**The Left-Hand Column**

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**Step 1: Choosing a Problem**

Select a difficult problem you've been involved with during the last month or so, the kind of tough, interpersonal difficulty that many of us try to ignore.

* You can't reach agreement with your close associates.
* Someone else is not pulling his or her weight.
* You believe you are being treated unfairly.
* You believe your point of view is being ignored or discounted.
* The rest of the organization is resisting -- or you believe they resist -- a change you want to implement.
* You believe your team is not paying much attention to the most crucial problem.

Write a brief paragraph describing the situation. What are you trying to accomplish? Who or what is blocking you? What might happen?

**Step 2: The Right-Hand Column (What Was Said)**

Now recall a frustrating conversation you had over this situation -- or imagine the conversation that you would have if you brought up the problem.

In the right-hand column (see worksheet), write out the dialogue that actually occurred. Or write the dialogue you're pretty sure would occur if you were to raise this issue. The dialogue may go on for several pages. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished.

**Step 3: The Left-Hand Column (What You Were Thinking)**

Now in the left-hand column, write out what you were thinking and feeling, but not saying.

**A Sample Case**

Here is an example of the format. An R&D project manager (Jim) assumes his supervisor (Todd) feels harshly about him. In the right-hand column, Jim writes down his last conversation with Todd. In the left, Jim recalls his own thoughts.

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| **What I was thinking** | **What we said** |
| We're two months late, and I didn't think he knew. I was hoping we could catch up. | *TODD: Jim, I'd like to come down there next week. We're a few weeks behind, and I think we might all benefit from a meeting at your office.* |
| I need to make it clear that I'm willing to take responsibility for this, but I don't want to volunteer for more work. | *ME: I've been very concerned about these deadlines. As you know, we've had some tough luck here, and we're working around the clock. But of course, we'll squeeze in a meeting at your convenience.* |
| He never offers this help in the planning stages, when I could really use it. It's too late now to bring that up. | *TODD: Well, it's occurred to me that we could use better coordination between us. There are probably some ways I could help.* |
| The changes he keeps making are the real reason we're late. He must have another one. | *ME: Well, I'm happy to talk through any changes you have in mind.* *TODD: I don't have anything specific in mind.*  |
| It's a shame I can't tell him that he's the cause of the delays. If I can hold him off two more weeks, I think we'll be ready.  | *ME: I'd like to have a prototype finished to show you before you come down. What if we set up something for the twenty-seventh?* |

**Worksheet Instructions**

Think of about a frustrating interpersonal problem that *you personally experienced at work* during the past month or so, with someone inside or outside of your immediate group or organization. Recall a specific conversation you had with that person – a conversation that DID NOT WORK OUT as you hoped it would. A work related problem is preferable, but if you can’t think of one, a personal conversation is fine. Choose a conversation that you are willing to discuss with other members of this team.

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| **Step 2:** In the left hand column below write down what you were thinking and/or feeling but did not say as this conversation was going on. | **Step 1:** In the right hand column below, write out the dialogue that actually occurred. Or write the dialogue you're pretty sure would occur if you were to raise this issue. The dialogue may go on for several pages. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished. If you can’t remember the whole conversation you can also write down 3 or 4 key exchanges from a recent conversation that still frustrates you, or makes you angry or regretful. |
| **Left Hand Column** | **Right Hand Column**I said:He/she said:I said:He/she said:I said:He/she said:I said:He/she said: |

**Step 4: Reflection: Using Your Left-Hand Column as a Resource**

You can learn a great deal just from the act of writing out a case, putting it away for a week, and then looking at it again. The case becomes an artifact through which you can examine your own thinking, as if you were looking at the thinking of someone else.

As you reflect, ask yourself:

* What has really led me to think and feel this way?
* What was your intention? What were you trying to accomplish?
* Did you achieve the results you intended?
* How might your comments have contributed to the difficulties?
* Why didn't you say what was in your left-hand column?
* What assumptions are you making about the other person or people?
* What were the costs of operating this way? What were the payoffs?
* What prevented you from acting differently?
* How can I use my left-hand column as a resource to improve our communications?

For example, I (Rick) have developed a way of describing my left- hand column to others in a non-accusatory, nonjudgmental way. I'll use language like this: "Look, I feel like I'm between a rock and a hard spot. The rock is our conversation, my right-hand column. You're saying you want to move ahead with this project rapidly. On the other hand, my own thoughts, my left-hand column, say that if we move ahead with it, we're likely to lose Joe's and Bill's participation. I'm leery of raising this with you because in the past, when I've asked you to slow down for other reasons, you've gotten upset with me."

In group meetings, when you feel angry or frustrated, the left-hand column is particularly valuable. You can stop the action and say, "I realize we've got important work to do, but once again I don't think we're focusing on the real issue. Can we check some of our assumptions before we go any further? Let me tell you what I've got in my left-hand column . . ."

In other cases, leverage lies with the conversation itself. Begin by rewriting the previous conversation as you might have held it. How could your right-hand column (what you said) bring some of your important left-hand column thinking to the surface? How could you have revealed your thoughts in a way that would contribute to the situation turning out the way you wanted? What could you have said that would effectively inquire into the other person's left-hand column?

For a reality check, show the revised case to a third party (such as a partner).

You can also show selected parts of it to the person with whom you had the original conversation. If handled with a sense of inquiry and care, that might be a way to break through your impasse: "I have been making some assumptions about our last conversation, and I wanted to check them with you." Sometimes you may find you both remember the same conversation completely differently. Even when you agree on what you have said, you may have been thoroughly unaware of each other's unvoiced concerns.

When you show your case to the other person, don't approach it as a way to finally clear the air and get your points out in the open. Nor is your purpose to "prettify" your left-hand column by redefining your thoughts in a cosmetically kinder, gentler context. As Robert Putnam notes, some of your left-hand thoughts probably *should* stay hidden. Our internal censors often have a good chunk of wisdom; sometimes these comments would wreak havoc if voiced. Your purpose is to raise assumptions and mutual misunderstandings whose resolution will most contribute to more fruitful future conversations.