

Manage conflict; Don't get your lines crossed?

As Scotwork consultants we repeatedly see that conflict emerges almost out of thin air - and often it is difficult to determine why this happens. In the space of a short exchange of words, in a single "transaction", tempers flare and the opportunity for agreement is suddenly lost. Why is this?

Communication explained

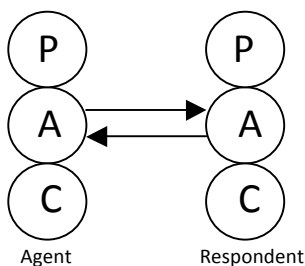
I was recently re-reading Eric Berne's classic from the 60's "Games People Play (the Psychology of Human Relationships)". The fascinating early chapters talk about "analysis of games" and, of particular interest, "transactional analysis". Dr Berne defines a transaction as *a unit of social intercourse*, in short a communication from person A to person B followed by a response from person B to person A. For communication to work it has to be two-way, given and received.

The essence appears to be that when we (as person A) communicate we offer our pronouncement from one of three ego states; Parent, Adult, or Child, and we address one of Person B's specific ego states, (Parent, Adult or Child). With apologies for being simplistic in approach, and risking not doing full justice to the book (we'd recommend negotiators to read it), I draw several observations which can be helpful to negotiators.

Berne's insight reveals that it may not be difficult to understand the spark that sets the discussion on fire, creating conflict. Once we recognise that, we can work to reduce the risk and impact of conflict in negotiation. First, we can avoid putting the discussion at risk of deadlock through our emotions, and perhaps more significantly. Second, we can learn a means of managing the transaction to avoid breakdown.

How so?

These "analyses of games" can be simply described by the following examples:

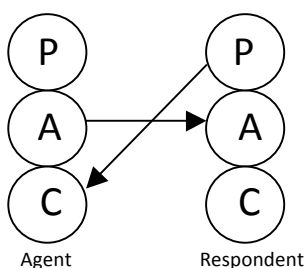


The transaction between the agent's Adult ego state to the respondent's Adult ego state and similarly returned from the respondent is referred to as a complimentary transaction and may sound like this...

"why it is that your department is not meeting its targets?"

The complimentary Adult to Adult response would be..

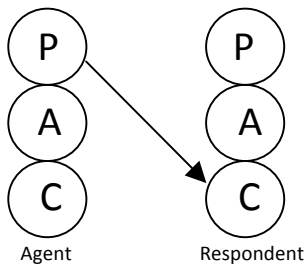
"yes it's important that this is understood as soon as possible" (i.e. neither aggressive nor defensive but neutral, acknowledging the need for solution to the issue itself)



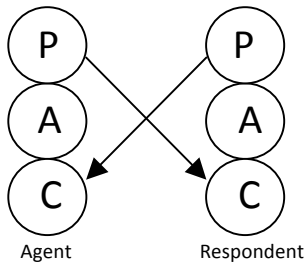
However as we so often witness, the response to the same question might have been very different as represented by the second diagram which notes the fact that whilst the agent's comment is the same, the response moves from the respondent's Parent ego state addressed to the Child ego state of the agent, perhaps as follows... "you would be better investing your time in your own department's failures".

(protective-defensive)

Interestingly, as above and without exception wherever we have what Berne refers to as “Crossed Transactions” we can be sure of a conflict and one that will usually escalate through a series of further crossed lines, deadlock; caused by deflection, resistance, aggression or defensive responses.



When we look at conflict in negotiations to varying extents the responsibility for avoiding conflict lies with both parties, in this same situation the agent may have invited conflict by addressing the respondent from the Parent ego state to the respondent’s Child state with a statement like “It is because your approach is wrong that your department doesn’t make its targets”. (talking down)



Such situations take skill to manage, a degree of self control and pause for thought before speaking. We will doubtless take exception to the Parent to Child attitude we are faced with (patronising) at the cost of agreement. The most likely response will be a further Parent to Child response along the lines of “why don’t you mind your own business?” (point-scoring). If so from that point on, the lines are crossed and there is little hope of anything productive coming out of the discussion.

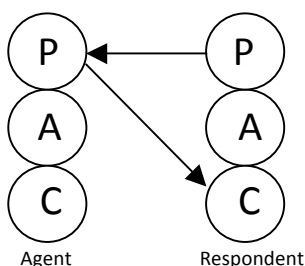
As an alternative to the above there are a few available responses that can be made that will avoid crossed lines, but only a few.

There’s Child to Child which might sound like ... “ah come on who gives a damn anyway they are working us like hell and not paying us enough” and there are obvious risks that in this situation the Child to Child transaction would be considered out of place by the agent.

Or Child to Adult, which could for example be...

“Yes you’re right, help me out will you, tell how you are doing it”

This requires the respondent to lose face and as Negotiating Consultants we see that loss of pride is something that most people are simply not prepared to pay.



But there is an option that demonstrates exactly what a skilled negotiator will do, and it is represented by the Parent to Parent response, and it may in this example sound like “I agree, as managers we have a definite need to get these staff aligned in performance terms, let’s talk about it”

What then?

This is what we call separating the people from the problem and is most often the least likely to cause conflict and the most constructive response. As “Parents” the respondent places himself and the agent above and separate from the problem (here the departments). Other such Parent to Parent transactions may be...

P > C “You are too expensive”

P > P “I understand that your company’s needs to cut costs” (i.e. I know there’s nothing personal)

P > C "You don't expect me to believe that do you?"

P > P "Let's take a look at these independent research figures" (using third party references)

P > C "You people are not able to understand our difficulties"

P > P "Can we find a way to make your issues clear to all involved"

P > C "You can't walk in here and expect me to just change a current contract"

P > P "Maybe there are ways that you and I can improve the deal for everyone's benefit"

It may be helpful to know that there isn't much of a mystery to conflict in negotiation after all, and of perhaps even greater comfort to understand that there are simple guide-"lines" for handling it.

Let's not get our lines crossed.

Mike Freedman,

Istanbul, October 2010

Eric Berne M.D. Games People Play ISBN 0 14 00.2768 8