

The “not-quite-ready for prime-time players” of Turm-Oil Inc. gave up a Sunday afternoon to role play and develop the characters to whom you hopefully will relate. Thanks, Tim Chizik, Clare Connolly, Gloria Hamade, Terry Harris, and Carla Reiger.

Many others took time to brainstorm scenarios, review incarnations of the manuscript, and provide invaluable feedback: Ken Bellemare, Laurence Betts, Alice Caton, Ardyth Cooper, Barbara Densmore, Dennis Hilton, Margaretha Hoek, Tim Langdon, Michelle LeBaron, Julie MacFarlane, Ron Ohmart, Kathleen Tribe, and George and Edna Young. Other colleagues who willingly shared their experiences and wisdom are included in the book’s final chapter.

The writing process itself was jump-started by my coach, Linda Dobson-Sayer, who helped me find my voice. My editor, Naomi Pauls, focused and tidied the work, encouraged me at each step, and kept my writing honest with her gentle “cliché alerts.” Illustrator Derek Toye brought the characters to life and added a light touch to a potentially serious subject.

I was fortunate to work with New Society Publishers — only two ferry rides from home. Chris and Judith Plant freely offered their hospitality, support and experience. Ingrid Witvoet and Diane Killou polished the manuscript, and Heather Wardle and Diane McIntosh brought their creative energy and talents to the cover design. It seems only fitting that we collaborated so effectively to produce a book on the topic.

Closer to home, my parents, David and Enid Harper, imparted their love of learning and appreciation of the written word. I was fortunate to inherit my late father’s creativity and a gentle cheekiness that I hope found its way into the work. I also benefited from my mother’s precision and eagle-eyed proofreading of the manuscript.

My wife, Kathleen, and daughter, Shannon, have provided me with years of support and opportunities to practice conflict resolution. They also allowed me to share some of our timeless moments with you in the pursuit of learning.

Thank you all.

— Gary Harper, March 2004

INTRODUCTION

“*The Joy of Conflict Resolution?* You’ve got to be kidding,” I thought when a colleague suggested the title during a brainstorming session. Where is the joy in conflict? Most people avoid it or deal with it reluctantly, as a necessary evil. Yet when Chris Plant at New Society resurrected this title from the brainstorm scrap heap, I reconsidered as I recalled the satisfaction and freedom I experienced when I had resolved a conflict or assisted others to.

At work or at home, conflict is a part of life. How do we respond? Sometimes we suppress it by avoiding people, leaving jobs or ending relationships. When that isn’t an option, we may nurse grudges until we can’t stand it anymore, at which time we may explode and engage in fruitless and even embarrassing confrontations. Unresolved conflict takes its toll on us and on our relationships. We can all learn to resolve it better.

In what follows, you’ll be invited to examine conflict stories. By identifying the ever-changing roles people play in conflict, you will be able to understand and resolve differences. Many people in conflict feel hopelessly stuck. And the harder they push or pull, the deeper they sink, locked into viewing conflicts in terms of right and wrong, good and bad. Without realizing it, they had entered a

“drama triangle” populated by victims, villains and heroes. Trapped in a world of winners and losers they find collaboration impossible.

The Joy of Conflict Resolution uses the drama triangle to illustrate patterns of conflict and to identify the roles people play. You will learn basic skills to help you create more productive roles, move beyond the drama triangle and resolve conflicts collaboratively. You will see how curiosity uncovers the other side of the story, how empathy builds bridges and how assertion separates the person from the problem.

You will learn what fairy tales and Hollywood movies have to teach us about conflict. You’ll also be a fly on the wall at Turm-Oil Inc. and follow the exploits of its employees as they encounter sticky situations everyone will relate to. You might even think the examples have been lifted from your own workplace or family! Each chapter also provides an opportunity to apply the concepts and skills to conflicts in your own lives.

The ideas presented in this book appear simple at face value, yet can lead to profound realizations. As you are challenged to broaden your perspectives, you will discover previously unseen possibilities for resolution. Conflict might be uncomfortable, but it produces energy. We can choose what we do with that energy. Every conflict provides the opportunity for learning, growth, and enhanced relationships. In seizing that opportunity lies *The Joy of Conflict Resolution*.

I hope you’ll join me.

CHAPTER 1

VICTIMS, VILLAINS, AND HEROES

A villain is a misunderstood hero; a hero is a self-righteous villain.

Fairy tales of conflict

As a child, snuggled under your bedcovers, you probably drifted off to sleep to a story along these lines:

Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away, there lived a beautiful princess. One day, she dared to wander from the safety of the palace and was captured by an evil dragon. A noble, selfless prince sallied forth to rescue the princess. He journeyed far and wide and at long last found the dragon in his lair. After a fierce battle, he was able to slay the dragon and rescue the princess. The prince and princess ultimately married and, of course, lived happily ever after.

In today’s workplace, you might have heard an updated version of this tale in the coffee room:

Once upon a time, in a galaxy far too close to home, there lived an innocent, hardworking employee. One day, she dared to wander from the safety of her cubicle and speak out during a department meeting. She was

immediately attacked and berated by her evil manager and embarrassed in front of all. A noble, selfless shop steward sallied forth to aid the poor employee. He journeyed far and wide through the grievance procedure and at long last trapped the manager with a harassment complaint. After a fierce battle, the shop steward was able to vanquish the evil manager and his human resources minion and ensure justice was served for the employee. She and the shop steward ultimately left the company and, of course, lived happily ever after.

If you'd had lunch with the manager and his human resources advisor, however, you would have heard a quite different version:

Once upon a time, in yet another galaxy, there lived an innocent, hardworking manager. One day, plagued by downsizing and re-engineering, he dared to wander from the safety of his office and meet with his employees. He was greeted by an angry mob who demanded things over which he had no control. The manager battled against all odds to quell the mob and solve their problems until he was blindsided by an irate (and obviously unbalanced) employee and her shop steward henchman. After a fierce battle, and with the help of his ally, the company's human resources advisor, the manager saved the day and ensured the success of his department. The victory, alas, was not without a price, as the noble manager suffered a harassment charge to the heart. From that day forward, his scar reminded him to trust no employee.

We all have our tales of conflict. We complain at one time or another about controlling spouses, lazy co-workers, or Attila the Hun bosses. We never seem to tire of recounting the injustices that have befallen us and bad-mouthing those who have "done it to us." This black and white view of life may be satisfying, but when applied to a conflict it is unlikely to lead to resolution. When we paint ourselves as the innocent victim and view the other person as

the enemy, we become locked in a power struggle complete with anger and frustration.

The fairy tales and myths of our childhood impact us more than we realize. They present larger-than-life characters and a simplistic world of good and evil. Not surprisingly, we relate to the characters in these stories and may even subconsciously view the world in their terms.

Try putting the words "Once upon a time" in front of one of your conflict stories. Through this lens you can broaden your perspective on the conflict, identify your role in it, and choose a more constructive and collaborative way to resolve it. Although this approach lacks much of the drama and excitement of traditional competitive ones, it produces richer, more lasting resolution and maintains relationships. Let's have a look at the roles we typically take on in the mythic "drama triangle."

Roles we play

In classic tales, we consistently encounter three types of characters: the victim (often represented as a damsel in distress or an innocent youth); the villain (a witch, giant, or dragon); and the hero (the white knight or prince). Although these character types originate in fairy tales and myths, we encounter them also on the front pages of our newspapers, on our favorite television shows, and on movie screens everywhere. No wonder we see conflict in the same way.

Traditionally, the villain captures or controls the damsel, who ultimately is rescued by the prince (as in "Snow White"). Sometimes the victim becomes the hero ("Popeye" cartoons spring to mind). Other times, the villain is transformed through forgiveness (Darth Vader in "Star Wars," for example). However the drama plays out, these character types will be front and center.

Because we experience our own conflicts as stories, we unconsciously adopt these roles. Most often, we see ourselves as the victim — innocent and powerless. Sometimes, we play the hero and risk the discomfort of conflict to right the wrong and see justice done. And, very occasionally, we even may slip into the role of the villain, venting our anger or frustration on another person. Each role provides a

limited perspective on the conflict. Together, they form a “drama triangle.”

Of course, each person in the conflict has their own story. Our adversaries likely see themselves as the victim and paints us as the villain. We, in turn, expend tremendous energy to defend ourselves and our reputation from such an unfair label. It’s no wonder, then, that we view conflict as negative. We experience the pain of “being hit,” the outrage of being unfairly labeled as the villain, and the stress of needing to defend ourselves. Not a pleasant combination.

We can change this if we are willing to acknowledge how easily we slip into the roles of the drama triangle. With this awareness, we can choose to view and approach our conflicts differently. We can see the other not as the villain but as someone with whom we must work to identify and solve the problem. By doing so, we move beyond the drama triangle and toward resolution.

THE VICTIM

In a conflict, each person feels hit first.

We experience conflict as an attack on our self-esteem or ego. We may see our values threatened or fear someone will deprive us of something we desire or need. We feel victimized — and blame someone or something else.

The victim role includes a sense of powerlessness. We often withdraw — the “flight” part of “fight or flight” — or become passive. We may even freeze like a deer caught in the headlights. We wait for something to change or for someone to rescue us. (Remember Rapunzel, trapped in her tower.) Although some of us suffer in silence, many of us express our frustration by complaining about the situation and blaming the person we see as responsible for our plight (the villain).

Victimhood has its rewards. (We receive a significant amount of attention in the form of sympathy.) If we are really lucky, we may even attract a hero to sally forth against our villain and “right the wrong” for us. Alternatively, we can play the “guilt card” in the hope that the other person will see the pain they have caused, recognize

the error of their ways, and behave differently. But even if we successfully manipulate another into doing what we want, the accompanying resentment often poisons relationships.

By playing the victim, we also absolve ourselves of responsibility. After all, we are innocent and the conflict is not our fault. Rather than meeting the situation head-on, we justify inaction by telling ourselves that the other person is the one who needs to change. It seems safer (and less messy) for us to ignore or avoid the conflict or to snipe from a distance.

The rewards of victimhood come at a price. As victims, we relinquish our sense of control or influence over the situation. This sense of powerlessness erodes our self-esteem and leads to resentment and frustration. Others may see us as weak or needy, and our relationships may become defined by co-dependency. In short, by playing the victim we trade personal power for sympathy and ironically increase the very stress and negativity we seek to avoid.

On a more positive note, the victim role reflects our goodness, sensitivity, and compassion. The victim/princess in stories seldom seeks revenge, but often facilitates reconciliation through unwavering love and forgiveness. (Cinderella’s continued good cheer toward her vain and envious stepsisters is a prime example of this.) These qualities are essential to allow us to escape the drama triangle and adopt a more cooperative approach to our conflicts.

THE HERO

I’ve stands all I can stand and I can’t stands no more.

— *Popeye the Sailor Man*

The typical plot line of a Popeye cartoon features Popeye taking abuse from the villainous Bluto. Eventually, Popeye reaches the limit of his considerable patience, pops open his can of spinach, and administers Bluto the beating he so justly deserves. And all is well with the world.

Though we initially experience conflict as the victim (if only for a split second), we often shift to hero mode to protect ourselves,

defend our interests, and even the score. This role represents courage and action, selflessness and nobility. The hero ventures forth to do what must be done — justice will be its own reward. The role represents the part of us that is noble and courageous, that will step forward, take a stand, and risk discomfort or judgment.

There is a darker side to the hero role, however. That is the fine line between righteousness and self-righteousness. What we may see as clever, others may see as manipulative. What we see as taking charge, others may experience as controlling. In rescuing the damsel, the hero usually attacks, slays, or captures the villain. When we agree that the hero's cause is just, we condone and even applaud what are clearly aggressive behaviors. We can even justify our own aggressive and hurtful behavior by telling ourselves, "They had it coming."

Based on actions alone, a hero is simply a self-righteous villain. In a different context, Robin Hood would have done five to ten years of hard time for extortion and armed robbery. Instead, his actions are not only excused but also revered in legend because of his noble cause and earlier mistreatment by the evil Sheriff. Similarly, Jack (of "Jack and the Beanstalk" fame) made his reputation through trespass and burglary, though these acts are seen as heroic because the giant was mean. You get the drift.

Some of us may even involve ourselves in the conflicts of others as self-appointed heroes — to fix the problem for them. Though our intentions may be noble, this approach reinforces the helplessness of the victim we are rescuing and further entrenches the other person in the villain role — thus unwittingly perpetuating the conflict (and the drama).

THE VILLAIN

Now you know what it feels like.

We see villains as hateful, bitter, and evil. Villains traditionally capture and control the victim for their own purposes or deprive the victim of something. This role represents the side of us that can be petty, mean-spirited, and vindictive (what "Star Wars" calls the "dark side" of the Force). This dark side includes the part of us that

is mistrustful, controlling, and fearful. The villain acts aggressively, attacking and hurting others and taking what they want. Many of these behaviors center on control. When we experience someone controlling us, we quickly cast them as the villain in our conflict story.

In fact, the behaviors of the villain are similar to those of the hero, distinguished only by how we judge them. Internationally, the same acts of violence we condemn as terrorism are seen by other ideologies as the selfless acts of freedom fighters. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator character was listed by the American Film Institute as one of the top 100 villains of all time for his role in "The Terminator" and also as one of the top 100 heroes for his appearance in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day." It all depends whose side you're on.

In our conflict stories, we judge the villain's cause to be wrong or unworthy and accordingly judge their actions to be evil. Yet looking strictly at behavior, a villain is simply a misunderstood hero. Even people who act inappropriately or antisocially have their story, in which they see themselves as victims and justify their actions as "evening the score." One person's justice is another's revenge.

For the bad rap the villain role receives, it does embody positive qualities. The villain usually is patient. Myths and fantasy tales (such as *The Lord of the Rings*) are filled with stories of evil forces that lurk for a thousand years, awaiting the opportunity to re-emerge and seek revenge. Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter series is another notable example of perseverance, albeit for an evil purpose. The villain also represents creativity and ingenuity, though we probably would call these traits manipulative or sneaky. The key to resolving conflict collaboratively is to apply our patience and creativity to solving the problem, not to exacting revenge on the other person.

Beyond the drama triangle

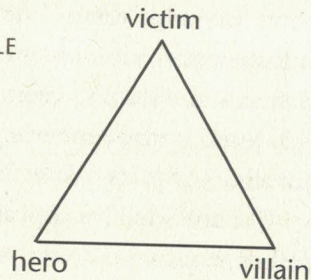
Every search for a hero begins with a villain.

— "Mission Impossible 2"

All three types of characters in our conflict stories require each other in order to exist — they form a "drama triangle." We cannot see our-

selves as a victim without casting the other person as a villain. Before we can shift to hero mode, we must have a wrong to right — a foe to vanquish. Who better than the villain? Similarly, a hero needs someone to rescue. (Sometimes, that someone might be ourselves.)

FIGURE 1A
THE DRAMA TRIANGLE



As long as we see ourselves as victims or heroes, we automatically create villains in our conflicts. Not surprisingly, when we see (and treat) someone as a villain, they in turn feel victimized by us — and see us as the villain. Behaviors we consider self-defense, they experience as attacks and further evidence we cannot be trusted. And the walls of judgment and justification are buttressed on both sides.

So we can see that the roles we play in our conflicts continually shift. It's not uncommon for someone to feel attacked (as victim), defend themselves (as hero), and, in their anger, attempt to inflict as much punishment as possible on their attacker (as villain). This can happen within seconds!

Our conflicts consequently are populated by a rotating cast of victims, villains, and heroes. While this undoubtedly leads to excellent drama and excitement, it seldom leads to resolution. The challenge is to step beyond the drama triangle, yet utilize the positive characteristics of each role to work with the other person to identify and solve the problem. To eliminate villains from our conflicts, we must be prepared to give up being a victim (and the sympathy and apparent safety the role offers). We also need to relinquish the mantle of the hero (and the self-righteousness that accompanies this role).

The drama triangle and its roles inevitably produce a win-lose approach to conflict. One person wins; the other must lose. No one

likes to lose, and we will battle ferociously to avoid defeat. Even when one person loses the battle, the war is seldom over. The loser continues to seek justice and retribution. Revenge, however subtly, underlies conflict stories and ultimately leads to a lose-lose situation.

CASTING NEW ROLES

Let's examine how we can shift our perspective and approach to allow resolution in which both people get what they need and there are no losers.

To set aside the role of victim is more easily said than done. We begin by being accountable for our feelings and reactions in conflict. We do not have to deny or devalue our feelings or needs, but must accept responsibility for them. After all, whose problem is it if you go home frustrated with your boss at the end of a workday? Who "owns" the problem? (Hint: your boss may be sleeping like a baby as you lie awake endlessly replaying the events of the day.)

Consider the difference between the statements "You never make time for my issues at meetings" and "I'm frustrated that we didn't discuss the budget during the meeting". The first statement is loaded with blame and judgment, casts the other person as the villain, and holds them responsible for how we feel. The second shares information, takes responsibility for feelings, and begins to identify the problem to be discussed and resolved.

Similarly, we can ask directly for what we need instead of quietly complaining to others about our plight. Asking is both uncomfortable and empowering. It's uncomfortable because we can no longer blame others and refuse to change, empowering because we become an active participant in shaping our life. To reap the rewards of assertiveness, we have to risk the discomfort of confronting a person or problem.

The role of hero can be as unproductive as that of victim in resolving conflict. This self-righteous mindset condones our attack on the villain as justice. Attack is met with counterattack; the conflict persists and usually escalates. Our ego fuels our need to be right and we become attached to a specific outcome. At this point, the conflict often becomes a power struggle.

We can address and resolve conflict much more productively if we let go of the need to be “right” and focus instead on ways to get our needs met. This focus opens up possibilities we might otherwise ignore. The energy devoted to a win-lose power struggle can instead be applied to problem solving. This approach often is referred to as “separating the people from the problem.”

This in no way means we should give in or avoid an issue just to keep the peace. We need to exhibit a hero’s courage in different ways: to raise an issue directly rather than to attack; to enter the uncomfortable place we experience as conflict and to stay present; to listen to things we may disagree with; to see the conflict through to real resolution. We need to stand up for ourselves in a way that doesn’t knock the other person down. We must shift our judgment to curiosity and our self-righteousness to openness — much more easily said than done.

There is a fine line between the roles of hero and villain, and in conflict we can easily and unconsciously slip into the role of villain. When we attack another person (even in self-defense) and attempt to hurt them in some way, we have become the villain. Fueled by anger or frustration, we may come out with statements such as “I don’t care what you think” and “Don’t be such a jerk.” We may even “lose it” and exhibit the very behaviors (threatening, interrupting, swearing) we find so objectionable in others. We victimize the other person anew and perpetuate the attack-defend cycle.

Although others may see us as a villain, we can change their view if we are willing to relinquish our need to control. No one likes being controlled. When we feel controlled by another, we experience the other person as “difficult” and label them as a villain. Since we resent being controlled, why should we expect other people to react any differently?

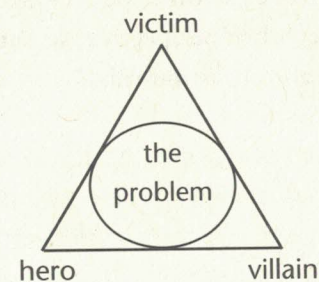
Abandoning the need to control is a good news/bad news scenario. When we relinquish our need for control, we make room for fresh and creative possibilities to resolve our conflicts and even redefine our relationships. At the same time, we have to give up our need to be right. (I never said it would be easy.)

When we view the conflict as a challenge or problem to solve, we allow collaboration. We can remain “hard on the problem” yet “soft on the people.”

FROM ADVERSARIES TO PARTNERS

When we live on the drama triangle, we see the other person as our adversary — the villain. If only they would change, we reason, things would be fine. They stand between us and happiness. Ironically, they usually are thinking the same thing about us. To resolve conflict, we need to relinquish our roles as victim, villain, and hero and work with the other person to solve the problem. If we need a villain, let it be the problem, not the person. The diagram below symbolizes this shift — from the drama triangle to the circle of resolution.

FIGURE 1B
THE CIRCLE OF RESOLUTION



THE CIRCLE OF RESOLUTION

Interestingly, the circle and triangle intersect not at the three corners of the triangle but in the middle on each side. Similarly, we must meet the other person in the middle. This doesn’t mean “splitting the difference.” It means telling them our story (in a way they will be able to hear it) and listening to their story with curiosity. Such open communication fosters mutual understanding. This understanding provides a bridge over which we can exit the drama triangle and enter the circle of resolution.

Summary

In a conflict, each person feels hit first. We initially experience conflict as the victim of an attack or threat. This role is accompanied by a sense of innocence and powerlessness.

The roles of hero and villain both exhibit aggressive behaviors and are distinguished only by our judgment of what is right or just.

To resolve conflict, we need to relinquish our roles as victim, villain, and hero and work with the other person against the problem.

From theory to practice

Consider a conflict in which you are or were involved. Examine your perspective on the conflict with respect to the roles of the drama triangle.

- When did you first feel like the victim?
- When might the other person have first felt like the victim?
- If you're feeling brave, tell your conflict story to a friend, have them pretend to be the other person, and ask them to tell the story from the other perspective. Monitor your reaction as you hear yourself cast as the villain.

CHAPTER 2

LESSONS FROM THE SANDBOX

All I need to learn about conflict I learned in kindergarten.

Grow up, already

“I feel like I’m running a daycare around here,” complains a weary manager. “They’re acting like a couple of kids,” opines an exasperated co-worker. “I wish he’d stop pouting and deal with this in a mature way,” says a frustrated supervisor.

We often describe people in conflict as “acting like children.” Although such a comparison does a disservice to children and their ability to cooperate (most of the time), it can provide us with clues about what underlies conflicts in our workplaces and homes.

We learn to play our parts on the drama triangle at such an early age that we do it unconsciously. As outlined in Chapter 1, the drama triangle provides attention and sympathy for the victim, admiration for the hero, and contempt for the villain. Many of the behaviors we develop as children and carry forward in life reflect our desire to avoid being cast as the villain and to be seen instead as the victim. After all, if we can stake out the moral high ground of being the victim, others normally will see us as innocent, sympathize with our plight, and comfort us. We also learn from a young age about the judgment and guilt that flow from being seen as the villain.

My PhD advisor can beat up your PhD advisor

During a conversation about various schoolyard themes that play out in the adult world, a friend and I were discussing "My dad can beat up your dad." He recounted his experience of a dinner at a national conflict resolution conference. Two experts were debating their respective theories about conflict. Within minutes, curiosity had evaporated and dialogue was replaced by a heated argument over the merits of their approaches. The focus quickly shifted to the credentials of their respective PhD advisors and which one carried more weight. How ironic that two "experts" in the field of conflict resolution, confronted by a challenge to the validity of their work, so quickly reverted to an adult version of "My dad can beat up your dad."

Why would these two men of learning revert so quickly to behavior most of us associate with playground squabbles? One reason is habit. As children they learned coping behaviors for conflict, and while these may have become more sophisticated as they matured, old habits die hard. Second, they were stuck on the drama triangle. They both fought to bolster their credibility so they would be seen as the hero, defending what is "right." Their identities were attached to having their theory accepted as "right." Perhaps we really do teach what we need to learn.

Themes from the playground

I recently visited friends and their two young daughters, aged two and four. Under the pretense of entertaining the kids, I grabbed a crayon and gleefully began coloring with them. It wasn't long before the elder girl noticed her sister with a dark-green crayon and declared, "I need that one." When I attempted to distract her and avoid the brewing conflict, she turned her attention to my crayon. "I need the blue one," she asserted. In the interests of peace, I gave her the blue crayon and picked up a red one. You can guess what happened next — the red crayon was now indispensable for her. It soon became a game. She would watch as I contemplated the next crayon I needed. When I chose one, the predictable "That's the one I need" followed. It was clear to the amused spectators that this wasn't really about the crayons but rather was an expression of the child's independence.

Conflict among grown-ups can be equally symbolic, yet we often get mesmerized by the "crayons" and miss the root of the conflict. Of course, sometimes, as Freud acknowledged, "a cigar is just a cigar" and conflict is about just what it appears to be about. These conflicts are relatively easy to solve. Other times, however, we are so concerned with judging who is right that we overlook the real issue. We treat the symptoms and ignore the cause. This accounts for the times we seemingly "solve" a problem, only to have it recur in a slightly different form, or for the times people react out of all proportion to what seems to be a simple, routine matter.

To help us understand and resolve conflict, let's examine a few basic "playground" themes and how they present themselves in the adult world.

YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME (INDEPENDENCE)

A group of kids are playing tag at the local playground when one touches another with a triumphant "You're it." The other immediately responds, "Am not! I was touching home base." The first counters, "You have to have both feet in the square. You're it." The second, outraged at this injustice, refuses to knuckle under. "Who died and left you in charge, bossy-pants?" he blurts as he sticks out his tongue, jumps on his bike, and pedals away.

A mom shakes her head as she surveys her teenager's room. She could swear she saw something move in the pile of clothes and papers under the bed. Exasperated, she yells down the hall over the sound of the blaring music to her daughter, "For the hundredth time, clean up that room." The teen rolls her eyes and shouts back, "It's my room. I'll keep it the way I want."

The new controller has just finished showing the management team a three-page, color-coded expense account form and insists that it be completed within 24 hours of a trip. The sales manager shakes his head in disbelief and says, "Where do you get off telling me how to run my department? We've got better things to do than spend all day on your petty paperwork."

Underlying these examples of “You’re not the boss of me” is an *independence* theme. We need to feel some degree of control over our lives and surroundings. If we feel powerless in some areas, we often will find other issues on which to take a stand. This explains why employees may file grievance over what management sees as insignificant issues. Employees who feel they have little say about their working environment often will find relatively minor issues on which to take a stand.

GAME’S CLOSED — YOU CAN’T PLAY (BELONGING)

A young boy, sporting his favorite team jersey, breathlessly pedals to the park to join the neighborhood basketball game. He is immediately told, “Game’s closed. Go away.” When he protests, he’s told, “This is for the big kids. Go play with the little kids.” Smoldering, he begins to shoot at one of the hoops, disrupting the game and incurring the wrath and threats of the other kids. Outsized and outnumbered, he leaves, dreaming of the day when he’ll be big enough to rule the court.

A new student sits down at a table in the high school cafeteria. Without so much as a hello, one of the other students says, “You can’t sit here. This is for club members only.” “What club?” the new student asks expectantly. “The one you’re not a member of,” smirks the other to the guffaws of the rest. The red-faced intruder moves to another table.

A long-term employee appears at the door of the human resources manager to file a grievance for harassment. She complains that two male colleagues have refused to acknowledge her “good morning” since a heated exchange at a recent team meeting. She is angered by what she sees as shunning.

The anxiety people feel when beginning a new job may stem more from office politics than from their job duties. With whom do we have coffee? Where do we fit? How do we find our place in this new environment?

Belonging and *inclusion* are basic human needs, and when they are denied or threatened we react. We feel victimized and perceive those who exclude us as villains. This theme shows up in the many

variations of “us vs. them” that play out in organizations: regional vs. head office; union vs. management; suits vs. the floor; new hires vs. long-term employees.

THAT’S NO FAIR — HER PIECE IS BIGGER THAN MINE (RECOGNITION)

A father returns home from a business trip and is swarmed by his two young sons in anticipation of the traditional “What did you bring me?” gift. He presents each of them with a toy double-decker bus from London — identical except for color. One is red, the other blue. The younger of the two gleefully begins playing with his new blue bus. The elder scowls, looks reproachfully at Dad, and says (yes, you guessed it), “How come he gets the blue one? That’s no fair!”

A teenager primps before the mirror before escaping from home for a Saturday evening with the gang. When the parent dutifully reminds them of their midnight curfew, they glower and say (yes, you guessed it again), “That’s no fair. You let Jamie stay out until 1:00.”

Two employees chew the fat over vending machine coffee in the plant lunchroom. The subject of a recent job reclassification arises. “I can’t believe those guys on the loading docks got bumped up to a Level 6. We have to have a two-year certificate and they can just walk in off the street. Why are we still a Level 4?”

On the surface, these conflicts seem to be about fairness, though if we look deeper we can see that respect and *recognition as an individual* often underlie disputes over money, rules, and resources. If we feel we get the short end of things, we fear we are not valued.

It’s hard to see the picture when you’re in the frame

Many times we fail to resolve a conflict because we fail to identify the real issue. We are so anxious to fix things that we treat the symptoms and ignore the root cause. This is particularly true where conflict recurs in slightly different forms, all reflecting a common theme. If you experience this type of situation, stand back and ask yourself questions such as the following:

- If it weren’t about the [corner office] what might it really be about?

- What might this person fear?
- What might this issue symbolize?
- What is the theme of this conflict?

Asking such questions allows us to probe for the source of the conflict. (Some people say, "The problem named is the problem solved.") While resolving conflict might not be quite that easy, identifying the problem allows us to focus our time and effort on the real issue and not be distracted by red herrings. This approach often will uncover valuable information and previously untapped possibilities. There are many ways to provide recognition, for example, once it is identified as the root need.

Conflict as its own reward

Imagine you supervise a production line at an industrial bakery. On one side of the conveyor, workers fold the croissants in a certain way (say, left over right). Workers on the other side of the conveyor, however, are adamant that it is better to fold the croissants right over left. When you investigate, you find that neither approach impacts efficiency, quality, or safety. Yet you find your production line divided literally down the middle. The groups have ceased speaking to each other, tension hangs in the air, and grievances begin to trickle to your desk.

As supervisor you will know that one side of the production line averages 15 years of service with your company; workers on the other side have all been hired within the past two years. The two sides also represent different ethnic groups.

Examine the situation from the perspective that "all behavior makes sense." What are these individuals getting *during* the conflict? By simply being on the drama triangle, they receive:

- an opportunity to exercise *independence* as they play the hero and stand up to the villain. This way of exerting power often underlies conflict in situations where those involved have routine and regimented jobs, with little sense of control.
- a feeling of *belonging*. They banded together to oppose the villains. By creating a "them," they created an "us."

- *recognition* or attention. The drama they created certainly attracted attention from both management and co-workers. Employees commonly feel ignored by management (unless, of course, something goes wrong). Conflict provides long-overdue attention and recognition.

These motivators are *identity needs*. Note that they are the same needs that underlie the "schoolyard" themes discussed earlier. Our baggage from forgotten schoolyard conflicts explains why we are triggered by certain behaviors, yet take other behaviors in stride.

Ironically, these same identity needs also are fulfilled by membership on a successful team. With membership come purpose, inclusion, and recognition. Organizations whose culture does not value these identity needs risk getting mired in conflict as employees seek other ways to fill these needs. As Fram Oil Filters tells car owners, "You can pay me now or pay me later."

As the supervisor in the croissant-folding controversy, you would not resolve the conflict by simply dictating a certain procedure. Resolution would require that those involved have an opportunity to tell their story and express their needs. By listening to both sides at a deeper level, you probably would learn that the apparent problem was but a symptom of deeper concerns.

So remember that conflict can exist at different levels. Where it is repetitive and seems petty, its roots probably lie at a deeper level. Any resolution must recognize and address the underlying concerns.

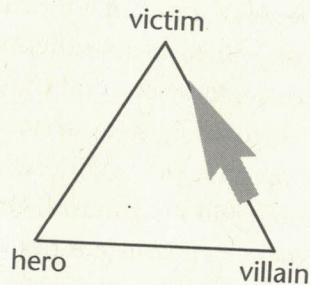
The roots of defensiveness

From an early age we learn that it can be a "dog-eat-dog world." As we take some hits along the way, we naturally develop strategies to defend ourselves. Over time, these survival techniques become habits. We develop automatic responses to conflict and may, through years of practice, even elevate defensiveness to an art form.

These basic "playground" defenses reflect our attempts to claim or avoid certain roles on the drama triangle. In conflict, we frequently feel blamed and personally attacked. This feeling inevitably

triggers defensiveness, as we refuse to accept being painted as the villain and will do almost anything to escape that role. We quickly learn to scramble to the safety associated with the moral high ground of the victim. After all, as the victim we must be innocent. Of course, this casts the other person as the villain and creates an ongoing cycle of defensiveness and counterattack. Entertaining and exhilarating, perhaps, but in the end stressful and draining.

FIGURE 2A
SCRAMBLING TO BE THE VICTIM,
REFUSING TO BE THE VILLAIN



Chapter 10 explores different types of defensive behavior and provides strategies to manage each.

Summary

The surface issues in a conflict may obscure the underlying source of the dispute. Where conflict is repetitive and seems petty, its roots probably lie deeper. We may be so anxious to fix the problem that we treat only the symptoms. Any resolution must recognize and address the underlying concerns, which often involve independence, belonging, or recognition.

Conflict on the drama triangle is marked by two dominant dynamics: people refuse to be cast as the villain in another's story and subsequently scramble to gain the moral high ground of being the victim.

From theory to practice

Consider either a repetitive conflict in your life or one that occurred over something you considered petty. Ask yourself the following questions:

- If it weren't about the [surface issue] what might it really be about?
- What is the theme of this conflict?

CHAPTER 3

JUST LIKE THE MOVIES

In a story, nothing moves but for conflict.

— Screenwriter's adage

Elements of conflict stories

Stories consist of three basic elements: plot, characters, and theme. The theme brings the characters into some form of conflict: with each other, with themselves, or with nature. Take the story from Chapter 1 as an example. The employee who was chastised by her boss might tell her story to a friend like this:

You won't believe what's going on at work. They brought in a new manager and he's already turning things upside down. He never even bothered to ask us — or he would have found out we already tried these things and they flat out didn't work. When he finally asked what we thought, I told him. Then he accused me of being "negative." I was so ticked off I told him he was a joke as a manager and almost walked out of the meeting. I finally had to see my staff rep. This jerk isn't going to make me the fall guy for his incompetence.

Even this short and simple story has its plot, characters, and conflict theme. Let's look at each.

THE PLOT

A story's plot provides the framework for the events as they unfold. It consists of what the characters say and do: their words and actions. The plot in a person's conflict story reflects their perception of the facts. The plot of the employee's story would consist of what she saw and heard:

- She has a new manager
- The new manager changed several procedures
- She was not consulted about the changes
- She told the new manager at a meeting that they had tried those things before without success
- The manager said she was being negative
- She contacted her shop steward, etc.

Words and actions are objective; perspectives, recollections, and interpretations vary even at the best of times. Ask witnesses to a crime to recount what happened and you likely will get as many variations as there are witnesses. No one sees the entire picture, especially in conflict, where emotions produce tunnel vision. To broaden our perspective, we need to encourage the other person to share their story. What happened from their perspective? We may uncover information that helps us make sense of what otherwise seemed irrational or hurtful behavior. As challenging as it may be to entertain the possibility of a different perspective on our conflicts, it is even more difficult to muster the self-control to hear another's story without correcting or disputing it.

Similarly, when we tell the other person how we see things, we can help them make sense of *our* behavior. Starting with words like "from my perspective" increases the likelihood the other person will hear us. We are simply offering our point of view, not claiming the "truth."

THE CHARACTERS

Every story has characters. The more interesting the characters, the more compelling the story. The characters provide depth as we

identify with their thoughts, feelings, hopes, and fears. As readers or listeners, our connection to and empathy with the characters draw us into the story.

Here's what might be going on inside the same disgruntled employee as a character in her own conflict story:

- She feels disrespected and excluded when she is not consulted on the changes
- She believes she was being helpful in pointing out the pitfalls of the changes
- She feels misunderstood and unfairly attacked
- She fears her manager will judge or even punish her for speaking up

From her words and actions, we might assume we know what she thinks and feels, but we won't know for sure unless she tells us. And she may not tell us unless she is asked to and feels she can do so without being further attacked or sinking deeper into the conflict.

Notice in her conflict story how quickly she moved around the drama triangle. Her perspective shifted from the role of hero (pointing out the pitfalls) to victim (feeling unfairly criticized) back to hero (seeking justice for the abusive treatment). As her temper got the better of her, she slipped into being the villain when she personally attacked her boss by calling him a "joke." Conversely, her boss likely experienced a similar trip around the drama triangle, seeing himself first as the hero (for trying to save the department through his changes) and then feeling victimized by the employee's lack of appreciation and subsequent personal attack.

Although the facts provide a starting point from which we can *identify* a conflict, insight into the characters allows us to *understand* the conflict. The thoughts, feelings, and motives of those involved in conflict help us make sense of their behavior. A co-worker withdraws, for example, and is unresponsive when we attempt to communicate. We label them as aloof or uncooperative. They see themselves as reacting to some earlier slight or as simply trying to cope with personal problems about which we have no knowledge.

When people are unable to resolve conflict, it seldom is because they lack the ability to problem solve. Two people who can define a problem and who agree to work together to solve it usually are successful. However, emotion and conflict are entwined. Unmanaged emotion, often anger, prevents us from reaching a common understanding of a problem and dampens any desire to work with the other person to solve it. Our mistrust leads us to see the other person as the problem (the villain).

We cannot fully understand a conflict until we understand the thoughts and feelings of those involved — the characters in our conflict stories. Yet experience has taught us that the frustration and anger that accompany conflict are at best uncomfortable and at worst dangerous. When we view the other person as the villain, we assume they intend to do us harm. It's not surprising then that we hesitate to emerge from behind our walls of judgment and defensiveness. We are reluctant to open what we fear to be a Pandora's box of emotion. This is where we need to draw on a different type of hero's courage, for until we are willing to take this risk, little will change. It would be like looking in the mirror and waiting for our reflection to move first.

We can start by clarifying our motives and letting the other person know our thoughts or feelings. This transparency may broaden their perspective and cause them to at least entertain the possibility that we aren't the villain they have made us out to be.

It is equally important to stay curious about the other character in our conflict story. What motivated them to behave as they did? What were they attempting to communicate or achieve? What were they thinking or feeling? By discovering this, we gain a deeper understanding of the conflict and are that much closer to resolving it. If we understand their motive or reasons, we may be able to release our judgment of *them* as the villain. Once this happens, we can begin to view each other as partners and work together to explore new ways to solve the problem.

THE THEME (CONFLICT AS UNMET NEEDS)

A theme is a recurring idea — the thread that weaves its way throughout a story and unifies it. Themes of novels, movies, or even newspaper articles involve conflict in some form. As the needs and values of the characters clash (within themselves, with each other, or with the world), conflict emerges. Stress and tension increase. We are drawn in. Ratings soar.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines conflict as “opposition between characters or forces in a work of drama or fiction, especially opposition that motivates or shapes the action of the plot.” This definition would include internal conflict — an individual torn between pacifism and revenge, for example.

Conflict provides a story with its juice. Without conflict, we would have no victims, villains, or heroes — no drama triangle. Stories without conflict lack the suspense and tension that captivate us. As screenwriters say, nothing moves without conflict. Our personal conflict stories would not hold our audiences (or rally support for our cause) without drama.

Because a good dramatic story attracts attention (often in the form of sympathy), some people seem to be addicted to conflict. You probably know people who are guaranteed to have conflict brewing somewhere at any given time. If things smooth out at work, something on the home front erupts. Even people who may avoid conflict like the plague often experience it vicariously by gossiping about other people's conflicts.

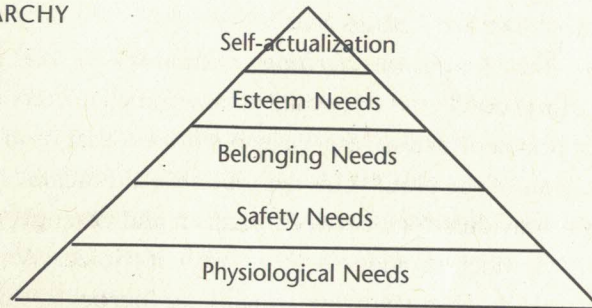
To understand someone's conflict story, uncover the theme. Ask yourself what might be the underlying and unmet need that fuels their conflict. Consider conflict as a quest to recover what was taken from us or to protect what is threatened. This understanding will lead us to frame the conflict in terms of interests and needs. It becomes a problem to solve rather than a battle to fight.

What drives us?

In the 1940s, psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that human beings are driven by a set of needs, which he arranged in a hierarchy.

The most basic are those associated with survival (air, food, shelter), closely followed by the need for safety. When these needs are denied or threatened, physical confrontation and war may result. The more basic the need, the more primal the conflict.

FIGURE 3A
MASLOW'S HIERARCHY
OF NEEDS



In our day-to-day lives in Western society, we are fortunate that survival and physical safety seldom fuel our conflicts. More often, we focus on belonging and esteem needs. Most conflict in families and organizations occurs at this level. If you listen to people complain about their workplace or family, you will hear much more about disrespectful treatment or lack of fairness than you will about money and safety. At the root of conflict lie unmet needs. Consciously or subconsciously, these needs drive us and motivate our behavior. And when we perceive that something or someone stands between us and fulfilling our needs, we cast them as the villain.

When our needs go unmet, our body lets us know, even though we often ignore its signals. If we are open to these signals, they can assist us to identify the unmet needs that lie at the root of our conflict. Think of times when you have felt your “button being pushed” and found yourself becoming angry. Your particular “button” links to an unmet need, and the resulting anger tells you that “what’s happening here is unacceptable — something has got to change.” If we can overcome our impulse to attack our perceived enemy, we can allow our anger to inform us about our needs and values.

INTERNAL CONFLICT

Sometimes our needs contradict each other and spark internal conflict: we may seek to belong, yet value our independence; we demand fairness and consistency, yet want to be treated as a unique individual. Let’s revisit our employee’s story for a minute. She felt victimized by her villainous manager, who, from her perspective, imposed unworkable changes without consultation and attacked her when she spoke up. She experienced the new manager as trampling her overall need for respect and, more specifically, her needs:

- to be included and consulted
- to be heard
- to feel competent in her job

Such unmet needs might fuel *internal conflict*. The employee might be torn between her need for financial security (“This is a good job. I’ll just put up with this new guy and wait out these changes”) and her need for respect (“I won’t take this lying down”). She also might be torn between her urge to confront the manager (“Don’t ever do that to me again!”) and her need for safety (“He’ll really make life tough for me if I say anything more”).

This inner conflict is not necessarily negative — we can think of it as simply energy. Anger and frustration can be powerful catalysts for change and can spur us to act. The employee can choose how to channel that energy. Does she stew and simmer in frustration? Does she explore other jobs where she would be more included or respected? Or does the inner conflict propel her to gather her courage and approach her manager directly to express her concerns and attempt to resolve the situation? The choice she makes speaks volumes about her values and priorities.

INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Often our unmet needs involve other people and lead to interpersonal conflict. The employee’s interpersonal conflict with her manager could surface in the form of a grievance or an argument over a particular policy. The conflict might go underground and involve

gossip, passive resistance, and passive-aggressive behavior (I hope she doesn't make his coffee in the morning). Regardless, there would be an undercurrent of tension whenever the two were together.

Such interpersonal conflict also can be traced to unmet needs. The employee feels neither respected nor supported by the manager and accordingly sees him as the villain. Yet the manager strives to meet his own needs. He, too, wants to be seen as competent and to be respected in the organization. He might even share the employee's need for financial security and fear the loss of his job. He may not even be aware of the unmet needs that drive him — but may feel threatened by the employee and make her the villain in his story.

So rather than casting people as villains in our conflicts, let's remember that both we and our apparent adversary are driven by the same basic human needs that Maslow identified more than 50 years ago. Our unmet needs often are shrouded by anger and encased in fear. As listeners, our challenge is to withstand the heat of these emotions and hear another person's entire story. Conversely, as speakers, we must tell our story and express our needs in a way that doesn't paint the other person as the villain.

Our conflict dramas

We make sense of our conflicts through story and it shouldn't come as a surprise that our stories and the dramas of stage and screen follow similar patterns. The victims, villains, and heroes of our interpersonal conflicts mirror those portrayed in movies (minus the odd photon torpedo or wizard's spell). As you read the standard movie plot line that follows, see how it might fit with a conflict in your life.

When we watch a movie, we begin by experiencing the status quo world of the main character. Writers often refer to this as *the platform*. In *The Wizard of Oz*, we meet Dorothy as she innocently goes about her business in rural Kansas. In interpersonal conflict, there is always a "before." "Things were fine before they made George a supervisor; now he acts like Attila the Hun" or "We got along fine before they brought in that new software."

Once the platform is established, we encounter the *inciting incident* — something "tilts the platform" and creates conflict. The main character may be in conflict with another person, with themselves, or with their world. The tornado in "The Wizard of Oz" would be the inciting incident that tilted Dorothy's platform. In interpersonal conflict, the inciting incident occurs the moment we see ourselves as attacked or threatened — when we first felt "hit." In some cases this may be a minor incident that serves as the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

The inciting incident leads to *struggle and conflict*. The victim often adopts the mantle of hero in an attempt to right the wrong or recover what has been lost. As the hero overcomes one obstacle, another often surfaces, and all may appear lost — the darkness before the dawn. Dorothy's journey and discovery that the wizard was a sham would mark this part of the story. Interpersonal conflict likewise can be considered a quest to recover what has been lost or protect what is threatened. At some point in the quest, the hero feels overwhelmed, trapped, and tempted to abandon the journey. Many people in conflict reach this point.

Then comes the *turning point*. Something shifts within the protagonist. Perhaps they begin to believe in themselves, forgive someone, or take the risk they thought themselves unable to take. Dorothy, in confronting the Wicked Witch of the West and defending Toto, discovers her previously untapped power. In interpersonal conflict, the turning point could be a shift from judgment to curiosity, a point when we let go of the need to be right or punish and instead seek to understand and collaborate.

Finally, we reach the story's *climax* as the rejuvenated hero confronts (and usually overcomes) the final obstacle — the villain. The climax leads to *resolution*. Dorothy vanquishes the Wicked Witch of the West and discovers the path home. In our interpersonal conflicts, we vanquish the problem by creating a solution that works for all involved.

And to complete the story, we *return to the platform* as we see how events have impacted the characters and their world. The plat-

form is again in equilibrium, though a new equilibrium. Dorothy returns to Kansas, a changed person in a familiar world. In conflict, this change is reflected in the deepened relationship and improved trust that often emerge when we are able to collaboratively resolve an issue.

When I first heard this typical plot line described at a workshop, I was stunned by its similarity to conflicts I had mediated. People in conflict often feel hopelessly stuck — trapped in *struggle*. My involvement as a mediator often was seen as a last resort, yet often became a *turning point*. I did not fix the problem for them but helped them view each other and the problem differently. This shift in attitude and approach allowed people to move from struggle to resolution.

The other parallel I saw between the standard plot line and conflict was the growth of the protagonist as a result of the journey. To overcome the obstacles they face, they may have to draw on an inner strength or change their approach. Conflict similarly provides an opportunity for us to learn about ourselves, clarify our values, and broaden our perspectives.

When did the knife go in?

To get to the heart of a conflict, identify its inciting incident, the moment in the story when “the knife went in.” The metaphor of the knife going in helps us identify the moment when someone experienced being victimized and began to see the other person as the villain. Other metaphors for this concept would include an electric shock, a punch to the stomach, a cut, a slamming door, or a rug being pulled out from under. All describe the moment they first felt “hit.”

Apply this metaphor to a conflict in your own life. Think of a time you felt angry or resentful toward another, then examine events and ask yourself when exactly you first felt “hit.” When did you begin to see the other person as the enemy? What triggered you? What was your unmet need?

Although conflict resolution focuses on the future, we cannot ignore these past wounds. Everyone involved needs an opportunity

to express their hurt, anger, or disappointment. Until they feel acknowledged, they are unlikely to relinquish their role as victim and will continue to view the other person as a villain. This belief traps them on the drama triangle and prevents resolution. It also explains why conflict sometimes surfaces over petty matters. Those involved usually have seen each other as villains for so long they simply pick a convenient issue over which to continue their battle. The issue is an opportunity to reinforce their ingrained judgment of the other person as untrustworthy, uncaring, etc.

Because there are two sides to every conflict, it helps us to learn when the other person felt “the knife go in.” When did they feel “hit?” When did their defenses go up? This point of wounding provides us with a starting point to explore how the conflict has impacted the other person. By asking them and listening to their answer without judging, we build empathy and encourage our adversary to join us in moving beyond the drama triangle toward resolution.

The journey from confrontation to collaboration

Conflict can be seen as a quest. In myths and movies, heroes use their wits and courage to surmount the obstacles they encounter on their quest. When all seems lost, they may rely on knowledge or a gift they received along the way. Subsequent chapters of this book will identify some of the barriers we face on the journey through conflict toward resolution and provide tools to overcome those barriers. (You’ll need to provide your own wits and courage.)

Through real-life scenarios played out by the employees of Turm-Oil Inc., we will explore ways to move beyond the drama triangle. Though the characters are fictional, you may find the situations they face all too familiar. Join this dysfunctional work “family” as they develop new perspectives and new approaches to conflict on their journey from confrontation to collaboration.

Summary

Remember that the full story includes the plot, the characters, and the theme. Although the events of the story provide a starting point from which we can *identify* a conflict, insight into the characters allows us to *understand* the conflict. Finally, the theme involves the needs that drive us and motivate our behavior.

Unmet needs might fuel internal conflict or interpersonal conflict.

To get to the heart of a conflict, identify its inciting incident (the moment in the story when “the knife went in”) and explore the needs that have been threatened or denied as a result of that event.

From theory to practice

Analyse a conflict in which you were or are involved:

- When did the knife go in for me?
- What need was wounded or threatened?
- When might the knife have gone in for the other person?
- What need of theirs might have been wounded or threatened?

CHAPTER 4

WELCOME TO TURM-OIL INC.

Lubricating the flaxseed community for over 20 years

Co-workers in conflict

Welcome to Turm-Oil Inc., a major distributor of flaxseed oil. In this fictitious yet typical workplace, employees consider themselves to be family — one large, dysfunctional family. Though many of you may see yourselves in the cast, I can assure you that these characters are composites of personalities, styles, and qualities of hundreds of people and organizations I have worked with (except Gale, and she knows who she is). Some live to work, others work to live; but whatever their reasons, they spend more time with each other than with their families.

As a company, Turm-Oil Inc. is facing the typical challenges of the new millennium: downsizing, greater reliance on technology, increased competition, and demanding customers. Such changes lead inevitably to conflict and produce no shortage of drama. Now meet our players (in order of appearance):

Clyde S. Dale, General Manager: He is an old dog, and these are very new tricks.

Clyde's haggard face reflects 25 years surviving in the dog-eat-dog business world. Clyde is well-intentioned,



Clyde S. Dale