

There is a critical relationship between the concepts of Leadership, Change and Conflict. Leadership facilitates vision that calls for change. Change becomes a context for conflict as people resist moving outside their current comfort zones. Understanding these dynamics will prepare leaders to mobilize people as they engage these challenges.

# Leading Through Change and Conflict

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SOUND  
OPTIONS  
GROUP

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## Introduction

Over the years as I have provided conflict engagement services to organizations and groups, I have noted a number of patterns emerge. One key pattern is the relationship between the role and function of leadership in the context of change and conflict. It would seem that leaders cause conflict because they initiate change. Now, before you push back on this somewhat broad accusation, let me explain.

A key distinction in the literature when differentiating between leadership and management is in the role of vision. While it could be said that managers are tasked with managing “what is”, leaders are attending to “what could be”. The focus on what could be is typically in service of some dimension of improvement. This could be improvements in outcome, process, structure, etc. If and when there is a commitment to implement and pursue a vision, it will call for change in people and systems.

So, what do we know about change? The emotion change generates in most people is anxiety. Change signals to people they are going to be expected to move outside their comfort zone. What is our comfort zone? It is the world we have shaped for ourselves that works for us. It is a world that meets our expectations. It is, for the most part, fairly predictable. It does not expect more from us than we can most likely deliver.

Change, on the other hand calls for us to “let go” (Bridges) of what is, and step into an often ill-defined unknown. It signals we are about to embark on a new learning curve. To the extent we have participated in change initiatives in the past, this may signal a serious disruption to ourselves and those with whom we interact. Depending on the culture of the organization we may perceive the change as a threat to our sense of well-being.

This leads us to the final element of our context; conflict. We experience conflict when we interpret a situation as evidence of some level of incompatible difference or threat. In our context, your need for me to change is incompatible with my need to not change (remain within my comfort zone). Your need for me to change threatens my need for predictability and safety. A person in a group I was working with shared his concern this way; “Basically they are asking me to move from competence to incompetence. This is not a safe place to demonstrate incompetence and failure”.

So, what does this mean for leaders? A fundamental function of leadership is to mobilize people to tackle tough problems. As we will explore in this seminar, this requires navigating change and effectively engaging conflict in the process. We believe you cannot lead work you are not doing yourself, so we start by exploring our own understanding of, and relationship to leadership, change, and conflict.

## Building a Foundation Exploring “the What”

**Engaging at-integrity:** While participating in a year-long program in coaching I was introduced to a distinction between being “in or out of integrity”. This is not about whether or not you have integrity. This is about alignment of speaking and action with commitments and beliefs in a specific context. You are said to be operating at or in-integrity when your speaking and actions align with expressed and fundamental commitments. You are said to be out-of-integrity when acting out of alignment in these areas.

What is essential about this distinction in our context is the correlation of engaging at-integrity with building trust and safety in relationships. Effective leadership is highly relational. Engaging at-integrity is essential to creating and maintaining safety and trust and building social capital as a leader. As we explore the integration of Leadership, Change and Conflict, a key construct foundational to the work is this notion of operating at-integrity. For leaders to be trusted by those they lead, they must be mindful of the choices they face in their actions and speaking.

As we continue to explore this context, we will find effective leadership is both functional and contextual. Leadership is not necessarily found in your position but rather in how you show up and function as you support and mobilize people and systems to action. The role you bring is determined by the context in which you are being called upon to lead. In order to be intentional as a leader and in support of engaging at-integrity I propose the following questions so as to orient yourself as a leader:

- What does the situation call me to **be** as a leader?
- Who am I committed to **being** as I consider leading in this context?
- Based on the needs of the situation and the people and my commitment, what will I **do**?

Leadership is as much about how you show up as to what you do when you show up. We will explore these questions in greater depth later in the seminar. As we continue to build our foundational understanding of our context, we will begin to explore models for understanding the fundamental elements of our challenge; Leadership, Change, and Conflict.

**Leadership:** The literature is replete with definitions and models for understanding the role and function of leadership. We will not attempt in this context to cover the depth and breadth of this growing area of research and study. Instead, we choose a specific framework for exploring and better understanding leadership in the context we are considering.

In his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, author Ronald Heifetz of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, addresses some key elements as he speaks to this topic. He succinctly describes his model as follows:

*My view of leadership is organized around two key distinctions: between technical and adaptive problems, and between leadership and authority. The first points to the different modes of action required to deal with routine problems in contrast with those that demand innovation and learning; the second provides a framework for assessing resources and developing leadership strategy depending on whether one has or does not have authority.*

We start by looking at his second distinction focused on the concepts of leadership and authority. These two words are too often assumed to be synonymous. People who are leaders, or those expected to bring leadership to a situation are those in positions of authority. There are any number of issues that we could address in relationship to this assumption and I will leave it to you to read Heifetz's excellent exploration of this relationship in his book. For our purposes, my fundamental concern with this assumption is how it can place limits on who will or can function as a leader. In this context, people who are assumed to be leaders are those who have the authority to do so. It assumes some people as leaders and others as not. I believe many people have the ability and the inclination to function as leaders, formally and informally.

Leadership, he posits is an activity. It is the activity of mobilizing people to engage a shared problem or challenge. Again, he makes a critical distinction here. It is often assumed that the role of a leader is to bring a vision and to mobilize others to join in the pursuit of that vision. In Heifetz's framework, what leaders bring is not **the vision** but **vision**. Having **the vision** assumes that the leader has the right answer in response to the presenting problem or challenge. Instead, leaders bring **vision** in the form of a commitment to engage a challenge and an understanding that the problem or challenge will necessitate a collective process of defining, more fully understanding, and engaging the situation. The role of the leader is to mobilize and facilitate this process of shared learning and action. Heifetz defines this as adaptive work which we will come back to.

Heifetz also explores the notion of authority. Again, as in the context of leadership, there are many assumptions as to authority. For some it has a negative connotation. Here is what Heifetz says about it:

*I define authority as conferred power to perform a service. This definition will be useful to the practitioner of leadership as a reminder of two facts: First, authority is given and can be taken away. Second, authority is conferred as part of an exchange. Failure to meet the terms of exchange means the risk of losing one's authority: it can be taken back or given to another who promises to fulfill the bargain. (57)*

Authority is a social contract. I grant you authority or place myself under your authority with the expectation that you will provide some service of value to me. There is an expectation of reciprocity. The person who is granted authority is often expected to have some level of expertise or access to resources that can be brought to bear in service of others.

**The Work:** The second distinction of Heifetz’s model is in his differentiation between technical and adaptive work. When engaged in technical work we are addressing technical problems or challenges. These are situations to which we can apply existing knowledge or existing solutions. They do not require the creation of new learning but rather the accessing and application of existing learning. In these situations, we might grant “authority” to someone with certain expertise that can be applied to address the problem or challenge. They might use this expertise to solve the problem for us or support us to apply this expertise ourselves. This may be in the implementation of policy or procedure or the identification of best practice that may be applied to the situation we face.

Adaptive work in contrast requires new learning. In this context we are faced with a challenge for which our current learning is inadequate or insufficient. This does not simply mean the creation of new knowledge. Heifetz describes adaptive work as follows:

*Adaptive work consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior. The exposure and orchestration of conflict – internal contradictions – within individuals and constituencies provide the leverage for mobilizing people to learn new ways.*

There is a lot to unpack in this description. First, this is not simply about increasing our head knowledge. It goes much deeper than that. It requires acknowledgement of a gap between the values and beliefs we hold and the situation we face. In the context of a distinction introduced earlier, it is an acknowledgement of potentially being out of integrity at an individual and collective level. Secondly, it requires us to engage the conflict that we are experiencing at an individual and collective level as we face our situation. It also recognizes that to the extent we are able to jointly explore this conflict, it can become a context for new learning, innovation and creativity, and deeper change.

As you reflect on this paradigm for understanding leadership it is important that you:

- Recognize and acknowledge the importance of both authority and leadership in the engagement of work.
- Be able to distinguish between the requirements of technical and adaptive work and recognize the unique needs of each.
- Understand that in order to lead effectively in complex contexts, it is essential that you reflect on your relationship to these constructs and do your own work. This will include understanding your relationship to conflict and change.

**Change:** As with the topic of leadership, there is a rich literature base for understanding change. And, as with the subject of leadership I will not attempt a comprehensive review of this literature. Over the years I have referenced two models for understanding change.

The first model comes from the work of William and Susan Bridges, and described in their book, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). A key distinction made by the authors is between the notion of change and transition. To summarize:

- Change is not the same as Transition.
- Change is situational.
- Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation.
- Change is external. Transition is internal.
- Unless Transition occurs, Change will not work.

Let's expand on this. Change is initiated by a shift in our situation. This may be initiated externally in the form of a mandate or new organizational initiative. It may be self-initiated such as a decision to retire, go back to school, downsize, etc. This change in situation, regardless of the source, triggers an internal process the authors refer to as transition. The question that transition poses is, "what is this change going to mean for me?" If we do not individually and collectively address the reality of transition, we will be unsuccessful at implementing deep change.

The following quotes from the book further elaborate this distinction.

*When we talk about change, we naturally focus on the outcome the change will produce.*

Change is typically purposeful. There is a reason for the change. We are implementing a new organizational initiative to increase productivity or customer satisfaction. I am retiring so that I can spend more time with my grandchildren. I am going back to school to increase my employment opportunities.

*Transition is different. The starting point for transition is not the outcome but the ending you will have to make to leave the old situation behind.*

We typically focus on the objective of the change. What are we individually and collectively going to achieve as a result of this change? What is the proposed benefit? This is then followed by a question of cost. What is going to be required of me as I participate in this change? What is going to be required of us? What, in reality, is this going to mean? The authors address transition by proposing a three-phase process that includes **Letting Go**, the **Neutral Zone**, and **New Beginnings**.

Transition starts with “**Letting Go**”. A leader’s role is to help people let go of what they are currently doing. This involves understanding and empathizing with what people perceive they are losing. As I shared in the introduction, change often triggers an experience of loss; the loss of something that people perceive as essential. Letting go has been compared to the grieving process originally described by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. In her model she describes an experience that includes denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. Change can be experienced as loss; loss of comfort, predictability, relationships, identity . . . The experience of grieving in a context of change, makes sense.

People have different relationships to, and capacity for, letting go. Everett Rogers, in his work on the diffusion of innovation, introduces a theory of innovation implementation that sorts the population into five groups. He refers to Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and finally Laggards. What this points out is the differential needs and concerns leaders will encounter when helping people let go.

The authors label the second of phase of transition, the “**Neutral Zone**”. I like to describe it this way: The Neutral Zone is where we are no longer doing what we used to be doing, not yet what we hope to be doing, we have no idea what we are doing. Reflecting on our paradigm of leadership from the work of Heifetz, the Neutral Zone is where individuals and groups engage in the adaptive work required for aligning with the change. To the extent that people experience this time as stressful, unpredictable, and chaotic there is often a focus on finding a more simple or technical solution that will not require as much of people. People can become split between those who want to go back to the way things were and those who want to just get on with the change.

The challenge for leadership is to resist either of these responses. A primary function of leadership is to facilitate the learning necessary to move into the change. Again, this is not simply the accumulation of new knowledge or skills. It is reconnecting with and clarifying individual and collective commitments and values. It is a rediscovery of our relationship to the work and to those with whom we engage the work. It is a commitment to engaging our work at-integrity and it is an opportunity to question assumptions and try new things. It is essential that structures are put in place to manage confusion and provide safety as people step from predictability into unpredictability. A key element of this process is regular and transparent communication. Messaging must be reliable, consistent, and repeated.

The final phase of the model is referred to as **New Beginnings**. While this is a secular book, the authors refer to biblical example of change and transition in the story of Moses and the Israelites.

*The beginning took place only after they had come through the wilderness and were ready to make the emotional commitment to do things the new way and see themselves*



*as new people. Starts involve new situations. Beginnings involve new understandings, new values, new attitudes, and – most of all – new identities.*

For those of you familiar with this story, their Neutral Zone was forty year long. New Beginnings took place when they crossed the river and took possession of the land. New Beginnings involve stepping out of the Neutral Zone as a somewhat new people, individually and collectively ready to align with the change. There is a deeper connection to the purpose, a shared picture of what has been created, a plan for engagement and an understanding of your part in the new reality.

As you apply this model to your own experience, reflect on the following questions:

- Reflect on a time when you were expected to “Let Go”.
- Reflect on a time you found yourself in the “Neutral Zone” required to rethink your basic beliefs and assumptions about some situation or context.
- Reflect on a time when you found yourself stepping into a “New Beginning”.
- What were these experiences like for you? What did you find challenging? Satisfying?

The second model we explore is based on the work of Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey of Harvard and described in their book, *Immunity to Change: How to Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organization*. Their work explores a number of factors impacting our relationship to change. For example, they reference the work of Heifetz describe earlier, distinguishing between the technical and adaptive nature of the work required for change. They define an “adaptive formulation” of the challenge which they describe as an “immunity to change”. This model more clearly identifies the factors contributing to the resistance to change and identifies the adaptive work necessary to break through the resistance. The authors describe three key dimensions to this immunity:

*You may now gradually come to see the immunity to change as a multidimensional phenomenon. First, at a most practical level, an immunity map gives us a picture of how we are actively preventing the very change we wish to make. But it also shows us how a given place on a continuum of mental development is at once a way of knowing the world and of managing a fundamental anxiety. Thus, it reveals a second dimension in the way persistent anxiety is managed, and a third, the epistemological balance that must be preserved if we are to maintain our way of knowing the world and ourselves.*

Their map, or immunity x-ray is developed by identifying the following:

Commitment Improvement Goal/Objective	Doing/Not Doing Instead	Hidden/Competing Commitment	Big Assumptions

The first step is the identification of what a person (or group/team) is committed to achieving or changing. This might be implementation of an initiative or mandate that the organization has committed to. In other cases, this might be a commitment that an individual or group has initiated. It is important in both cases there be a true commitment by the individual or group to make the change.

The second step is to identify and articulate what is being done or not being done in relationship to the commitment. What specific action is being taken to achieve the objective? What actions or steps are being avoided that are necessary to align with the commitment? It is most helpful if specific behaviors or actionable items be identified.

At this point there is value in stepping back and reflecting on what we have learned and how it is beginning to inform potential action. The pull at this point might be to focus on the behavior identified in column two of the model and assume if you just change this behavior to align with the commitment then the problem will be solved. If we take this approach, then the challenge is being defined as a technical problem. If this is the case, then by all means make the necessary changes or adjustments. If I avoid second helpings and deserts, then I will lose weight. If I start the project earlier then I will avoid the stress of procrastination. However, the challenge being faced may require a more adaptive approach and the only way to determine this is to continue to develop our x-ray.

Moving to column three, we seek to answer the question, "If I imagine myself trying to do the *opposite* of this (column two behavior), what is the most uncomfortable, or worrisome, or outright scary feeling that comes up for me?" So, why this question? This question relates to the fundamental emotion that is triggered by change which is anxiety. While there is a true commitment to the change, this is often in tension with what the authors refer to as competing or hidden commitment. This hidden commitment is the source of the resistance to the change. While I am consciously committed to the objective or goal related to the change, I am also unconsciously committed to not changing. To do so pushes me too outside my comfort zone. Resisting the change is a way of managing the anxiety being manifested by what may be fears about which we may be unaware.

This moves us to the final column, our Big Assumptions. Kegan and Lahey write:

*The most reliable route to ultimately disrupting the immune system begins by identifying the core assumptions that sustain it. We use the concept of big assumption to signal that there are some ways we understand ourselves and the world (and the relationship between the world and ourselves) that we do not see as mental constructions. Rather we see them as truths, incontrovertible facts, accurate representations of how we and the world are.*

*These constructions of reality are actually assumptions; they may well be true, but they also may not be. When we treat an assumption as if it is truth, we have made it what we call a big assumption.*

Let's look at some examples that the authors shared in an article from the Journal of Staff Development, Summer 2002.

	<b>Commitment</b>	<b>Doing/Not Doing</b>	<b>Competing Commitment</b>	<b>Big Assumptions</b>
<b>Superintendent</b>	I am committed to operating less as a manager and more as a mentor with the principals.	I do not genuinely collaborate with the principals around the redesign of their schools. My non-negotiables are very large in scope.	I am committed to having things go my way, to dramatic and fast success which I think requires my playing an active, hands-on role.	If I do not exercise widespread authority and control, all forward momentum for change will be lost. The principals will not do enough of what they should, quickly enough, or at a high enough level.
<b>Principal</b>	I am committed to powerful learning experiences for every child in my school and to functioning as my school's Chief Instructional Officer.	I spend too little time in classrooms and talking with teachers about their work and too much time as "plant manager," "chief scheduler," or doing other less essential things.	I am committed to not making messes for my superintendent, not losing her high opinion of me.	If I create a problem for my superintendent, it will irreparably harm my relationship with her.
<b>Teacher</b>	I am committed to wholeheartedly participating in our instructional redesign plan.	I am not getting involved, avoiding, procrastinating.	I am committed to not being disappointed yet again, to not letting myself hope for real change when that does not occur, to not fooling myself.	If I let myself hope again and have my hopes dashed, I will not be able to recover.

This allows you to see how the elements work together and how the system is maintained. The challenge is to begin taking action that tests your Big Assumptions. You take actions that will move you closer to your commitment and that are slightly outside your comfort zone. Learning is achieved by taking this action and capacity in service of the commitment is increased. We have explored some of the key elements of their research. The book is an important read. As you apply this model to your own experience, reflect on the following questions:

- How does this model inform your relationship to change?
- Where have you seen this dynamic manifesting in those you work with or supervise?
- How does this model inform your role as leader in this context?

**Conflict:** Our experience with, and relationship to conflict, are key factors in our ability to work effectively with others. Conflict has two potential outcomes. When engaging conflict, we can erode trust and social capital and threatening relationships. Unfortunately, this is the experience that too often defines many people's experience with conflict. At the same time conflict is a context in which trust and social capital can be built and where innovation and creativity are possible. Relationships can be strengthened. The capacity for new learning increases. Conflict challenges us to move outside our comfort zones to explore new possibilities. The choices we make when faced with this opportunity will determine what is possible.

We experience conflict when interacting with another person or persons, we interpret the interaction as evidencing some level of incompatible difference or threat. In a sense, conflict starts between our ears as a result of what we make our interaction(s) with others mean. Our internal interpretation manifests externally in the behavior we demonstrate as a result of this interpretation. The conflict will escalate (become more heated) or deescalate (become potentially productive) based on our choice of behavior. As stated above, the key point to acknowledge is that how we engage is a choice.

Most of us have developed a "way of being" when confronting conflict. While, in many cases, our response is situation specific, we tend to have a "default response" or style. While the literature identifies a range of models for reflecting on this construct, this is not about differentiating a "right style" from a "wrong style". For the most part, one can identify both pros and cons of just about any style. The point is that our ability to be intentional in our conflict response is dependent on our level of **self-awareness** as to what we tend to do in a given situation. In fact, much of preparation occurs in the context of increasing our capacity for personal reflection and self-awareness. It is about developing and practicing mindfulness.

In the book, Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, the authors state:

*As people begin to feel unsafe, they start down one of two unhealthy paths. They move either to **silence** (withholding meaning from the pool) or to **violence** (trying to force meaning in the pool).*

They go on to say:

***Silence** consists of any act to purposefully withhold information from the pool of meaning. It's almost always done as a means of avoiding potential problems, and it always restricts the flow of meaning. Methods range from playing verbal games to avoiding a person entirely. The three most common forms of silence are masking, avoiding, and withdrawing.*

***Violence** consists of any verbal strategy that attempts to convince, control, or compel others to your point of view. It violates safety by trying to force meaning into*

*the pool. Methods range from name-calling and monologuing to making threats. The three most common forms are controlling, labeling, and attacking.*

In the book, Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together, author William Isaacs introduces a schema for describing an unfolding conversation. In his model he describes what he refers to as “Fundamental Choice Points,” in which the behavioral choices participants make in the context of these fundamental choice points will influence the structure of the subsequent conversation and their ultimate experience of each other. When engaged in a conversation where there are differences of opinion, strong emotions and important issues at stake we initially engage in “deliberation”. This means to take careful thought, to reflect or to weigh out. In other words, we think about what is being said. In the context of this deliberation participants tend to make one of two choices; **suspend** judgment or **defend** their point of view.

Suspending judgment starts with awareness that I am making a judgment about your point of view. I choose to dis-identify with this judgment in order to “listen without resistance”. My goal is to more deeply understand your thinking and point of view.

When describing the choice to defend, Isaac says:

*The word defend comes from roots that mean “to ward off an attack.” This is a billiard ball model of conversations. In a discussion people see themselves as separate from one another. They take positions to put forth arguments and defend their stakes.*

A third, and well-known model for reflecting on conflict style comes from the work of Kenneth Thomas. He proposes a two-dimensional model for assessing conflict style based on assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is the extent to which an individual works to satisfy his or her concerns while cooperativeness, the extent to which an individual works to satisfy the other persons concerns. From this model he proposes five different styles of conflict engagement. They are:

- **Competing:** described as being assertive and uncooperative. When competing an individual is more focused on addressing his/her concerns, sometimes at the expense of the other person meeting their needs. The competing person will often use any resources available to win.
- **Accommodating:** is described as unassertive and cooperative. It is considered the opposite of competing and is sometimes described as self-sacrificial. When accommodating the individual neglects, his/her concerns in order to meet the needs of the other person.
- **Avoiding:** is described as both unassertive and uncooperative. In this case the individual does not pursue his or her objectives nor those of the other. In many cases there is a denial of the conflict.
- **Collaborating:** is both assertive and cooperative and is fundamentally the opposite of avoiding. In the context of collaboration, the parties seek to find solutions and make

decisions that address the concerns of all involved. In this case the parties are committed to achieving mutual gain or mutual benefit for all involved.

- **Compromising:** is seen as moderately assertive and cooperative. In this case the parties are looking for expedient, mutually acceptable solutions that may only partially meet the objectives of those involved

We expand our understanding of the context of conflict by reflecting on the “six faces of conflict” introduced by Mayer in his book, *Staying with Conflict*, referenced in the introduction. Mayer takes the singular construct of conflict and differentiates between six manifestation of the experience.

1. Low-impact Conflict: Typical everyday conflict. “Where do you want to go for lunch?” “What color should we paint the living room?” “Do you want to go first or should I?”
2. Latent Conflict: This is potential conflict. These are conflicts that we potentially have but do not need to engage. It is not that we are consciously avoiding them. Our shared context does not necessitate that we address them.
3. Transient Conflict: These are conflicts that can be resolved and are often addressed in a time bound context. Examples include, a grievance, contract negotiation, a hearing, etc. They are not insignificant; however, procedures exist for navigating these issues that often have timelines attached.
4. Representative Conflict: Many conflicts fall within this category. In this case the issues that are said to define the conflict are often representative of some deeper issue(s). For example, a conflict between an employee and a supervisor may be representative of a pervasive culture of disrespect and mistrust between frontline workers and management.
5. Stubborn Conflict: I often say that conflict of this type has many moving parts. It is complex, resistant to resolution, manifesting with high emotion and will take a more complex intervention to resolve. Stubborn conflict may involve multiple parties or agencies, multiple issues, and be manifesting in both an interpersonal and organizational context.
6. Enduring Conflict: Mayer states, “enduring conflict is that aspect of a dispute that is embedded in structures, systems, values, or identity and will therefore not be resolved through short-term, resolution-oriented conflict interventions”. By highlighting awareness of the context of Enduring Conflict, Mayer identifies the importance of dispute resolution capacity, but also the capacity for being with, and effectively engaging and navigating enduring conflict over time.

**Conversational Structures:** Interpersonal conflict is experienced and most often engaged in the context of a conversation. Every conversation has a structure. We can influence the structure of the conversation and therefore the outcome by choices we make individually and collectively.

In their book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, cited above, authors Stone, Patton and Heen differentiate between what they refer to as “stances” from which we tend to engage conflict. In a “Telling Stance” participants approach the conversation with the belief that we are right, and the other is wrong. From this stance we will structure the conversation so as to prove our point. We are judgmental, sometimes arrogant, and most often dismissive of what others have to say. Why would I want to hear what you have to say when you are obviously wrong? This is fundamentally about debate.

By contrast, in a “Learning Stance” we bring a different set of attributes to the conversation. At the most fundamental level participants enter the conversation with curiosity. I was once told by an instructor of mine that our goal as we enter the conversation is to “shift from judgement and fear to curiosity and compassion”. We realize that while we may know a lot about the issue(s), we do not know what the other person knows. And, while we might not agree with the other person, we will know more if we are willing to listen. In service of our curiosity we bring a sense of presence to the conversation. We are present to the opportunity for new learning. Finally, a learning stance has us engaging the conversation at integrity with what we often state as a core value, a respect for diversity of opinion.

## Implementing New Learning: Exploring the “So What”

Earlier I introduced the notion of engaging at-integrity. I introduced the following questions as a framework for preparing to match the role and actions of a leader with the needs of a situation. Let’s explore each of these questions in more detail.

### **What does the situation call me to be as a leader?**

When engaging a situation, we too often assume the role we need to bring. For example, when someone shares a problem, how often do you find yourself wanting to offer a solution? However, they may not want a solution. They may just want an empathetic ear. When a potential client contacts me to provide services within their organization I need to clarify the role they are asking me to bring. Are they asking me to serve as a mediator? Facilitator? Teacher? Coach? Consultant? Each of these roles comes with a different set of expectations as to my role and actions in the situation. This question focuses on the context, the people, and the needs they are looking to have addressed as a result of your engagement.

### **Who am I committed to being as I consider leading in this context?**

The second question focuses on your relationship to the context and to the people. Is this a context to which you want or need to make a commitment? Another way of asking might be, “is this my problem?” Is the issue or context one in which you have some level of shared interest or are willing to make some commitment. If yes, do you have the capacity to engage at this time? Are you able to follow through on your commitment? Too often we make commitments that we may not be able to keep, resulting in broken trust and fractured relationships.

### **Based on the needs of the situation and the people and my commitment, what will I do?**

Your answers to the questions above will determine the action you take. In order to engage at integrity, your actions and your speaking need to match the role you are taking and your commitment to the people and the situation.

We use these questions for assessing our role and function as leaders in the engagement of a conflict. What follows is a description of three common roles leaders may choose when engaging. This is followed by descriptions of what engagement might look like from each role.

The first role is that of **Partner**. In this role you are engaging conflict in which you clearly are a participant and have a stake in the outcome. This may be conflict with a supervisor or manager. This may be conflict with a colleague. Finally, this may be conflict with a direct report or someone that you supervise. What is fundamental to taking this role is the commitment to partner with the other person or persons so as to reach a mutually acceptable and mutually beneficial agreement or resolution of the dispute. While you may not be engaging as equals according to the organizational structure, you are engaging the issue with a



commitment to engaging as equals and therefore partners. As a leader in this context you are committed to modeling behavior that is at-integrity with a respect for diversity of opinion and a valuing shared learning.

The second role is that of **Facilitator**. In this context we are using the term to mean more than someone who might be leading a meeting. In this role you as leader are providing for others what they need to engage a conflict. While you typically have a stake in the outcome, your objective is to mobilize others to effectively engage a challenge or conflict which has team or organizational implications. Support might include clarification of the issue(s) and identification of external parameters impacting potential solutions. As a leader you might provide release time for engaging the issue as a group and make available a facilitator that will support the group in what might be a challenging conversation. Your primary commitment is to increase participation by those effected by the issue in collectively engaging the issue.

Our third and final role is that of **Arbiter**. In this role you choose to impose action for resolving an interpersonal or organizational conflict. This role is not taken lightly and one for which you must have the authority to do so. Examples of when you might choose this role include but are not limited to:

- The issue in dispute are non-negotiable. For example, the issue has regulatory, contractual, safety or compliance implications.
- Other effort to resolve the issue(s) have proven unsuccessful and a resolution is necessary.
- Immediate action is called for and there is not time for negotiation or collective engagement.

This is not meant as an exhaustive identification of the multiple roles you might take as a leader supporting the engagement of conflict. It does demonstrate the importance of being intentional in matching your role to the requirements of the context and the needs of the people. You will also recognize that while engaging a situation, contextual and human factors may change, necessitating a shift in your role. It is important to be transparent when making these transitions.

Upon determining your role, you must choose effective action that is at-integrity with that role. We organize and differentiate action in four contexts. These include:

- Preparing to Engage
- Convening the Conversation
- Increasing Shared Understanding
- From Inquiry to Action

Let's look at what action might look like in general from each role and within each phase of a process.

## Preparing to Engage

### Partner

We are committing to participating as partners in pursuit of a mutually beneficial outcome.

- What do I really want for myself and others in this conversation?
- How can the conversation positively affect relationships?
- How will I behave if I am committed to mutually acceptable solutions and better relationships?

### Facilitator

Preparing, mobilize and guide a team or group to effectively engage.

- What is the context for this conflict?
- Who needs to participate in the work?
- How do I support the team substantively, procedurally, and emotionally?
- What is my relationship to the conflict?

### Arbiter

Preparing to impose resolution to a conflict when individuals or the team have been unable to engage effectively and agree upon action.

- Why am I choosing this role?
- What is my “authority”?
- How do I choose and carry out this role in a way that is consistent with my commitments and those of the organization?
- What is the potential impact of my making the decision?

## Convening the Conversation

### Partner

Clarifying expectations. Sharing commitment to engaging so as to acknowledge and understand all perspectives.

- How do I invite others into this conversation?
- How will I tell my story?
- What should I listen for in the story of others?

**Facilitator**

Clarifying expectations. Organizing and supporting a group to effectively engage a challenge.

- What are the “readiness” conversations we need to have as a group as we engage this conflict?
- What are we talking about and why?
- What is the role of the leader in this dialogue?
- What are shared expectations of the process
- How will we interact with each other?

**Arbiter**

Clarifying expectations. Convening the team and sharing rationale for making the decision.

- How do I share my intent to act in alignment with our mutual commitment to the work and to each other?
- What is the “gap” between where we are and where we need to be and why am I choosing to close the gap?
- What am I asking/expecting from the group at this point?

### **Increasing Shared Understanding**

**Partner**

Creating a joint story with a mutual statement of issues and desired outcomes. Identifying shared and independent objectives.

- What do we need to share and understand about this issue?
- How do we suspend judgment and increase curiosity?
- What do we need to understand about context and external forces?

**Facilitator**

Supporting dialogue to create deeper, shared understanding of the challenge.

- What adaptive work is needed among participants and beyond?
- What are the individual and shared interests and/or objectives?
- What external parameters exist?

**Arbiter**

Enrolling the team in the decision as I have made it.

- What interests /objectives am I addressing by choosing this course of action?
- How do I enroll the group in committing to this course of action?

- How do I communicate what I believe to be the consequences if we do not take this action?
- What transition/change issues do I need to be aware of?

### **From Inquiry to Action**

#### **Partner**

Finding mutually agreed upon resolution, planning for action, and committing to forward movement.

- How can dialogue lead to innovative solutions?
- What are the details we need to work out?
- How can we support implementation of our plan?

#### **Facilitator**

Generating potential actions and bringing specificity to a plan for implementation.

- How do we build on the conversation to increase capacity for creativity and innovation?
- As agreement emerges, what are the details that need definition?
- How will the plan be implemented and what support is needed?

#### **Arbiter**

Implementing decisions, clarifying expectations, and holding group accountable.

- How do I invite participation of others in designing implementation process?
- How do we clarify expectations and align action as we implement the plan?
- How will we evaluate and adjust as we go forward?
- How will we address those unwilling to commit?

As you reflect on this new learning let me leave you with one final thought. You cannot lead work that you are not doing yourself. How will you continue to strengthen your relationship to conflict and change and your capacity for mobilizing others to navigate these critical contexts?

