiated (at least as pilot projects) and vie for attention and for success. The competition might be vitalizing for both parties. The "victory" comes not from winning the battle for acceptance over the other idea. Rather the "victory" comes from demonstrating that this idea works better than the other idea. Each side is encouraged to extend its better effort. If the "space race" led to creation of new technologies by both the United States and Soviet Union, then a similar "race" between two ideas might yield new processes, technologies and uses of human resources that benefits the overall system in which the competition is taking place.

There is another matter to be addressed in this reframing of the diversity. It concerns resources (money, staffing, time, attention, etc.). While this was not a problem for Mary and Dorothy Rodger, it is often a problem when two projects (building on two differing ideas) are competing for the existing resources. They are engaged in a "win-lose" struggle. Neither project often has sufficient resources to be successful when two projects are initiated at the same time. The "pie" simply isn't big enough to be shared by the two projects. There can, instead, be an effort to expand the size of the pie—find more resources. This is an example of a higher order purpose. In this case, the competing parties both agree that it is important to generate more resources.

This is also an example of enablement. A bigger pie increases the changes that both projects will succeed. Suddenly, the fund-raisers are more important. A capital campaign might be launched that “enables” both projects to succeed. Dues are increased or admission to all events sponsored by the organization comes at a higher price. To ensure that these “enabling” changes are successful requires better public relations and community outreach. Other departments in the organization become that much more important as attention turns to expanding the resources available to support both projects.

Does this reframing make sense? It only works if some slow thinking takes place at the top of the organization to ensure that the competing parties don’t tear apart the organization. While the “space race” might have yielded positive results, the “arms race” led only to resources being allocated to projects that threatened rather than benefited humankind. While two parties in an organization might be competing with one another, the overall organization must collaborate in bringing about better outcomes for both of these parties.

Furthermore, there must be a balancing of resources. There must be assurance that the “playing field” is level for both parties. There had to be roughly the same number of words offered by Dorothy and Mary Rodgers. Budgets must be of comparable size for two projects seeking to accomplish the same goal(s) by different means. Under the right conditions, this reframing can lead to a wonderful “harmony of interests” (to quote from a 19th Century vision of a successful community) (Sun and Bergquist, 2021).

The analogy of a finely tuned String Quintet might be relevant. The diverse sounds of the four string instruments are beautifully offset by the percussive sound of the piano. There is creative “competition” among the five sounds—and this competition yields a beautiful harmony. The challenge for those musicians who are performing the quintet is to insure that all five “voices” are heard and appreciated.

Regardless of the strategy being used to address the matter of differing ideas, there are several questions that might be asked as a way to address the differences:

- What have you already tried to do when seeking to solve this problem and what did you learn from these efforts? [slow thinking]
- What actions have you taken that somehow reduced the scope or impact of the problem—even if this action was not intended to address this problem? What did you learn from this serendipitous impact? [appreciative thinking]
- How might other people help you solve this problem—especially those who have not previously been involved with this problem? What other resources which have not previously been used might you direct to this problem? [enablement]
- What would happen if you just ignored this problem? What would happen if you devoted all of your time and resources to solving this problem? [reframing]
- What is one idea upon which there is agreement regarding how to solve this problem? [convergent thinking]
- What is one step you can take right now to begin solving the problem? [convergent thinking]
- What is the most unusual idea that you have about solving this problem? What solutions have you dreamed of or thought about at a moment when you were particularly tired or frustrated? [divergent thinking]
- What would you do if you had much more time to solve this problem? [divergent thinking]

- What would you do if you had very little time to solve this problem? [divergent thinking]
- If you were “king” or “queen” what solution(s) would you impose to solve this problem? If you were a “fool” or had nothing to lose in trying something out, what would you do in attempting to solve this problem? [divergent thinking]

A reminder about BIAS and NOISE. Either of these can be prevalent at this late stage in the problem-solving process.

Traveling Between Domains and Among Differences

Many pathways can be taken between the three domains of intentions, information, and ideas when significant differences exist in one, two or all three domains. When we have addressed differences in Intentions, the gathering of information can be of great value—and can often help to inform the dialogue regarding intentions. Consideration of differences in both the domain of information and domain of intentions provide guidance when seeking to find appropriate ideas.

This sequence from intentions to information to ideas is only one of many sequences that can be engaged. One can move from any one of these domains to either of the other domains. It is often valuable to move back and forth between the domains of information and intentions. A return to the domain of either information or intentions can be activated at the point when differing ideas are being considered.

I offer the following list of interdependencies between the three domains.

<u>Interrelationships</u>	<u>Type of Interdependence</u>
Information to Intentions	Dissatisfaction with the situation implies a particular target as a standard of comparison Any suggested target implies by comparison what is unsatisfactory about the current situation
Intentions to Ideas	A target defines the results desired from any proposal Any proposal embodies assumptions about the nature of the desired target
Ideas to Information	A proposal embodies assumptions about the causes of the unsatisfactory situation and implies resources and requirements for change

The situation places limits on the effectiveness and feasibility of acceptable proposals

Here are some questions that can be asked regarding interdependency among the three domains:

- When information is generated about the situation [*domain of information*], target information [*domain of intentions*] can be elicited by such questions as:
 - “If you could change the present situation, what would you want to accomplish?”
 - “What's missing in the present situation that you want?”
 - “What would be your goal in improving the situation?”
- Proposal information [*domain of ideas*] can be generated from that same situational statement [*domain of information*] by such questions as:
 - “What might be done to improve that?”
 - “What kind of action does that seem to require?”
 - “What plan would use that resource?”
- When a target is identified [*domain of intentions*], situational information [*domain of information*] can be elicited by such questions as:
 - “In what ways does the present situation fall short of that goal?”
 - “Why does the present situation fall short of that goal?”
 - “What forces for improvement are there for reaching that goal?”
 - “What obstacles stand in the way of reaching that goal?”
- Proposals [*domain of ideas*] can be elicited from the same target statement [*domain of intentions*] by asking:
 - “What might be a possible way to accomplish that?”
 - “What steps might lead toward that goal?”
- In a similar manner, when a proposal [*domain of ideas*] presents itself, situational information [*domain of information*] can be elicited by asking:
 - “What might that improve in the present situation?”
 - “What part of the problem do you see that dealing with?”
 - “What resources are there for doing that?”

- And, finally, target information [*domain of intentions*] can be elicited from that proposal [*domain of ideas*] by asking:
 - “To accomplish what?”
 - “In order to do what?”
 - “What objective does that proposal aim at?”

Any of these questions can be asked as a way to move across all three domains. These questions also can help to “release” the energy and attention of a group when it is stuck in one domain and is unable to successfully address differences of viewpoints in this domain. Often, as I have noted, a group can return to the contentious domain later after gaining clarity (and agreement) in one of the other domains. In other words, differences can be addressed successfully by being flexible in movement between the three domains.

Conclusions

While significant differences in viewpoints regarding information, intentions or ideas might seem insurmountable when attention continues to be directed to this single source of difference, there is often a “liberation” when attention shifts to another of the domains. Two parties can come to an agreement regarding the best idea to embrace when they find a common goal or desired outcome. “Getting the facts straight” can be of great value when deliberating regarding the feasibility of differing intentions. Clarity regarding the collection of additional information can arise when clarity is found among differences in several competing ideas.

Differences, in other words, are only likely to block progress if there is not ample opportunity to travel between domains—finding places where agreement is found or finding processes that are engaged in one domain which will resolve (or at least clarify) differences in a different domain. So, we should keep moving in the midst of diversity. It is a great way to sustain relationships!

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