

# Reducing Resistance to Change and Conflict: A Key to Successful Leadership

## Article Four: Reducing Resistance is Easier Said Than Done

By Stephen Haslam and Robert Pennington, Ph.D.,  
Resource International

This is the fourth in a series of articles that examines the essential role of a leader in reducing resistance to change, in order to promote growth in an organization. The first article explored basic models of change that help us understand why resistance occurs (CBAM – the Concerns Based Adoption Model by Frances Fuller (Hall, et. al. 1972) and The Stages of Transition and the Four P's of Transition by William Bridges and Susan Mitchell (Bridges & Mitchell 2000)). The second article presented models of decision-making, and explored why it is important to build an organizational culture in which it is safe for employees to disagree with one another and with management. In the third article, *understanding* and *respect* were presented as two fundamental keys to an effective organizational culture. This article presents communication techniques and group processes that can be used to make respectful behavior a common practice in individual and group behavior.

### **Sharpening the saw**

An ancient oriental proverb states, “To know and not to do is to not know.” Understanding, respect, trust – they are commonly accepted to be important in developing successful work relationships. But they are all easier said than done. It is not enough to simply have the idea that these things are important. One must practice them daily. A martial artist practices basic techniques for balance, strength, flexibility, and agility, before he enters into a conflict. So too, leaders need to follow basic techniques to be firm, clear, understanding, and respectful, so that when misunderstandings and disagreements occur they can demonstrate these qualities automatically, rather than reacting defensively or aggressively. Stephen Covey referred to this practice as “sharpening the saw,” a continual habit of learning followed by all great leaders. (Covey 1989)

There are many such techniques for improving one-to-one communication and for facilitating respectful behavior in groups. The following sections present a set of integrated techniques that can be modeled by leaders, and taught to all employees. The ultimate objective of using these techniques is to establish a work environment in which everyone feels safe to disagree so that communication is more open and work is more productive.

- Three Questions to Reduce Misunderstandings<sup>©</sup>**
- The Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication<sup>©</sup>**
- Clear Communication: Five Levels of A Clear Communication<sup>©</sup>**
- Constructive Feedback: The Feedback Sandwich<sup>©</sup>**
- Creating Supportive Agreements: Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements<sup>©</sup>**

### Three Questions to Reduce Misunderstandings<sup>©</sup>

There are so many books and trainings on the topic of active listening one would think that by now everyone would have become an expert. Unfortunately, in the middle of a disagreement or misunderstanding most people are hit by an automatic emotional wave that knocks all communication skills out of the window. So it is actually important to have some very basic guidelines that may seem ridiculously simple. The simpler they are, the easier they are to practice. Here is a simple analogy to keep in mind the next time you feel your emotional wave overflowing.



As illustrated in figure to the left, the glass represents you, and the water is your thoughts. The second glass to the right represents the other person, and the water in that glass represents his thoughts.



The splashing water in glasses to the right shows you what an argument looks like. You are trying to get some of your thoughts into him, and he is trying to get some of his thoughts into you. A little exchange is actually happening, but generally it just makes a big mess.



What would happen if you just started pouring your water into his glass? Of course, it would overflow all over the floor. He is too full of his ideas, so there is no room for yours. You need to create some openness. Some people try to do this by punching a hole in the other person's cup, puncturing his ego by pointing

out that he is wrong. But if you attack the other person, he is not likely to want to listen to you. He may go back to friends who agree with him, until his ego is repaired. Then he will return to argue with you again because he knows you did not understand him.



It is true that you need the other person to be more open, but there is another way to accomplish this. Take your thoughts and set them aside for a moment. These thoughts will be there when you get back. Create some openness in yourself first, and just as he expects you to argue with him, stop and say,



1. **“This is really important. What is it you want me to know?”** Become a receptive force, drawing information out of the other person. He will pour his ‘water’ into you. Repeat his words back without adding any of your own ‘water glass thoughts’ (*we’ll deal with those later*), just to make sure you are clear.
2. And then you say, **“Is there anything else?”** What do you think is the likelihood that the other person has more thoughts that he has not yet shared? Pretty good. He will pour some more water, while you repeat his words just to make sure you are clear.
3. Finally you say, **“Is that all?”** Pause, and give the other person time to think. You want to squeeze all water you can out, to create as much open space as possible for him to consider your ideas.

The simple truth is this: **if you want get people to become open to your ideas or suggestions, first be open to considering theirs.** This is the simple principle of “seek first to understand.” (Covey 1989)

## The Be-Attitudes of the Martial Art of Communication

The following four principles must be juggled at all times in order to maintain equilibrium in a disagreement or misunderstanding (Resource 1993).

### 1. Be Firm

Know your own position - what you believe and what you want. Stand firmly for your fundamental requirements. Know and communicate your preferences, but don't push too hard. When expressing yourself be clear about the difference between a firm expectation and a possible suggestion, between a “not negotiable” requirement and a preference. You don't have to defend your position to be confident in it. You don't have to make others wrong to know you are right.

### 2. Be Flexible

Be willing to adjust your preferences, but don't give them away for free. Continue to be curious whenever other people express resistance. When you run into a block, reconfirm common agreements and then ask questions to resolve misunderstandings. Be willing to look at your point of view from theirs. Be curious about why they don't already know what you

want them to know. Learn everything you can about what is in the way of them seeing your point of view by becoming an expert on theirs.

**3. Be Actively Receptive**

Develop leverage by helping other people feel understood. Learn to be receptive, especially to ideas with which you disagree. Actively assist others in expressing their opinions more fully. Remember that understanding occurs when the other person feels understood, not when you think you understand. Receptivity absorbs. It is an active force. It is not "being passive."

**4. Be Balanced**

Don't be pushy, but don't be a pushover. Don't let your fundamental requirements impose on others, but don't let others take advantage of you. Balance firmness and flexibility by developing a sense of timing for when to express and when to listen, when to be firm and when to adjust, when to put your ideas out there and when to actively pull their ideas out of them.

**Clear Communication**

Fielding Cooley (Cooley 1994) proposed that an autocratic approach to resolving differences does not help people apply what they know and can do to influence a situation. He outlines how to use an awareness of Schmuck and Runkel's three types of conflict: conflicts over values, facts, and strategies (Schmuck & Runkel, 1985) to better facilitate a resolution of differences. These levels are also reflected in Virginia Satir's five levels of a communication. Resource International's adaptation (Resource 1993) of Satir's five levels (facts, thoughts/opinions, emotions, meaning/importance, action/expectation) provides a communication tool for leaders to address Schmuck and Runkel's three types of conflict.

<i>Virginia Satir's</i>	<i>Schmuck &amp; Runkel's</i>
<u><i>Five Levels Of Communication</i></u>	<u><i>3 Levels of Conflict</i></u>
Facts	Facts
Thoughts/Opinions	Values
Emotions	Values
Meaning/Importance	Values
Actions/Expectations	Strategies

During the 1960s and 1970s, Virginia Satir suggested that as much as seventy percent of what people communicate is done nonverbally. This could mean that people listen more to what is in between the lines than to what you literally say. It also suggests that if you don't clearly say everything you mean, others may fill

in the blanks and make up their own mind about what you are thinking (Satir 1988).

Satir outlined five basic levels that are a part of communication between two people. These five levels of a clear communication provide a blueprint to make sure that misunderstanding does not occur.

1. **Facts:** Clearly state the facts, as they have occurred. Describe what literally happened, without judgment or interpretation. You may check to see if the other person is aware of these facts, and if he has other important pieces of information that need to be considered. People often put across their own beliefs as objective facts (i.e. "You don't respect me.") Don't. This is more likely to cause other people to disagree with you and to try to make you wrong. When there is not clear agreement on facts, you need more information.
2. **Thoughts/Opinions:** Communicate your thoughts and opinions about the situation. Facts are neutral. They become positive or negative, good or bad, right or wrong when you make a judgment about them. Thoughts are your subjective response to the objective facts. Through thoughts and opinions, you communicate your evaluation of the facts. This second level includes your attitudes, preferences, and opinions about the facts. Do not communicate your thoughts as if they are facts by stating an opinion like, "The fact is you are wrong." Often, people will have less resistance to your opinions if you first clarify the objective facts, and then offer your subjective opinions as possibilities, not as rigid positions.
3. **Emotions:** Clearly state your feelings or emotions. You can either control your emotions or your emotions will control you. Emotions will be expressed unconsciously if you do not express them consciously. When you suppress or repress an emotion it becomes unconscious and controls your behavior. To control emotions effectively, you must acknowledge them consciously. Let the other person know that he may have sensed some emotion from you, and that you want to clarify. Let him know you will take responsibility for your own emotion without blaming him for it, and you still want to communicate to him what you believe is important: "I know I may be feeling angry, and I don't want my anger to get in the way of working this out," or "I feel hurt by what you did, so I want to make sure you understand why this is important to me."

Sometimes people mistake their thoughts and opinions for emotions. They may say, "I feel that you do not understand me," or "I feel you should not be treating me this way." These feelings are not emotions, they are opinions. Sentences that begin with "I feel that \_\_\_\_\_," are most likely not a statement of emotion, but a statement of opinion. You may think that someone does not understand you, and you may feel hurt or angry in

response. Because of what you think (thoughts) about what happened (facts), you may be hurt or angry (emotions). But your communication does not end here. Two more levels must be involved which clarify why this issue is important to you, and what your expectations are.

4. **Importance/Priorities:** Describe what is important to you about the situation. Take a moment to consider your thoughts and emotions, state what these mean to you, what is important to you and why you think and feel as you do. Any emotion you experience indicates deeper beliefs or priorities that are important to you. You may disagree with the other person about facts or opinions, and both may still hold the same goals and priorities. This can provide a basis for cooperation even when you have different points of view. And if you do not clearly state your priorities, others are likely to make assumptions and fill in the blanks. Eliminating any of the five levels of communication adds fuel to the misunderstanding.
5. **Actions/Expectations:** Clearly express your expectations, the action you want to take as a result of this discussion. Don't stay stuck in the emotion of the moment. Don't expect the other person to guess. Be clear. Be clear enough to identify what you would like the other person to do, and what you will do.

It is important to state this expectation in a positive way. You may expect the other person to misunderstand you. You may expect him to be uncooperative. But this is not really what you want. You want him to understand, you want him to cooperate. You may tend to think that if he really respects you he will know what you want, and will respond accordingly. Whether he knows what you want has nothing to do with whether or not he respects you or cares about you. It has to do with whether you have told him clearly, directly, and concisely what you want of him and of yourself.

Usually, if seventy percent of what you communicate is done nonverbally, you may not consciously think about what you say on each of these five levels of communication during a normal conversation. Consequently, it may be difficult to suddenly begin measuring all your words in five easy steps. You need to develop a familiarity with each level in order to comfortably use them in a stressful moment. One very effective way to develop this familiarity is to hold the model of the five levels in your mind as a blueprint while you listen to other people. You could actively ask questions about each level, interviewing others until you completely understand what facts they know, their opinions and feelings, what they believe is important, and what they want to do. The following example shows how effective these levels can be as an interview technique for resolving a misunderstanding.

**Case Study: The Five Level Interview** (Resource 1993)

Greta worked as a marketing representative for a training firm. She worried for two months about an important issue, but was afraid to talk to her boss, Steve, because she believed he would not listen. When she finally brought it to him she was very nervous and upset. Steve thought she had a problem and was asking for a solution. But no matter what he suggested to solve the problem, she just kept complaining, and they could not reach an agreement.

Steve realized that as long as Greta felt misunderstood she would continue to resist his input. So he used the five levels of communication as a reflective listening tool to clarify misunderstandings on each of the five levels. The following example is a reconstruction of the actual conversation, according to Steve.

The Five Level Interview:**Facts**

Steve: Please help me be clear. What did these people say to you?

Greta: People are complaining that we teach the same material over and over again in programs with different titles.

Steve: So, the same material, but different titles. You spoke directly with people who took the classes?

Greta: Yes, that's right.

Steve: Were there any comments in the written evaluations?

Greta: Oh, uh, yes there were.

Steve: With written and verbal comments, how many people have communicated with you?

Greta: Oh, I guess I heard from about three or four people.

Steve: So you have this feedback from three or four people. How many people would you say have taken our classes altogether?

Greta: Hmm. Well, I guess at least one thousand people. (*Steve was careful not to press this point at the moment, so Greta would not become defensive again.*)

Steve: Have the Human Resource directors made any negative comments?

Greta: Well, no.

Steve: And have these people spoken to the HR directors?

Greta: No, not yet.

Steve: Did they say they would?

Greta: Well, no. But I know they will!

Notice how much time was spent just digging for and clarifying the facts by restating what Greta was saying. This must be done objectively, without a tone in the voice that delivers a message of criticism between the lines.

**Thoughts/Opinions**

Steve: So they haven't talked with the directors yet, but you think they might?

Greta: Right!

Steve: You believe that people will think poorly about our work, and our reputation will suffer because the decision-makers will hear about it.

Greta: Of course.

**Emotions**

Steve: Of course, you are concerned. This must be very upsetting to you.

Greta: Yes, and it should be important to you too!

**Meaning/Importance**

Steve: Yes, it is important that there be no doubts about the quality of our work, otherwise we could lose business in the future.

Greta: That's right, we would. That's what I've been trying to tell you!

**Actions**

Steve: You have obviously put a lot of thought into this. What do you recommend we do?

Greta: Well, we need to have clearly distinct programs that do not repeat each other, with accurate program outlines and descriptions for each one. *(At this point Steve breathed deeply and practiced stress management techniques!)*

Steve: OK. And do you think this will solve the problem?

Greta: Yes, that should do it.

Steve: Great. I do too. What would you like me to do?

Greta: Well, you can do the program outlines and descriptions!

Steve: OK, I can do that tonight, and fax it to you first thing in the morning.

**A Win/Win Solution**

No matter how much Steve had previously tried to give Greta the same solution, she could not accept it because she did not feel understood about her full communication. She wasn't even fully clear about what she was thinking. When Steve took the time to listen and to interview Greta, her resistance dissolved, and they easily reached a win/win solution. Greta had avoided the conflict for two months. The original argument repeated for ninety minutes. The interview reached a solution in less than ten minutes. This was one situation where the disagreement was caused by misunderstanding. They actually had an agreement on the solution, which was clarified with understanding.

Being actively receptive need not take a lot of time. It takes a sincere interest to understand, a foundation in the Be-Attitudes of the Martial Arts, and familiarity with each of the Five Levels of Communication. In the long

run it saves time because you don't have to deal with the resistance, misunderstandings, and arguments. To develop this familiarity you need to practice until each level becomes a habit. Then when you are in a difficult situation you will be less likely to do what Steve did during the first hour of this example, by becoming defensive or argumentative. When you have established in the other person the feeling of being understood, then she is more prepared for your feedback.

## **Constructive Feedback**

Giving feedback is the process of giving information back to someone about his or her actions or behaviors. Feedback gives the person information about how his or her behavior has affected you. But notice, the word is “feedback”, not “giveback”. It is supposed to nourish the person who is receiving it. And it should contribute to the relationship so that both parties benefit. But the feedback process can backfire if you force the other person to hear your viewpoint whether he likes it or not, or if you intentionally withhold information from the person. Feedback can definitely taste sour if it is passed through someone else before it finally gets to the person for whom it is intended.

It can be difficult to give feedback constructively, comfortably, and firmly so you get your point across without triggering the other person's defenses. Here are some typical examples of situations in which it is difficult to communicate:

Saying NO to something you don't want to do, whether it is a request or an instruction.

Telling someone who gets on your nerves to change his behavior.

Giving someone bad news which he doesn't want to hear.

Asking for something you think the other person will have a difficult time doing for you or giving to you.

Telling someone that something he is doing causes problems for him, for his job, or for you.

Giving an evaluation to an employee.

This section will not focus on telling you what decisions to make in resolving such challenges. Instead, the focus will be on how to communicate difficult messages or feedback in the face of resistance. The three stages of The Feedback Sandwich can help the constructive criticism be clearer, firmer, and easier to accept. (Resource 1993)

### **The Feedback Sandwich**

#### **Step One: Appreciation**

Appreciate the person: Generally, it is best to first help the person feel understood about his or her concerns before presenting the feedback, because that understanding helps reduce the person's resistance. You



might be totally unaware of them. If he is unaware of these facts, he will believe that your comments are irrelevant to what he knows is true. Make sure the other person understands the facts you see, even if he does not yet totally agree with you about your opinions.

Share yourself: Let the other person know why you think the way you do, whether you have any feelings about the situation, and why it is important enough to take the risk of sharing this feedback with him. Help him understand you, not just the situation.

Define clear action steps. Clearly and objectively define what changes you want. Don't leave him to interpret what you expect by saying, "I want you to be more sensitive," or "You should stop being so picky." The words "sensitive" and "picky" state your judgment about him, but he might disagree with that judgment. Don't argue about who is right and who is wrong. Focus instead on specific behaviors you want him to do which are not picky, or which are sensitive. It will be easier to reach an agreement.

State positive benefit: Use the WIIFM principle, "What's in it for me?" What will the other person receive out of changing the behavior? Be sure to point out the positive benefits you expect. This increases the person's motivation to cooperate.

### Step Three: Support

Understand that real change takes time: What you point out to him might be an unconscious habit. Even if he wants to change, the old habit will not automatically disappear. Give him some room to maneuver, some time to turn a good intention into a new habit.

Provide ongoing support: Because a real change will take time, you want to explore with him what you can do over time to support the change. This does not mean supporting anything the other person does. You will support behavior that contributes to a productive, effective growth and change.

But since this new behavior is not already his habit, he is likely to forget. Ask the other person how you could remind him, if you happen to see the old habit recurring. Try to identify a specific behavior you can do which he agrees will be supportive to him. When he tells you what you can do to remind him, he very subtly agrees to participate in the process of change.

Understand that real change takes persistence. Don't use the force of emotion, the force of being right, or the force of group opinion to beat him into submission. Your persistence is a much more effective force to wear down another person's resistance.

**Case Study: Constructive Feedback** (Resource 1993)

Mike never felt respected by his manager, Paul. Paul tended to be argumentative, while Mike tended to avoid confrontation. Eventually, Mike realized that Paul was not being disrespectful, but was just trying to stimulate creative debate. But Mike did not like the repeated interruptions. He did not need to change Paul's beliefs, but he did want to change Paul's behavior. Mike used The Feedback Sandwich to work out a new agreement with Paul. The following is an abbreviated rendition of the actual conversation that took place.

I Appreciation

Mike: Paul, you are one hundred and ten percent committed to everything you do. That's why I like working with you.

Paul: *(They discussed this "commitment" for awhile. Paul felt proud, because he is recognized for one of his best qualities.)*

II Challenge**Facts**

Mike: Have you noticed that sometimes, while I am answering your questions, you have a thought and start to talk, so I shut my mouth?

Paul: Yeah, you just shut up, which just doesn't make any sense.

**Thoughts**

Mike: When you do this, I think you want me to listen to what you have to say. Is that what you want me to do?

Paul: Of course, but that doesn't mean you just have to shut up!

**Emotions**

Mike: When this happens, I feel really frustrated. Did you ever notice this?

Paul: Yeah, you just clam up. I can't get anything out of you.

**Meaning/Importance**

Mike: It is important that I understand what you are trying to tell me. It is also important to me that you hear my input. And I simply don't know how to talk and listen at the same time.

**Action/Expectation**

Mike: So, I want to find a way we can both be understood without having to fight for "air time."

Step Three: Support

Mike: What can I do the next time I notice this happening again, in order to remind you so we can start communicating more effectively?

Paul: You know, Mike, I don't think this is really such a big problem.

Mike: Maybe not. But what could I do that you would feel comfortable with, next time I notice this happening again?

Paul: Well, if you hold your index finger in front of your face, I'll remember and stop talking. But you have to keep the agreement and tell me what is on your mind!

Mike: Absolutely. It's a deal.

So Mike started holding up his index finger. At first he held it for a few minutes before Paul noticed. But when Paul stopped talking, it was Mike's turn to keep the agreement. After awhile Paul noticed the finger message immediately, and eventually Mike didn't even need to hold up his finger. Mike didn't use force; he used understanding, a common goal, time, and persistence in order to support a change in the lifelong habit of another person. By first reducing resistance, Mike moved a mountain with one finger.

### **Balance Flexibility and Firmness**

When balanced with flexibility, firmness is not rigid. When balanced with firmness, flexibility is strong. If you want your feedback to be well received, balance it with flexibility and firmness. It is possible for your feedback to have an impact, even if it is challenging, even if there is resistance. But the key to reducing the resistance is balance and timing.

### **Creating Supportive Agreements**

The key to maintaining power is to be balanced. The key to maintaining balance is in knowing when to push and when to pull, when to assert and when to respond. It's all in the timing. In *The Book of Leadership and Strategy, Lessons of the Chinese Masters*, Thomas Cleary translates one of the oldest and most prestigious works of Taoist philosophy. These teachings list five practices of an effective leader:

“To be flexible without being pliant.

To be firm without being stiff.

To be humane without being vulnerable.

To be trusting yet impossible to deceive.

To have courage that cannot be overwhelmed.” (Cleary 1996)

The same principle of balance is true in effectively applying the techniques of The Five Levels of Communication and The Feedback Sandwich. The key is in the timing of when to firmly assert your own perceptions and expectations, and when to respond to the other person. This chapter will integrate these two models into a six-stage process for building supportive agreements.

Six basic stages are required in order to move through misunderstandings and conflicts to create supportive agreements.

## **The Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements**

Stage One: You understand them

Stage Two: You acknowledge common ground

Stage Three: They understand you

Stage Four: They acknowledge common ground

Stage Five: We clarify differences

Stage Six: We create supportive agreements

### Stage One: You Understand Them

If you begin by pushing your own ideas, you are likely to meet with resistance and defensiveness from another person. Instead, begin by producing in the other person a feeling of being understood. Remove his impulse to attack you or to defend himself. Remember that you want the other person to recognize and confirm that you do understand his or her point of view completely on all five levels (facts, opinions, emotions, importance, expectations). To accomplish this you can use the Five Levels of Communication as an interview technique, as presented above.

### Stage Two: You Acknowledge Common Ground

Even after you have focused on understanding, it may still be premature to immediately express your own thoughts. In the martial arts, when you stand on common ground with an opponent you have leverage. So before you present your thoughts, which your opponent might resist out of habit, take a few moments to reflect on whatever he has said. See if there are any specific points to which you can agree. List these points. Let the other person know that you think these are good ideas, important points. Now the two of you are standing together on common ground looking in the same direction, rather than squaring off in battle. His resistance to your ideas will now be lessened.

The Five Levels of Communication can help you to identify and acknowledge common points. For example, even if you disagree on the solution (the action step), you can establish common ground with agreements about facts and priorities. Taking the time and effort to seek for common ground may not always be easy. You may not agree with anything he says. If this is true, then you could at least say, "Looking at it from your point of view, I can understand why you feel the way you do." If you at least give recognition to his point of view and acknowledge his emotions, you show that you are making the effort to step outside of your own position and consider his position.

### Stage Three: They Understand You

Use the Feedback Sandwich with the Five Levels of Communication to help you be clear about the facts, your thoughts and emotions, what is important to you, and what you specifically want. Pause periodically, and

check to see if the other person understands. Be subtle and tactful about it. Don't say that you just want to see if he is really listening to you. You might instead say that you want to make sure you are really being clear. Ask him what he heard you say so far.

You might want the other person to focus solely on your point of view at this point, since you did that with him in Stage One. But it is more likely that he will continue to express his thoughts, opinions, and expectations. If that happens just return to stages one and two, making sure he feels understood about this new point, and commenting on the extent to which you can agree with him.

#### Stage Four: They Acknowledge Common Points

As you check with him to see if he understands, you can also ask him if you have made any points to which he can agree. You could begin by stating the points that have already been established in common, and then say, "So, are there any other things we've said that are common ground?" No longer a you-against-me conversation, at this point it is the two of us together.

It was earlier proposed that as much as fifty to ninety percent of conflicts and disagreements are caused by misunderstandings. Any disagreement in this category will be resolved if you have successfully completed Stages One through Four. You understand them, they understand you, and all the common ground is clarified. There is no misunderstanding. You have an agreement. ***Fifty to ninety percent of all disagreements can be resolved by following this model, without ever having to engage in a conflict.***

#### Stage Five: Clarify Differences

Unfortunately, most people skip Stages One through Four, and jump immediately to Stage Five. Each person tries to convince the other person to change. However, when the common ground is first acknowledged, the differences take on a new perspective. In this context, many people are more capable of resolving whatever points of disagreement still exist.

Use the Five Levels of Communication to clarify where you actually differ, and what options exist to resolve the differences. Is there a disagreement on the facts? If so, how can this be clarified to find out objectively what is true? Are there different opinions about what the facts mean? Are there different priorities? Are there different end results or goals, or merely different ways to reach the same goal? When you identify these points of disagreement you clarify what you need to work on in Stage Six, in order to create a supportive agreement.

Often disagreements are caused by common goals (Step Four – priorities) but differing solutions (Step Five – expectations). But if the goal is the same, and two different paths will get you there, what does it matter which path is taken? Actually it may be matter in principle, or because of some other priorities, and these differences are what the Five Levels of Communication can clarify, before moving on to solving the problem.

If you attempt to solve the problem before all of these stages are accomplished, you increase the risk of sabotage or resistance to the final solution. Or if you skip the understanding and acknowledgment of Stages One through Four and jump immediately to Stages Five and Six, the other person may agree with you simply to avoid conflict.

#### Stage Six: Create Supportive Agreements

At this stage, everyone feels understood. The common ground is established, and some agreements already exist. The facts are clear, the opinions, feelings, and priorities are out in the open. You know where you differ. There are no hidden weapons. Now is the time for problem solving. If the first five stages are completed, all participants will feel more secure that their needs are being considered.

You will want to build agreements that are supportive. A supportive agreement is one that is supportive to you and to the other person. Only when your needs and her needs are taken into account will the solution be supported in the long run. For example, in a business relationship, one party might realize, "This is a much sweeter deal for me. But, hey, it's her responsibility to look after her own interests." When the other party recognizes her misfortune, she may resist and even sabotage completion of the agreement. She may be less likely to do business with such an untrustworthy person in the future. You may win the battle, but you could lose the war.

“When leadership is established to unify the people, if the leadership is consistent, there is order, and if the leadership is inconsistent, there is disorder.” (Cleary 1996)

If you take it upon yourself to ensure that all interests are being met, you establish more trust and dependability. The result is the leverage of goodwill, a priceless asset.

#### **Case Study: Healing Old Wounds by Creating Supportive Agreements**

Dave met with his boss, Mr. S., for breakfast every morning. Their informal morning meetings included a small group who developed close professional relationships by discussing important issues and asking one

another advice. One day Mr. S. heard that someone else knew what he had shared in confidence with Dave at breakfast. Mr. S. decided that, in his position as the boss, it was not safe to discuss sensitive issues with Dave. So Mr. S. stopped attending the informal morning meetings. He didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so he didn't say why he stopped. He was just too busy. Mr. S. also avoided Dave in the hallways and stopped talking to him in general.

This continued for four years. Before long, Dave knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what it was. The rest of the breakfast group also felt that Mr. S., the boss, was withholding, but they were not sure why. This suspicion grew into distrust, which spread through the organization like a cancer.

Eventually, both Dave and Mr. S. learned how to work with The Five Levels of Communication, the Feedback Sandwich, and the Six Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement. They took the risk of sitting down to work out their differences. In his role as the boss, Mr. S. listened to Dave first, repeating and acknowledging until he began to reestablish some trust. Because Mr. S. was an introverted thinker, he had to work consciously at sharing his thinking process with Dave, rather than keeping it internal. Then Dave listened to Mr. S., repeating and acknowledging along the way. Dave was an extroverted thinker, so it took effort for him to pause and be silent while Mr. S. reflected. When you are weighted down by years of judgments and baggage, it is not easy to listen patiently, focusing on the other person's point of view.

After understanding each of Mr. S's points, Dave built common ground with Mr. S. by saying, "You are right, confidentiality is very important to me also. And because of this I sincerely believe that I did not discuss these things with anyone else. However, I realize that I tend to have a hot temper, and I sometimes say things I don't mean to say. So if I ever did repeat these things, I am truly sorry." Dave paused to let Mr. S. reflect for a moment, and then said, "You know, Mr. S., I wasn't the only person at the meeting when you shared that information with me. Did you ever consider that maybe someone else talked about it?"

For a moment there was silence. Then a light went off in Mr. S's mind. After four years he realized, "Maybe it was someone else who broke confidentiality, not Dave." Upon that common ground, they started building a new work relationship. ***In the end, it didn't matter who was right and who was wrong. What mattered was to rebuild trust and reestablish an effective work relationship.***

It took them time and practice to learn the techniques, and it took courage and commitment to sit down with each other and work through each step.

But can you imagine how much time and energy they had expended over four years of misunderstanding? It may seem like it takes too much time to put these principles and techniques into practice, but in truth, it saves time, energy, and a lot of grief. And it may even heal misunderstandings that have been carried for years.

### **Supportive Agreements Are Not Always Possible**

It is not always possible to reach a supportive agreement in which everyone gets everything they want. When people's fundamental requirements are different, Covey's phrase, "Win-Win or No-Deal" is most appropriate. (Covey 1989) In such cases, no agreement is the most supportive agreement, and it is better for both parties to find other avenues for meeting their needs.

#### **Case Study: I Thought We Had an Agreement**

John and Joe had worked together for eight years as business associates. Joe wrote a book and created a video series based largely on material that John had created. John wanted to be supportive of Joe's career and at the same time receive credit for his contribution. They agreed that Joe would reference him in the video, which would also contribute to John's reputation. This would be a win/win solution for all. At least, this is what John thought they agreed to do.

Later, the producers of the show pointed out to Joe that such an acknowledgment could detract from his own credibility, so Joe did not include it in the program. When John learned that Joe had deleted his acknowledgement of John's contribution and that John's name was not mentioned on the program, John was infuriated. They used the Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements to try to reach a solution that would be supportive to both.

The facts were clear, the opinions were clear, the emotional reactions were clear. But they both had a fundamental disagreement about making and keeping agreements. Joe made a unilateral decision that pursuit of his own professional goals would produce more successful results for him than would collaboration with his associate. John did continue working with Joe for as long as he believed it would contribute to his own professional goals. They discussed the acknowledgment issue repeatedly. However, they eventually dissolved their business relationship because of this fundamental disagreement in belief, and the resulting lack of trust.

If John had clearly used the Five Levels of Communication and the Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement before entering the agreement with Joe, he might have been able to clarify the misunderstanding before it began. He might not have been able to change Joe's mind or prevent him

from acting as he did. But at least John would have been more aware of their fundamental disagreements, and may have chosen not to take the risk of giving Joe access to his material.

**This Technique Is Not The Holy Grail**

The Stages of Creating A Supportive Agreement will not remove all conflicts or disagreements. Sometimes the differences are too great, or the conflict has progressed to the point where a higher authority is required to provide a solution. However, using this model can resolve the fifty to ninety percent of conflicts that are caused by misunderstandings, and can also build a firm foundation for resolving most differences. Even when the differences are too great, it provides a constructive method for moving through the discomfort and establishing a clear change in the relationship.