



## SOLVING COMPLEX PROBLEMS RELYING ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

An ancient process of discernment that leads to sane and unified actions

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### Five Stages for developing sane, unified actions

For eons, humans have struggled to find cooperative ways of living together. In this present culture of anger, fear and opposition--where we accuse and blame one another from solidified positions—we have rendered ourselves powerless to solve the issues that afflict us in communities and organizations. Shouting at one another from our self-sealed positions and echo chambers, we have lost the capacity to work together to resolve the complex problems that are creating more and more suffering.

This five-stage process originated in ancient Tibet as the Four Karmas (actions). It demands *deep inquiry*: we rely on differences of experience and perception in order to discern actions that might bring sanity to addressing the issue. It requires *humility*: we honor the fact that no one person or group has the answer (not even me). It requires *appreciation*: the experiences of all stakeholders are essential to understanding the complexity of the issue. It requires *patience*: we take the time to understand diverse perspectives. It develops *insight*: we open to collective intelligence that arises as we work well together.

### This process is based on assumptions that underpin any healthy group process:

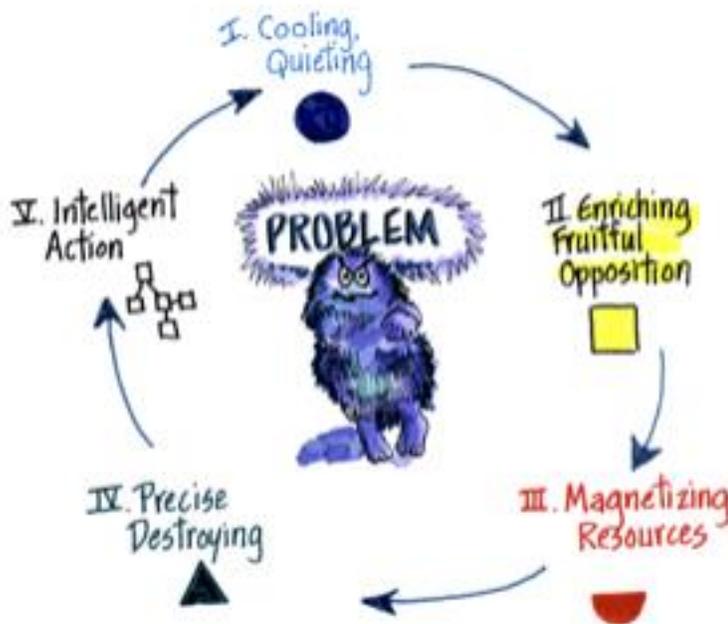
- Certainty is the source of positional conflicts; curiosity creates possibilities and new relationships
- All perspectives are essential but not sufficient --no one person or group understands the problem sufficiently
- Every perspective, prejudice, and opinion offers information

- Everybody is an expert about their own experience
- Respectful listening creates space for both relationships and insights
- People support what they create; engagement is a necessity
- Diversity is a life-saving blessing, not a problem

### Five stages to solving complex problems

In these processes, the problem sits in the middle. *We are engaged together* in developing a rich understanding of its complexity and, from that shared understanding, discerning wise actions.

There are five separate activities to complete in sequence. The sequence is important, although one stage may require a lot of time and other stages are moved through more quickly. This depends on the participants and the nature of the problem.



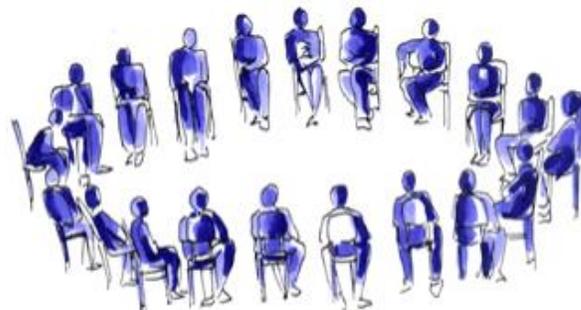
- I. Cooling, Quieting
- II. Enriching through Fruitful Opposition
- III. Magnetizing Resources
- IV. Precise Destroying
- V. Intelligent Action

These five stages are depicted here as a cycle because they work developmentally, one stage creating the conditions for the next. This developmental sequence, however, can sometimes be gone through very quickly, or a group might spend a great deal of time in one stage and move rapidly through the next. Each stage has a form associated with it, a geometric shape that indicates the nature of the work to be done. These are illustrative although, if meeting in person, it is quite helpful to seat people in these shapes. Also, there are different core behaviors that facilitate the inquiry for each stage.

### Stage One: Cooling, Quieting

Imagine your most recent experience in a conflicted situation. Most likely, people were arguing their position, not listening, raising their voices, acting out, doing power plays—in essence, acting aggressively. Nothing positive ever results from this continued conflict, yet we stay in it, unwilling to abandon the drama. Now imagine what might have been possible if someone had intervened with a process to lessen the drama, to cool down the situation. This first stage does just that, by using an ancient, pacifying form: the circle.

The circle is the shape that cools, quiets, pacifies (makes peaceful). It is the form of equality, the most common and enduring form of human meeting. Circles have been found from about 1.5 million years ago (!) as early human ancestors sat around fires, trying to get warm. The equality of the circle was very important even then. Had they sat in a rectangle or any other form, some of them would have frozen!



COOLING, QUIETING  
CORE BEHAVIORS: CURIOSITY & PATIENCE

To pacify a highly conflicted group, you have to move into a circle (or a number of small circles.) As soon as you sit in this form and it becomes clear that everyone will have a chance to speak, things quiet down. Anyone who persists in being dramatic or loud in a circle soon looks like a fool. Circles create soothing space, where even reticent people can realize that their voice is welcome. As the drama drains, people will still speak passionately, but more quietly and earnestly.

The process is quite straightforward. You go around the circle and everyone who wants to speak does so, in turn, and within a limited time period. People who choose not to speak may pass and contribute later if they like. As each person speaks, everyone else is silent, listening as best they can. People may ask questions if they don't understand something being said, but this is not the time for exchanges or debates. The task is to have each voice heard, for each person to make a contribution to the circle.

There are many benefits to this process of listening. The first is that good listeners are created as people feel listened to. Listening is a reciprocal process—we become more attentive to others if they have attended to us. We are often surprised when people truly listen to us. Their unexpected acceptance encourages us to listen better.

The second benefit is that listening brings people together. You can see this happening physically in a circle. As people quiet down and get more engaged, they lean in. The circle becomes tighter. The room gets quieter, the volume decreases substantially, yet the intensity of listening is palpable.

And as we listen, we develop greater awareness that each of us is human, struggling with life's challenges. One adage describes this: "You can't hate someone whose story you know." We may never agree on an issue, or share the same values, but as soon as we realize there's a person behind the position, we become more open to them, less reactive.

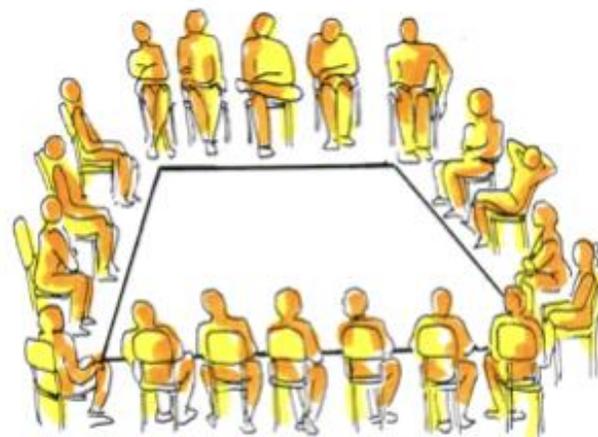
The purpose of first quieting, calming, and pacifying is to develop a richer appreciation of the complexity of the problem, using a process that begins to bring people together. Every person has a somewhat different perspective, by virtue of individual differences, and also because we each sit in a different part of the organization or community. The world doesn't look exactly the same to any two people, and circle provides the form to gather many different perspectives without as much judgment or defensiveness.

The core behaviors of this first process are patience and curiosity. We have to be willing to give up our soap boxes and become curious about others' perspectives. And we have to be patient—it takes time to go round a circle and give everyone equal time. If we become impatient, it's an indication that we're still holding onto our position. We just want to get this over with so we can win using more aggressive approaches. But usually, what's being said by others begins to awaken our curiosity. We learn things we didn't know, and develop more awareness of how other people are affected by the problem under consideration.

## Stage Two: Enriching, Fruitful Opposition

After the initial process of cooling and quieting, it's essential to return to the source of the conflict, which is people's different perspectives and positions. In order to understand a problem in its complexity, we have to learn much more about it. We achieve this understanding by giving each person or position ample opportunity to explain their reasoning in depth. What's required here is to amplify the differences as the means to create a fuller, detailed appreciation of the situation or problem. We are seeking to enrich our understanding from the realization that no one person or position has a sufficient picture of what's going on.

To create this differentiation and depth, it helps to sit around a square table, to literally "take sides." People need to choose which side they're on (more than four sides is fine, as long as it doesn't go beyond an octagon. And people can switch sides as the process evolves.) You can also do this seated as an audience, with each side presenting from the front. The fact that most public forums use such a form explains why they only increase conflict and entrenched positions. They begin by amplifying differences, rather than quieting and calming the situation. If you begin with taking sides, it's guaranteed that you will only exacerbate the conflict.



ENRICHING, FRUITFUL OPPOSITION  
CORE BEHAVIORS: RESPECT & CLEAR THINKING

Each side is responsible for developing their position in depth. This is not the time for sloganeering or campaigning. The task is to go deeply into the rationale and logic of each position. It is important to keep the exploration of each side separate—we are not seeking compromise, blending of views, consensus or negotiations. Each position has its own logic, and the goal is to develop the unique integrity of each side.

Respect and clear thinking are the core behaviors of this stage. We listen attentively, even to those that we profoundly disagree with. Such respect is easier now that people have sat in circle together and developed more rapport and patience. Respect also means that we're open to the possibility that we'll hear something useful from our opponents. We are willing to be curious that others have insight and wisdom that are useful to the group.

And clear thinking is essential. We move away from emotions (no matter how much we care about the issue) and instead use reason to develop greater clarity about what's going on. We want to clear away the fog created by our emotional investment in the issue. As each side presents its analysis of the problem, others simply listen. After a while, the inherent complexity of the situation becomes quite evident. Often, people are overwhelmed as they realize just how complex things really are. But this overwhelm is of great benefit, because it moves people off of their certainty platforms. Confused and overwhelmed, we become open to new interpretations and possibilities. Confusion often has a helpful companion, humility. Thus, confusion is the necessary precursor for letting go of entrenched positions.

At the end of this stage of differentiation and taking sides, you'll notice that people begin to move out of the square or audience form and begin to cluster in messier ways because they want to talk with each other. One paradoxical consequence of exploring differences is that groups emerge at the other end feeling somewhat unified. The boundaries of the different positions have lost their hardness, and people begin to talk together as one cohesive group, wanting to resolve the problem together. This feeling of cohesiveness is an essential pre-requisite for Stage Three, when it will be an important means to attract needed resources

### Stage Three: Magnetizing Resources

In magnetism, only opposites attract. Two magnets will repel apart if the same poles (or energy charge) are brought together. Yet when opposing magnetic poles are brought near each other, they snap together in a strong embrace. The same principle of attraction and rejection is relevant to this stage of problem-solving.

After progressing through the stages of Cooling and Enriching, it is common for people to feel good about working together as a group, to be humbled by the complexity of the issue, and to be energized to move forward in finding a solution. It's a complex array of predictable emotions. People will be both tired and motivated, confused yet confident. However, it's also common for people at this stage to want to launch into action planning. Taking action relieves us of the oppressive feelings of confusion and overwhelm. We are eager to do anything rather than linger longer in these uncomfortable states.

However, if actions are determined at this stage, generally they will be the wrong ones. We do not yet have a sufficient understanding of the issue's complexity to know what actions will be useful. If we rush into actions prematurely, we run the risk of setting in motion a long chain of unintended consequences. Stage Three takes us deeper into the issue, rather than letting us leap prematurely onto the stage of action.

The form that characterizes the work of Stage Three is a half circle, a very humbling symbol. It indicates that however far we've come in our understanding of the problem, we're only half-way there. Our comprehension of what's going on is still incomplete, and we need many more perspectives and information to complete the circle of understanding



As a result of working well through the first two processes, people feel more optimistic, confident that they can find the resources, information and support they need. And it's true that groups at this stage do attract what they need. The source of this attraction is the shared understanding and cohesiveness of the group. As real magnets, we're creating one pole of sufficient strength to attract its opposite. The bond amongst ourselves, and our clarifying picture of the problem, can now draw in what's missing. We will be able to attract an entirely new level of different and opposing points of view.

Generosity is also a core behavior of this stage. We're no longer working in a reactive, self-protective mode. We've developed stronger relationships with colleagues, and have increased our understanding. As our curiosity has grown, as we've moved out of our bunkers, it becomes easier to feel open and welcoming. Humbled that we know only half of what we need to know, it's easier to feel generous, welcoming new viewpoints and uncomfortable information.

To complete the circle of understanding, it can help to sit arrayed along the curve of a half-circle, facing out to the blank, uncompleted circle. You can put up flip charts or a white board in

the empty half of the circle. It's important to keep people focused on the blank space, not on each other. You can also draw a circle split down the middle. Fill in one side with a summary of your understanding. Leave the other side blank, to be filled in during this process.

A variety of questions help to fill in the blanks:

- o What else is out there?
- o Who else needs to be here?
- o What are we blind to, what can't we yet see?
- o What additional information and perspectives do we need?

In answering these questions, the group is creating its next piece of work. Whoever is identified as missing has to be invited into the group. Whatever information is lacking has to be researched and brought in for deliberation. Time is required to go find the people, ideas, and resources that have been identified. It is important for the group to set a realistic but efficient timeline for this work.

Our willingness to acknowledge that we only see half the picture creates the conditions that make us more attractive to others. The more sincerely we acknowledge our need for their different insights and perspectives, the more they will be magnetized to join us. As our humility and openness becomes evident, and as our generosity grows, word gets out that we're a good group to work with. This reputation also helps attract the people that we need to complete our circle of understanding.

#### Stage Four: Precise Destroying

Although we live in an aggressive culture, people often recoil from the word "destroying." Yet if we look honestly at what's going on in organizations, destroying is the most common response to organizational issues. And it's the first response, rather than being the last action after careful consideration of the situation. Too many organizations use weapons of mass destruction rather than smart bombs. These WMDs include sweeping budget cuts, where everything is reduced rather than intelligent decisions to cut back in specific areas. Or massive lay-offs. Or constant reorganizations that obliterate the most recent reorganization. We don't seem to know how to act with precision; instead we routinely resort to carpet bombing.

Destroying is a necessary function in life. Everything has its season, and all things eventually lose their effectiveness and die. We do as much harm holding onto programs and people past their natural life span as we do when we employ massive organizational air strikes. However,

destroying comes at the end of life's cycle, not as a first response. Hence it is Stage Four here, coming after deep, thoughtful analysis by a group that is thinking well together. At this stage, precision destroying is necessary to create more capacity for the work going forward. We can see now what small elements of the situation are impeding movement forward, what few things need to be let go of as they are no longer necessary or appropriate for the work we must do.

Many different things need to be considered for destruction: outmoded beliefs; inappropriate or harmful values; traditional practices that no longer make sense; habitual behaviors that are dysfunctional; aspects of the culture that impede future direction; programs that have outlived their usefulness; policies that don't work as intended; specific individuals who refuse to change or who block progress.

At this stage in the problem-solving process, we can be trusted to act with precision and discipline. We are no longer reacting defensively, intent on getting rid of people and things that threaten us. We have a very clear picture of the problem and are able to use this new found clarity to exercise real discernment. We act as intelligent and insightful contributors rather than as excluded or embattled members of the organization or community. We now are skilled enough to discern those small acts of destroying that will yield real benefit.



The form for Precision Destroying is the triangle. A triangle is a very stable structure, sitting on a broad base that supports its apex. The group can sit as a triangle, leaving the apex area open, with a flipchart or small whiteboard occupying that narrow point. Or people can draw a triangle and focus on the apex area. The core skills of this stage are discipline and discernment. We are restricted by the triangle to nominate only a small number of things to be destroyed in that narrow apex. We apply laser-like discernment to a very complex situation.

Precision destroying is naturally compassionate. We no longer act from self-defense, striking out at what we think harms us. We're clear about which things impede solutions, which small elements hold us back or burden us with the past. When we determine what to destroy, we do so from a profound appreciation of the problem. We do not act from fear or anger, but from clarity and compassion.

### Stage Five: Intelligent Action

This last stage is the reward for working through the first four. We are now a cohesive, smart group of people who have developed genuine perspective and depth about the problem under consideration. We have become good systems thinkers because we've included so many diverse and contrasting views and information in our analysis. We can't help but appreciate the dense interconnections and multiple dynamics at play in this situation. We've also developed very useful skills in working well together. We've become better listeners, become more open and curious, developed new thinking and analytic skills. We've also learned to work with people we had misunderstood, ignored, or feared. We've become a more intelligent, diverse, inclusive, and confident team, ready to go to work. The core behaviors of this stage are commitment and team-work. We don't have to create them or go off to be trained; they are the result of all the work we've done to get this far.

The form for this stage is any and all processes for engagement and teamwork. Now is the time to use the processes that people are familiar with: action planning, strategy setting, project planning, budgeting, measurement. These processes have an important role to play. What's been missing from them before is good thinking. Bored or exhausted, people have used them in rote fashion without insight or intelligence. Or they have been forced to use them in all situations, even those that make no sense. However, now these well-worn and tired processes can be infused with the light of clear thinking and the energy of strong commitment. Newly-developed insights can be used to intelligently determine which actions, measures, and strategies make the most sense. Empowerment will occur naturally, as people proceed to change and discard existing processes and methods that are dysfunctional or nonsensical.



INTELLIGENT ACTION CORE BEHAVIORS:  
COMMITMENT & TEAMWORK

It's important to note that leaders need to be prepared for big change. Once any group has developed this level of insight and rapport, they cannot be pushed back into small boxes or compliant behavior. With their intelligence awakened, people want to contribute, want to change things, want to make things happen. They will work with existing structures and processes, but they will be altering and adapting them as needed, almost without noticing. Too often, leaders fear a loss of control and attempt to rein in such a group. Their own fear pushes them back into aggressive patterns of command and control. However, the smart leader understands the level of accomplishment attained by this group and the depth of understanding now available. It is time to celebrate the fact that so much commitment and intelligence are now in active use in the organization.

When we can lay down our fear and anger and choose responses other than aggression, we create the conditions for bringing out the best in us humans. Without aggression, it becomes possible to think well, to be curious about differences, and to enjoy each other's company. Our energy finds new channels in creativity rather than defense. We learn that it is possible to feel passionate about a position without having to resist or out-manuever those with differing passions.

As we strive to make our organizations and communities work sanely in these difficult times, if we are to find true solutions to the problems that afflict us, it is essential that we understand the price we pay for our certainty and choice of aggressive methods. If we are to work together more intelligently, we will need to choose processes that evoke our curiosity, humility, generosity and wisdom. The ultimate benefit is that we learn that it is good, once again, to work together.

*Drawings by Nancy Margulies*