



Person-to-Person Communications: Models and Applications

presented to the
Pacific Northwest Software Quality Conference



by

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**Building State-of-the-Art Teamwork
In Problem-Solving Organizations**

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A note on format

- Underlined items are live links to articles on my Web site or elsewhere
- To get a copy with working links, go to:
<http://tinyurl.com/26rs5g2>
- To get a copy of the handout, go to:
<http://tinyurl.com/2abmgoy>
- To get both as a ZIP archive:
<http://tinyurl.com/2f29szc>

Core Message

- Person-to-person communications are complex
 - Problems that do arise are difficult to fix
 - Prevention is easier than repair
- We do better when we slow down
- We have little control over what others do with what we say
- How we cope with what we don't like does matter
- Communications within groups can determine their effectiveness

Work on preventing problems by changing our inner processes

How we'll work together

- We'll be dealing with some personal stuff
- To go for the gold we need safety
- Some norms that I need
 - Non-attribution
 - Suspend judgment
 - Do no harm
- Some norms you need:

Learning is the art of acquiring new ideas

- Whatever you've been doing is the best you know how
- Honor what you know as good
- You might someday learn something better
- Your toolbox isn't full—you can add new things without discarding the old

The menu

- Communication as a process
 - What are communications?
 - Examples of problem communications
- Levels of communication
 - Self: How we cope with what we don't want
 - Other: A model of human interaction
 - Group: Communication in meetings
- A technique for surfacing Truth

What are communications?

- A process in which information is *exchanged*
- Requires a common system of tokens:
symbols, signs or behavior
 - Pheromones in insects
 - Words, expressions, body language in humans

When we do well, we
communicate *with* each other.

Examples of problem communications

- Living the catastrophic expectation
- Implied accusations
- The Tweaking CC
- Commitment by implication
- Mind-reading
- Culture/gender/generational differences
- Hat-hanging
- Mistakes

Living the catastrophic expectation



- Receive an email query “how did we decide this?”
- Respond with defense of the outcome
- Problem:
 - The query asked only about the decision process
 - The response went immediately to defending an attack on the decision

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Living the catastrophic expectation can shift us into a high-stress mode unnecessarily

Implied accusations



- An accusation presumed as true and contained within another statement
- Examples:
 - I will agree to invite you to the meeting, if you will agree to be polite and not interrupt other people
 - You can join the team if you agree not to pout if your ideas are not accepted

Implied accusations can put your communication partner on the defensive

The Tweaking CC



- The tweaking CC is a pressure tactic
- A CC to the recipient's supervisor or other powerful people
- Message usually contains embarrassing information

Pressuring your communication partner rarely has the intended effect

Commitment by implication



- Someone else rephrases your words so as to commit you to something you didn't intend
- Example:
 - You said: "Yes, I'll get you a few names—not many—soon."
 - Response: "Great! I'll take quality over quantity any time!"

Commitments are real
only if they are made with freedom

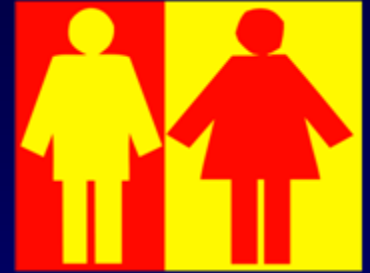
Mind-reading



- None of us can *really* read minds
- We just *think* we can
 - “You’re only saying that because you want me to agree with you”
 - “I don’t believe that because you would never do that unless there was more in it for you”
- Conclusions based on mind-reading are suspect

Mind-reading is so pervasive
that we no longer recognize it as such

Culture/gender/generational differences



- We all use similar communication forms
- Different cultures and sexes attach different meanings to the same forms
 - “Would you like to”
 - Politeness/wimpiness

When we assume that communication tokens have universal meanings, we're headed for trouble

Hat-hanging



- People we meet sometimes match up with people we knew long ago (parents, old bosses, etc.)
- We tend to attribute characteristics of people we knew then to people we know now
- Basis of advertising and con games

Hat-hanging is very difficult to detect
and almost always a disaster

Mistakes

- We're all imperfect
- We make “simple” mistakes, especially under stress
- When our communication partners are also under stress:
 - They interpret the mistake on as-if-intended basis
 - This is also a mistake



Mistakes, especially under stress,
can damage a relationship irreparably

What we learn from all these problems

- Person-to-person communication is riddled with problems
- The possibilities for defects seem endless
- Fixing defects in this system is a lot harder than fixing a production process
- To improve quality, work at a deep level

A case-by-case approach is unlikely to make a measurable difference—too many cases

Levels of communications

- Within the self
 - Personal, emotional
 - Delivery technique
 - Interpretation technique
- Between two people
 - Negotiation
 - Conflict resolution
- Among many people
 - Meetings, discussions, debate
 - Mass communications
 - Image management

Self

Other

Context

Communications at the level of Self

- Before we consider interaction, make sure our inner process is effective
- Tools for improving our inner process
 - Awareness of our freedoms
 - Awareness of our coping strategies

Mastering communications
at the level of Self really pays off

Our Five Freedoms

- The freedom to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, was or will be
- The freedom to say what one feels and thinks, instead of what one should
- The freedom to feel what one feels, instead of what one should
- The freedom to ask for what one wants, instead of always waiting for permission
- The freedom to take risks in one's own behalf, instead of choosing to be only “secure” and not rocking the boat

Some communications bring us bad news

- When we learn about something we don't like, we must *cope*
- To *cope with* problems and difficulties is to deal with them or maybe to try to resolve them
- How we cope determines how we communicate

We all have to cope with reality

- We receive messages from the world
- We process those messages
- Some are not what we would like
- We cope
- We respond on the basis of our coping

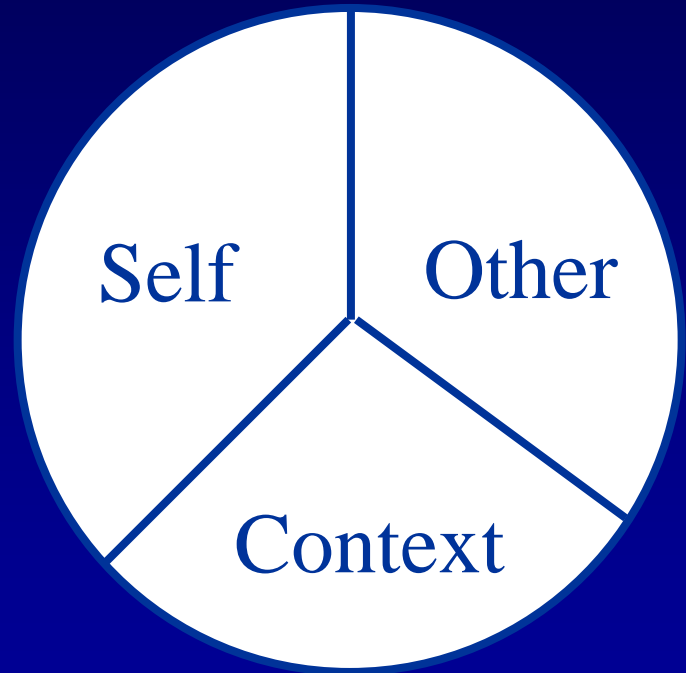
When our coping has balanced regard for all elements of reality, and it is emotionally honest, it is *congruent*.

Coping stances

- Blaming: “You’re always late!”
- Placating: “Whatever you say, I’ll get it done.”
- Love/hate:
- Super-reasonable: “I’ll work 24/7 if needed.”
- Narcissistic: “I’m God’s gift to this company.”
- Infatuated: “We’re lucky he’s in charge.”
- Irrelevant: “What’s for lunch?”
- Congruent: “It’s not perfect, but

Coping stances and elements of reality

Congruent coping has balanced regard for Self, Other and Context



Incongruent coping stances and reality



Blaming



Love/Hate



Infatuated



Placating



Narcissistic

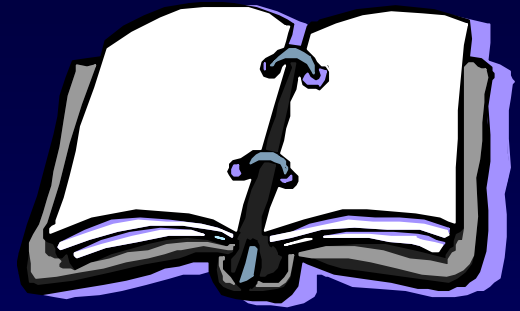


Super-reasonable



Irrelevant

Homework: keep a coping journal

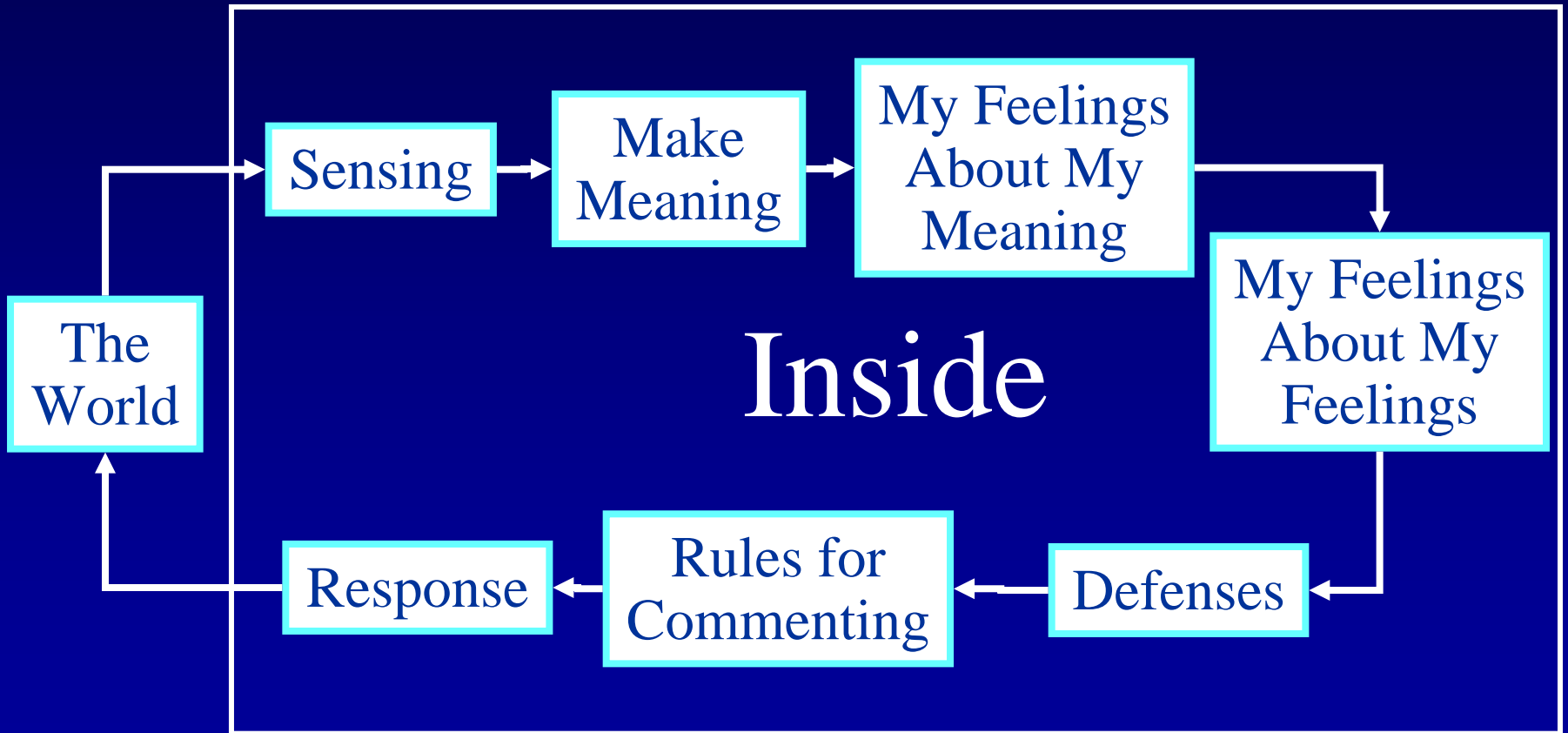


- When we cope incongruently, we often experience strong feelings
- Keep a little journal for a week
- When you notice strong feelings, make a note of what was going on
- At day's end write no more than one page about it. Note what your coping stance was.
- Read your journal at the end of the week

Communication with Other: Interaction

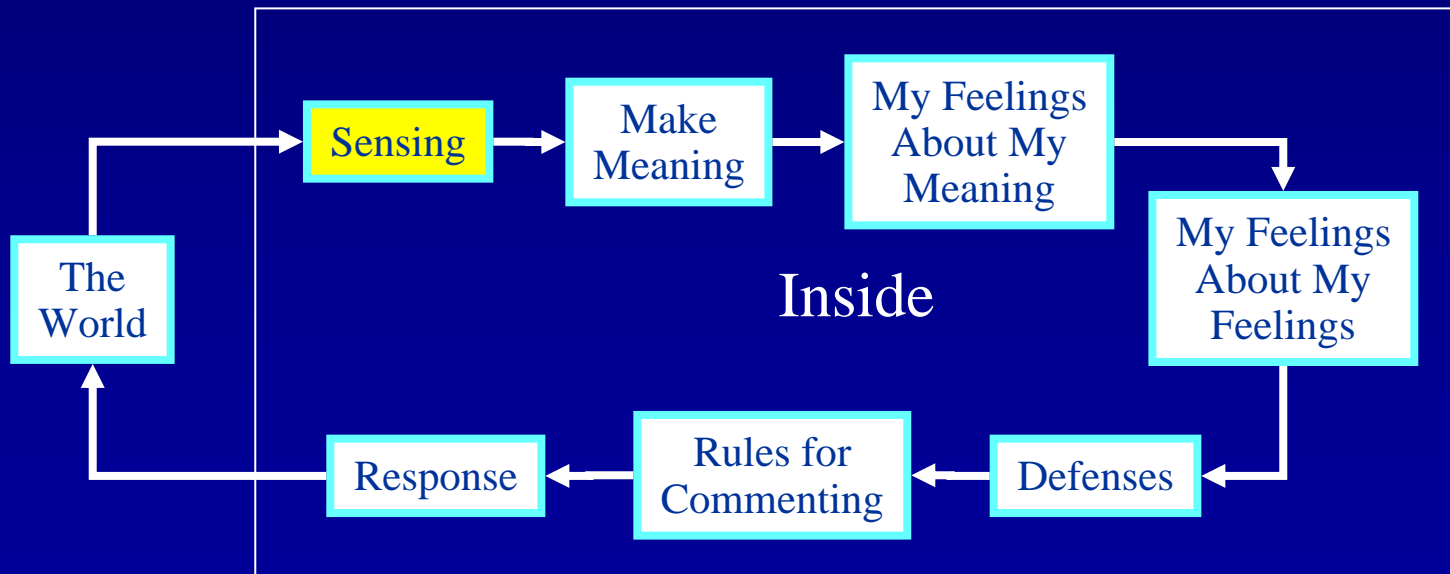
- When we converse:
you talk, I talk, you talk, etc.
- But it's way more complex than that
- Things happen inside us
- To improve effectiveness of communication:
 - Create a system model of the inside and the outside
 - Use the model to understand defects
 - Devise approaches to limit the occurrence of defects

A model of human interaction



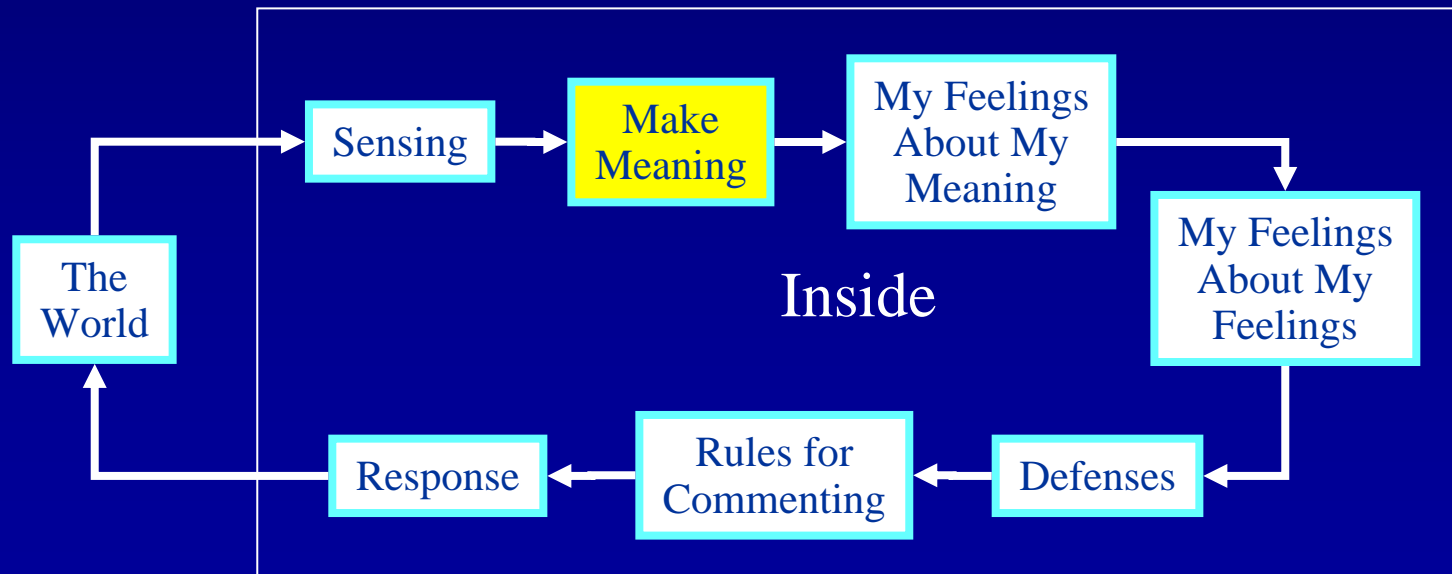
Example: Sensing

- Taking in data through the senses
- “She fidgeted as she spoke, and backtracked several times.”



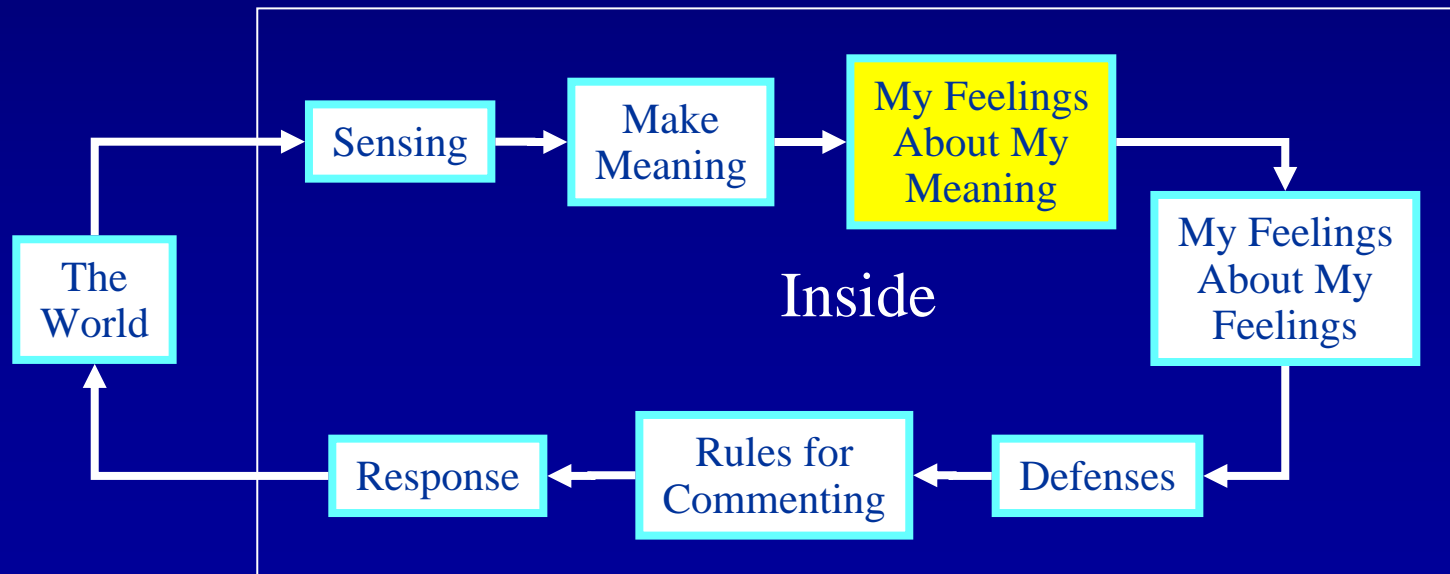
Example: Make meaning

- Making meaning of the data we take in
- “She seemed nervous and unsure of what she was talking about”



Example: My feelings about my meaning

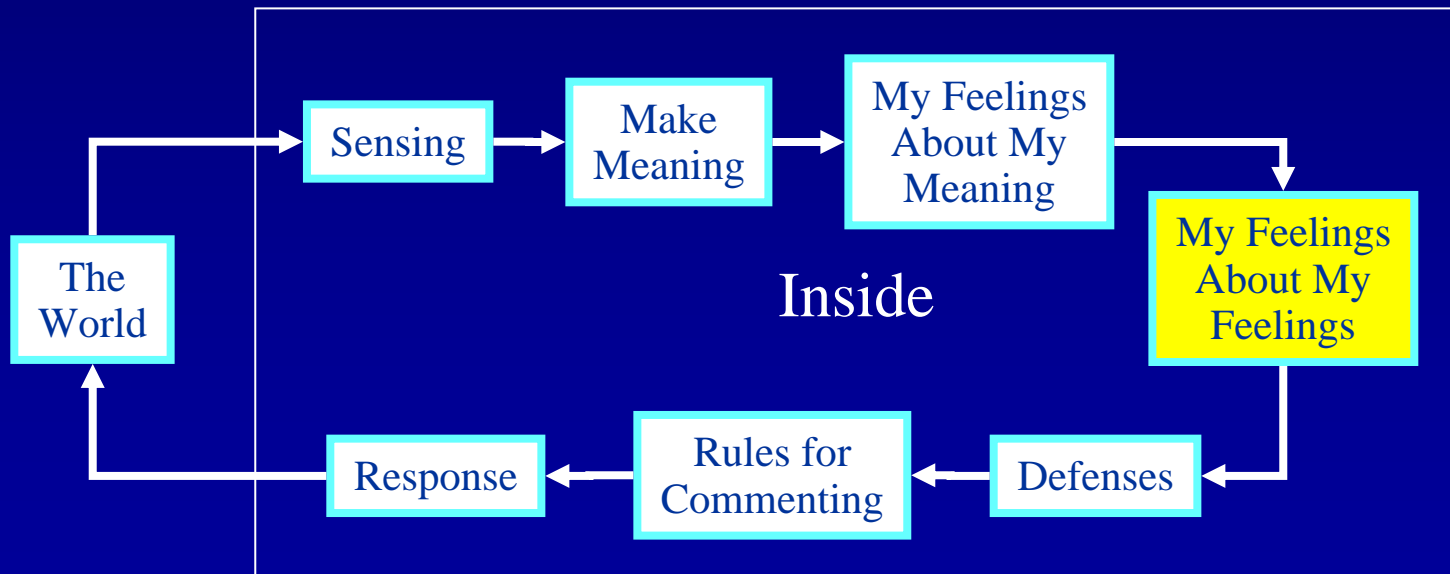
- How we feel about the meaning we made from the data
- “I feel bad for her and want to help her if I can.”



Example:

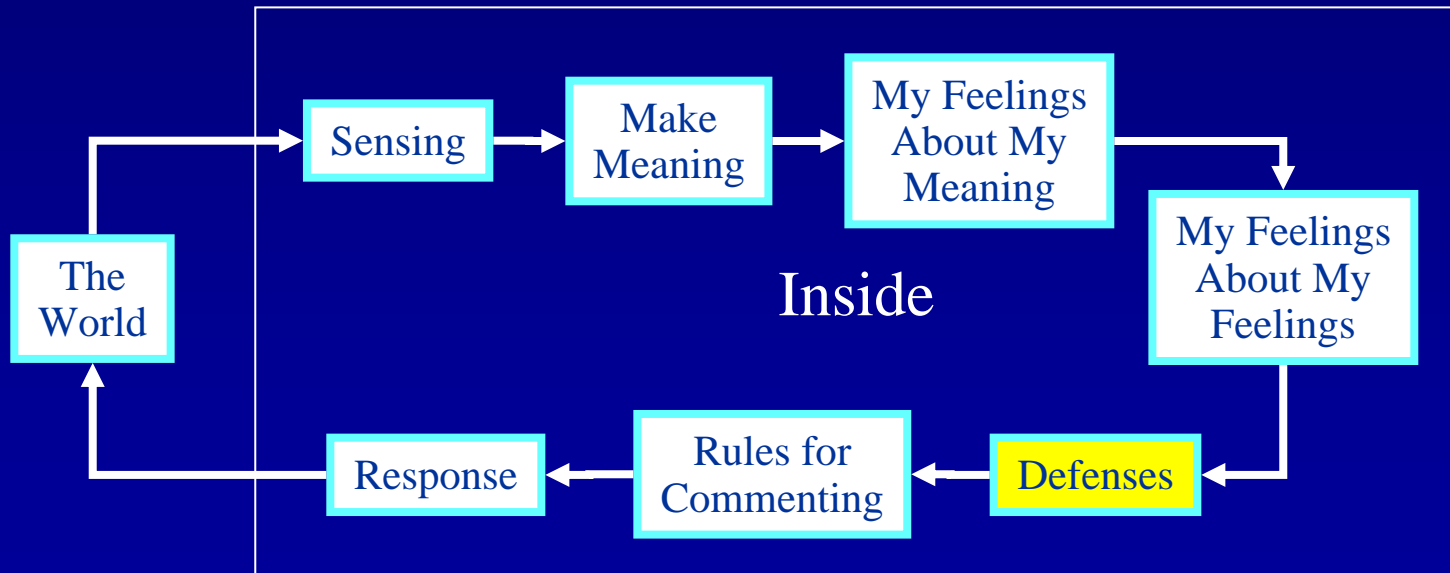
My feelings about my feelings

- How we feel about having those feelings
- “I shouldn’t want to help her. I feel guilty about wanting to.”



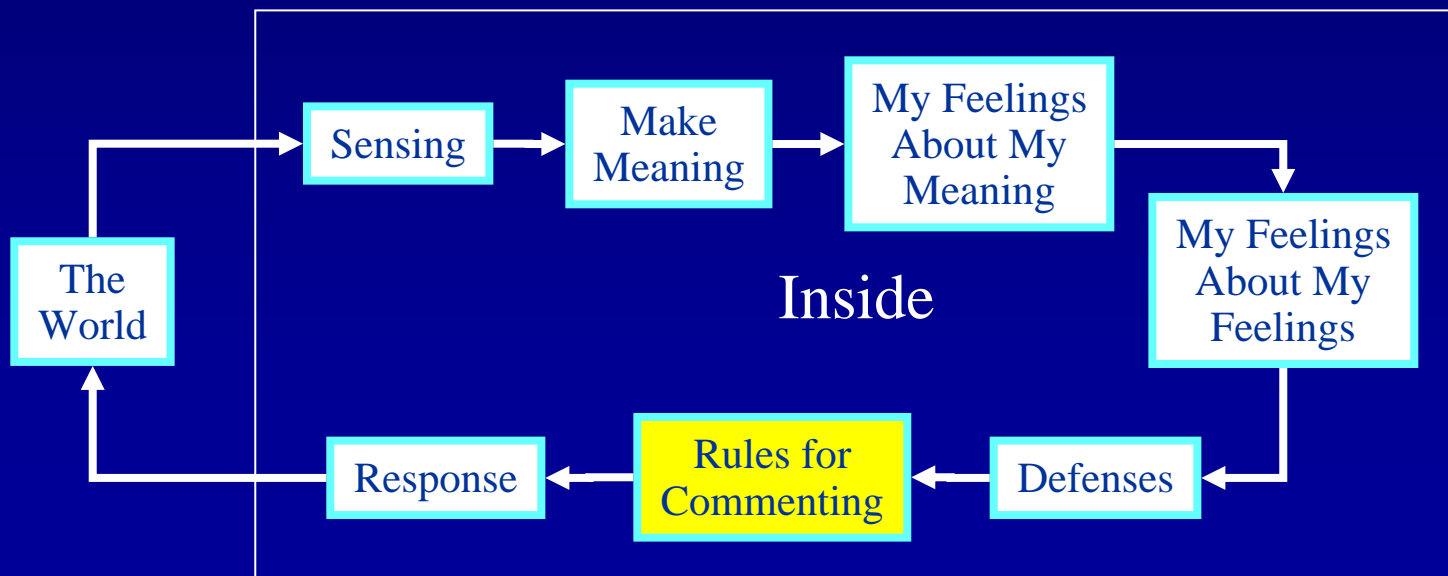
Example: My defenses

- Protection from our own feelings “I’m angry about being sympathetic. There will be none of that.”



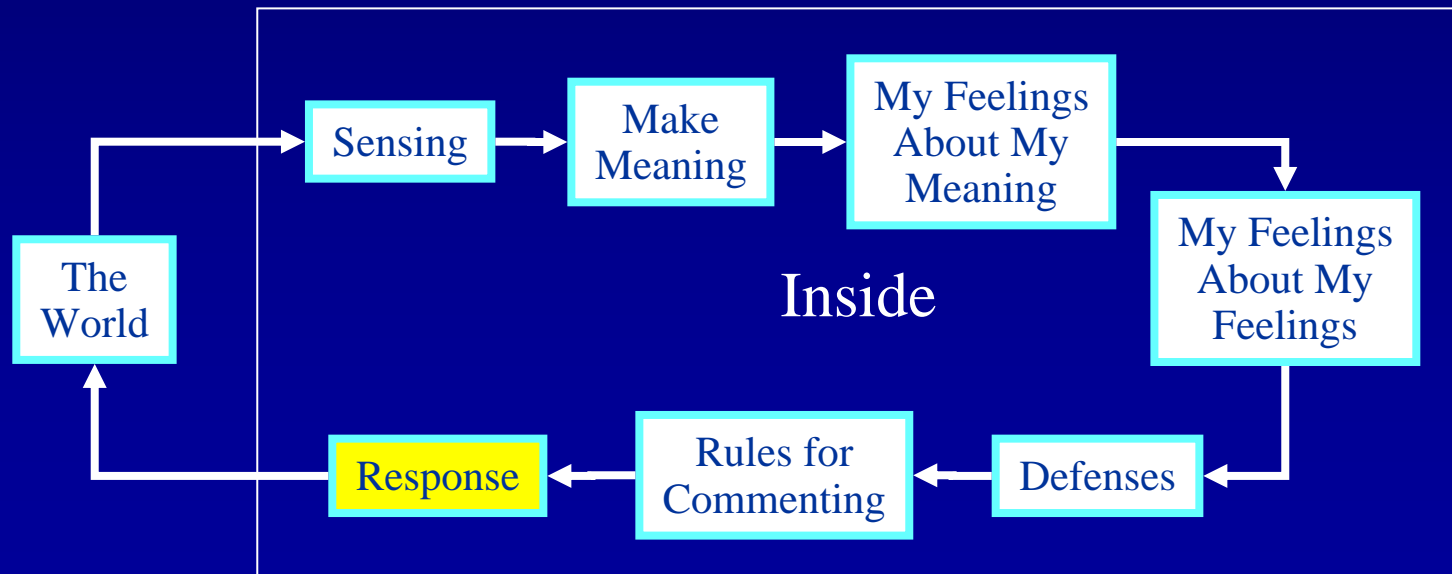
Example: My rules for commenting

- Rules governing disclosure to others
- “I must not let anyone know that I feel sympathy. I must be tough.”

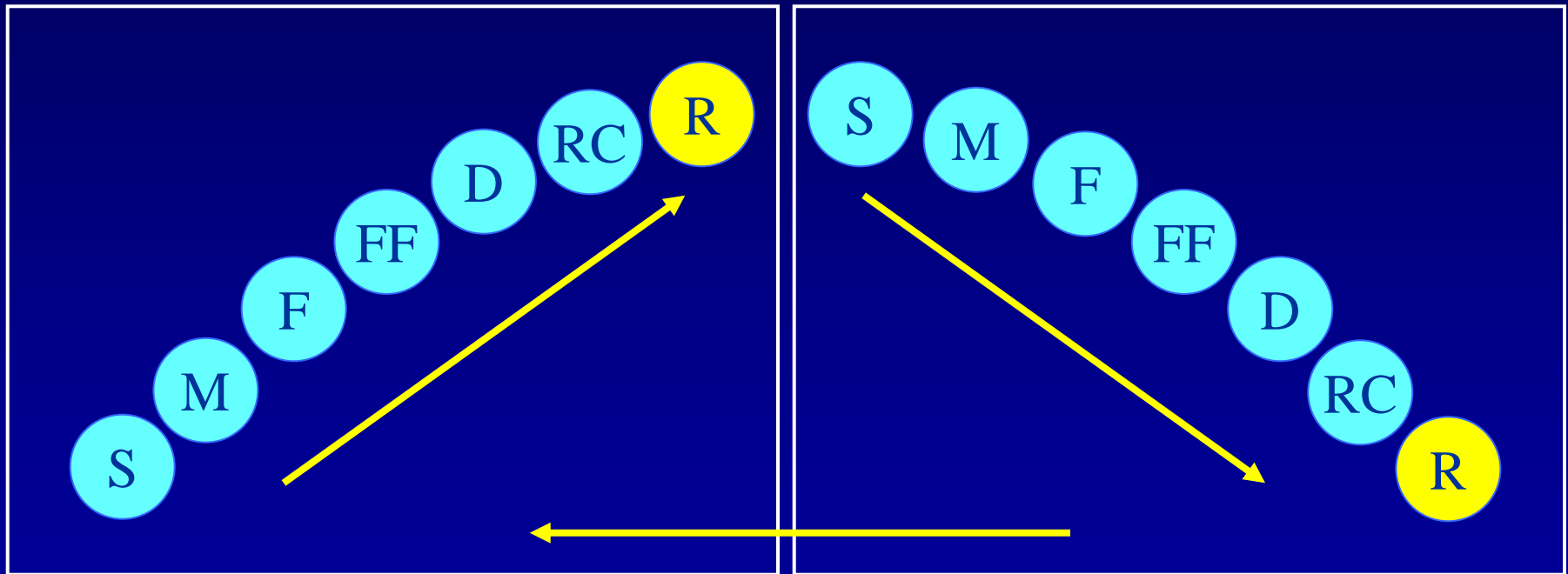


Example: My response

- What we do about what we took in, subject to the constraints of our rules and defenses
- “Pull yourself together!”

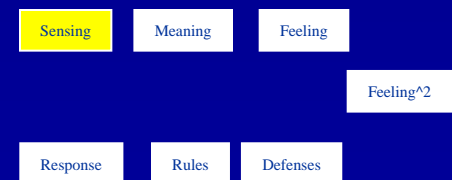


Exercise: Interaction model



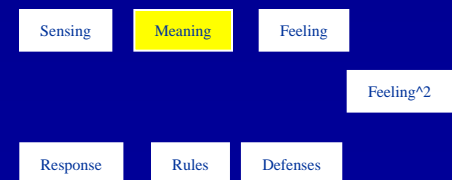
Errors and interventions: Sensing

- Errors
 - Not seeing what is here
 - Seeing what is not here
- Interventions
 - Center
 - Breathe
 - Five Freedoms
 - Retrospectives



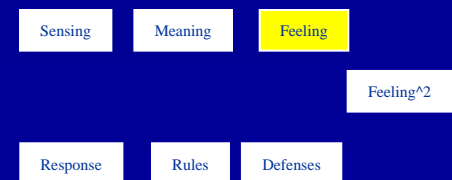
Errors and interventions: Meaning

- Errors
 - Attributing my meanings instead of yours
 - “Rushing” to a meaning without considering alternatives
 - Mind-reading, hat-hanging
- Interventions
 - Data question: “What did I see or hear that I used to make that meaning?”
 - Rule of three: think of three possible meanings



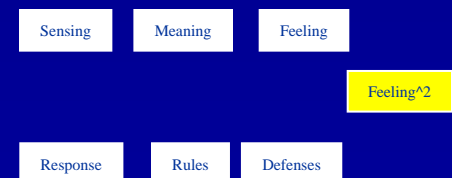
Errors and interventions: Feelings about meaning

- Errors
 - Feeling about a meaning like (but not the same as) the actual meaning
 - Extrapolated meanings—living the catastrophic expectation
- Interventions
 - Slow down
 - Ask: “What meaning did I notice that I used to let myself feel that way?”
 - Be here now



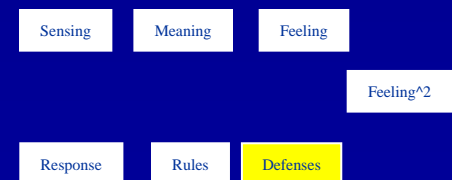
Errors and interventions: Feelings about feelings

- Errors
 - I feel bad that I feel like that
 - I will not feel that feeling
- Interventions
 - Five freedoms: I am free to feel what I feel
 - All feelings are valid
 - “Stuffing” isn’t possible



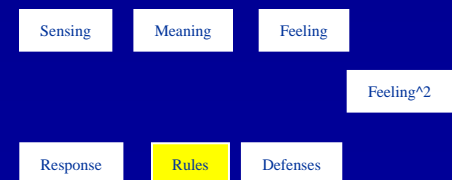
Errors and interventions: Defenses

- Errors
 - I shouldn't have these feelings
 - I (you) should not do (say, think, ...) that
- Interventions
 - Know your survival rules
 - Transform rules into guidelines



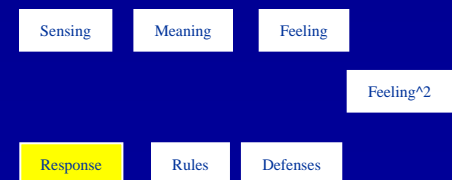
Errors and interventions: Rules for commenting

- Errors
 - Rules for commenting prevent collaborative exploration of problems
 - “I must not comment” becomes “I must not feel”
- Interventions
 - Five Freedoms
 - Transform rules into guidelines



Errors and interventions: Response

- Errors
 - Knee-jerk responses keyed on past experience
 - Creativity limitations; habits
 - Pressure, blaming, manipulation
- Interventions
 - Slow down
 - Center
 - Conscious awareness prevents knee-jerk response



Homework: Interaction model

- Find an interaction at work that stirred up emotions
- Try to reconstruct the part of the interchange that got hot
- Play out the interaction model—what happened in each step?

Communications at the level of Context

- Groups, meetings, email discussion lists
- Non-human factors
 - Communication medium
 - Environment
 - Law, regulation, policy, security

The larger the audience, the more
significant Context is

Communication and meetings

- Knowing the failure modes helps reduce their frequency
- Agree on names for the modes
- Agree on a way to call a “process check”
- Track incidence of failure modes organizationally



Some failure modes for meetings

- Muzzling
- Running on and on and on
- Reruns
- Tree slaughter
- Serial status report
- Duels and explosions
- Interruptions
- Information hoarding
- Rhetorical fallacies

Muzzling

- Muzzling is the practice of stifling comments by certain individuals
- Often used for political advantage
- Techniques
 - Abuse of the parking lot
 - Preferential recognition
 - Commentary by the chair

Muzzling deprives the group of alternate points of view

Running on and on

- Long commentary with low issue density
- Excessively formal presentations
- PowerPoint abuse
 - Gratuitous graphics, video, animation
 - Unnecessary background content
- Excessive detail that almost nobody will ever remember

Sometimes the chair/group *wants* to chew up time

Reruns

- Plowing over already-plowed ground
- Recapping material
 - From previous meetings
 - From other sources
- Requiring reports from attendees who have nothing to report (again)

Use the “cockpit principal”:
Let me know if anything changes

Tree slaughter

- Here's a still-warm slide-for-slide copy of my presentation
- Keep the slide-to-page ratio as high as possible
 - Page flipping by others distracts the audience
 - Page flipping requires attention
- Not all slides need to be in the handout
- Use printer settings to increase slide-to-page ratio



Serial status report

- We each, in turn, take 2-3 minutes to report that everything is under control
- Brutal honesty is rare
- Instead of status:
 - Report issues
 - Report future risks

Success is not news—at least, it shouldn't be

Duels and explosions

- Sometimes a pair will polarize
 - Emotions are involved
 - If chronic, it can become a duel that transcends the meeting context
- Rarely are the players restricted to the pair
- The problem is never the problem
- Long-term solution is intervention
 - Best: an outside facilitator
 - Alternate: The two respective supervisors
 - 2nd alternate: The lowest shared supervisor

Interruptions

- When we interrupt each other
 - We disrespect each other
 - We deprive the group of a chance to hear each other's contributions
- A sidebar isn't an interruption—it's disorder
- Don't interrupt yourself
- Repeat offenders must be dealt with
 - Interrupting others is a performance issue
 - Failure to address the problem is a performance issue for management

Information hoarding

- Practice of withholding info until the meeting
- Especially “unpleasant news”
- It’s unethical
 - It’s disrespectful to attendees
 - It prevents attendees from preparing responses
 - It makes the meeting less productive
 - It stifles discussion

Distribute information in advance.
Give people time to mull it over.

Rhetorical fallacies

- Any of dozens of deceptive debating techniques
- All fallacies carry risk
 - They cloud reasoning
 - They lead to bad decisions
- Examples:
 - Straw man
 - *Ad hominem*
 - Slippery slope
 - False dichotomy
 - False cause

Straw man rhetorical fallacy



- Technique: exaggerate partner's premise, then refute the exaggeration
- Warning signs:
 - Feeling the need to say "I never said..."
 - Someone characterizes a position, then draws inferences
- When you see a position being characterized:
 - Call a halt
 - Check that everyone is OK with the characterization

Ad hominem rhetorical fallacy

- Attacking the advocate, not the position
- “Your estimate was wrong before, so this one is probably wrong too”
- Defending yourself against *ad hominem* is *very* difficult
- When you see an *ad hominem*, on someone else
 - Call a process check
 - Get consensus on whether it is *ad hominem*
 - If it is, backtrack

Bystanders are best able to deal with *ad hominem*

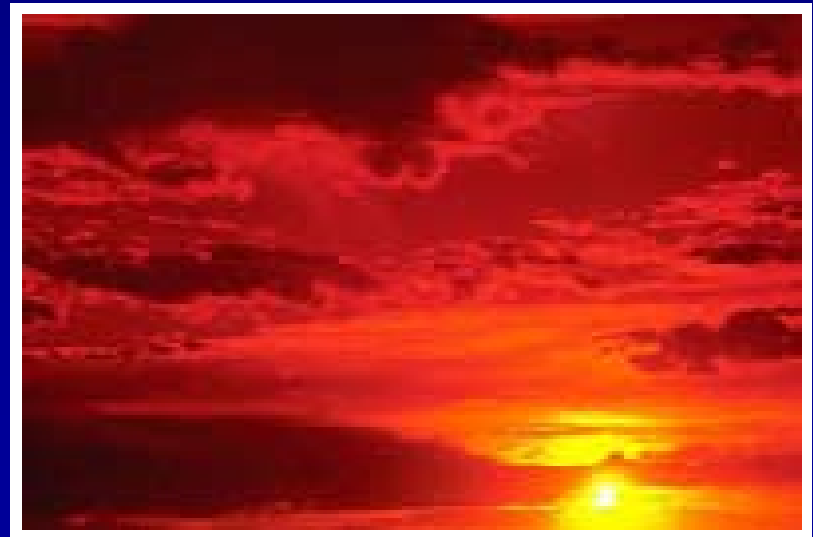
Slippery slope rhetorical fallacy

- Technique:
 - If we accept your premise, then we'd have to accept my exaggerated form of your premise
 - Usually the exaggerated form is scary
- “If we include these fixes, we'll have to include the whole B list, and we'll be a year late.”
- Check carefully: Is the conclusion correct?

False dichotomy rhetorical fallacy

- “Black-and-white” thinking
 - The only solution to a problem is an extreme and over-simplified path
 - Often stated elegantly—that’s part of the deception
- “You’re either part of the solution, or part of the problem”

Think in living color



False cause rhetorical fallacy

- Mistaking proximity for cause
 - Correlation isn't cause
 - Time sequence isn't cause
- Example:
 - Every project you've managed has been late and every other project has been on time
 - Neglected to mention: you get all the high risk projects

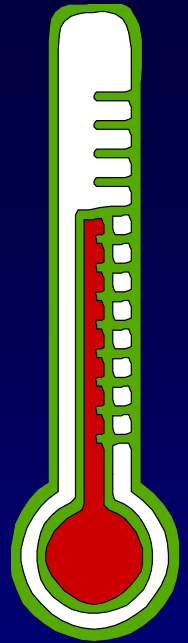
This one is especially insidious

A technique for surfacing Truth

- Truth isn't always evident
 - Sometimes we're afraid to reveal it
 - Sometimes we don't know that others are unaware
 - Sometimes it good news, but we're uncomfortable
- We can provide a structure that makes it easier to reveal truth
- Virginia Satir: The Temperature Reading

What is a Temperature Reading?

- Structured conversation for a group
- Five parts:
 - Appreciations and excitements
 - Complaints with recommendations for change
 - New information
 - Puzzles
 - Hopes and wishes
- When you want to make a contribution:
 - Facilitator recognizes you
 - You come to the front of the room
 - You can request others join you if you wish
- No comments about contributions



Appreciations and excitements

- This section is first because it builds positivity
- You can express appreciation for
 - A specific person
 - A group
 - Anything—even the Law of Gravity

Complaints with recommendations for change

- Complain about anything
 - Things that bother us
 - Things we find irritating
- Gives everyone a chance to get the group's attention
- Recommendation of something to change
 - Should address the complaint
 - This would be better if...

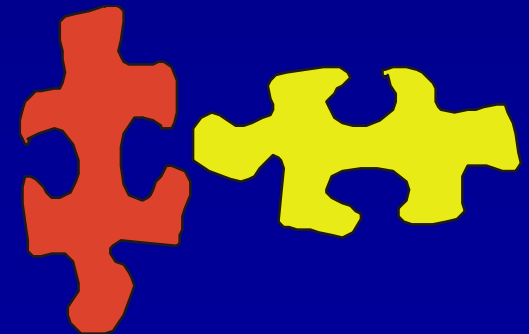
New information



- Anything you know that you think:
 - Others don't know
 - Others would find helpful to know
- Tends to trigger others to offer related news
- Revealing new information
 - Can resolve problems before they cause trouble
 - Can prevent situations from becoming problems

Puzzles

- Sometimes we're reluctant to reveal our puzzles
- Sometimes we don't realize we have puzzles
- Often what puzzles us puzzles others too
- Revealing the puzzle can
 - Send the group in a profitable direction
 - Motivate others to reveal or seek answers or useful info



Hopes and wishes

- Expressing our dreams gives us energy to make them real
- Any hope or wish is OK
 - The project, the company, the world
 - The team
 - Yourself
- When we exchange our dreams, we make it easier to help each other to achieve them

Exercise: a temperature reading

Final Word

- Much communication training emphasizes repair (e.g., conflict resolution)
- The real payoff is in damage avoidance
- We cannot control
 - What others communicate
 - What others do with what we say/do
- We *can* control
 - What *we* do
 - What *we* communicate

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