

Resolving Conflicts – “Win-Win” TOC way

A conflict is defined as a situation when two parties have opposite views that cause them to disagree. It could also be a situation in mind of a person who is struggling with a dilemma of doing or not doing some thing. Often we resolve conflicts in a win-lose way when one party forces his/her view on the other party towards an agreement. This results in dissatisfaction on part of the person who is forced to agree. Another way to resolve conflict is a compromise where both parties gain or lose some thing. Best way is when we attempt to find a win-win way of resolving conflict in which both parties feel they met their needs. That happens with the help of tools of developed by Dr Eli Goldratt under Theory of Constraints (TOC). Following story that some one forwarded to me, provides an effective background for understanding how it happens -

A teacher teaching Maths to seven-year-old Arnav asked him, "If I give you one apple and one apple and one apple, how many apples will you have?" Within a few seconds Arnav replied confidently, "Four!"

The dismayed teacher was expecting an effortless correct answer (three). She was disappointed. "Maybe the child did not listen properly," she thought. She repeated, "Arnav, listen carefully. If I give you one apple and one apple and one apple, how many apples will you have?"

Arnav had seen the disappointment on his teacher's face. He calculated again on his fingers. But within him he was also searching for the answer that will make the teacher happy. His search for the answer was not for the correct one, but the one that will make his teacher happy. This time hesitatingly he replied, "Four..."

The disappointment stayed on the teacher's face. She remembered that Arnav liked strawberries. She thought maybe he doesn't like apples and that is making him lose focus. This time with an exaggerated excitement and twinkling in her eyes she asked, "If I give you one strawberry and one strawberry and one strawberry, then how many you will have?"

Seeing the teacher happy, young Arnav calculated on his fingers again. There was no pressure on him, but a little on the teacher. She wanted her new approach to succeed. With a hesitating smile young Arnav enquired, "Three?"

The teacher now had a victorious smile. Her approach had succeeded. She wanted to congratulate herself. But one last thing remained. Once again she asked him, "Now if I give you one apple and one apple and one more apple how many will you have?"

Promptly Arnav answered, "Four!"

The teacher was aghast. "How Arnav, how?" she demanded in a little stern and irritated voice.

In a voice that was low and hesitating young Arnav replied, "Because I already have one apple in my bag."

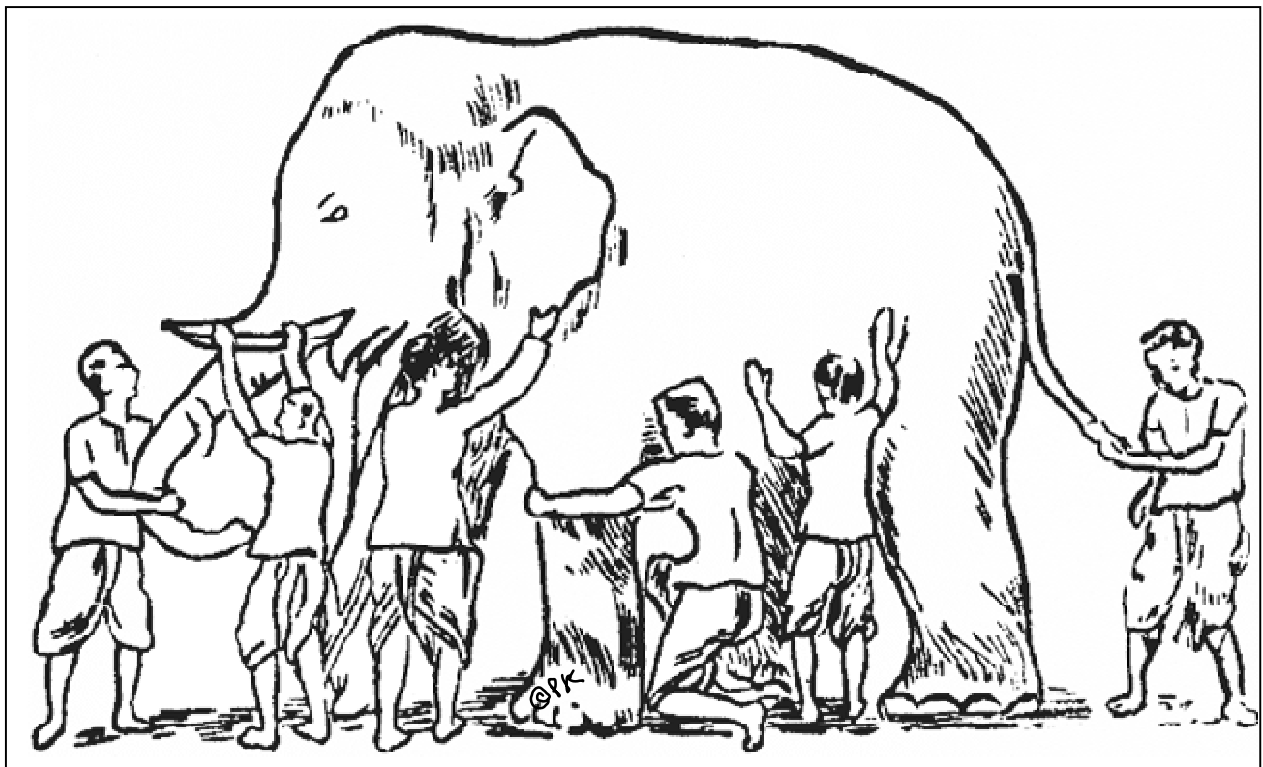
In the story above, the teacher is assuming that Arnav would understand that he only had to count the apples she was speaking about. But Arnav is counting both real and imaginary apples. He is too young to understand the reference to the context. By changing the reference from apples to strawberries teacher inadvertently removes the assumption from Arnav's mind that all apples should be counted instead of only the imaginary apples being given by the teacher. When Arnav explains

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that he was also counting an apple in his bag, it satisfied the teacher about his ability to count. Both the teacher and Arnav would have felt good after discovering assumptions with either side!

We all learn by observing the world from our senses and build mind maps. No two persons can have the same mind map and this creates the basis of different points of view in minds of two persons for the same situation. The ‘win-win way’ encourages them to expand their points of view by listening to one another and understanding the other person’s point of view. This ‘listening’ to the other party is called ‘checking assumptions’ in the TOC way of conflict resolution.

The story of 6 blind men touching an elephant and defining it in their own way is another good example to learn how our unique individual perspectives limit our understanding of any situation. Instead of forcing our limited perspective on the other person, or debating till we agree to disagree, if we invest time in understanding the other person’s point of view to visualize the bigger picture, we could come to a common understanding of the situation.

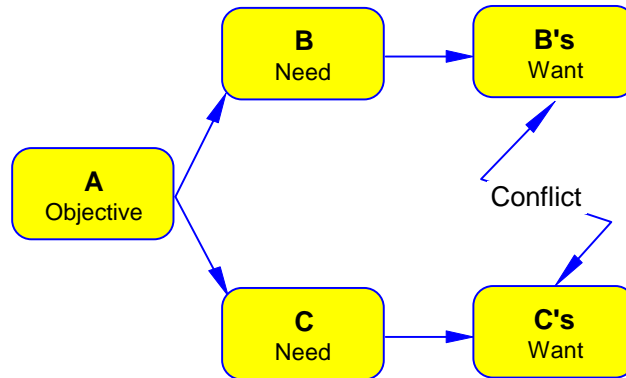


Stephen Covey in his book “The Seven habits of highly effective people” speaks about the power of ‘paradigm’. He says, “word paradigm is commonly used today to mean a model, theory, perception, assumption, or frame of reference. In the more general sense, it is way we ‘see’ the world not in terms of our visual sense of sight, but in terms of perceiving, understanding, (and) interpreting.”

Conflicts arise because of differences in paradigms of people. In business and work environment these paradigms diverge further when people are measured by functions. There are many situations when two employees or functions working with separate measures are trying for the good of the company but may want exactly opposite things. For example marketing manager trying for growing market share may want to reduce prices, but business manager looking for improving profits may ask for increasing the prices!

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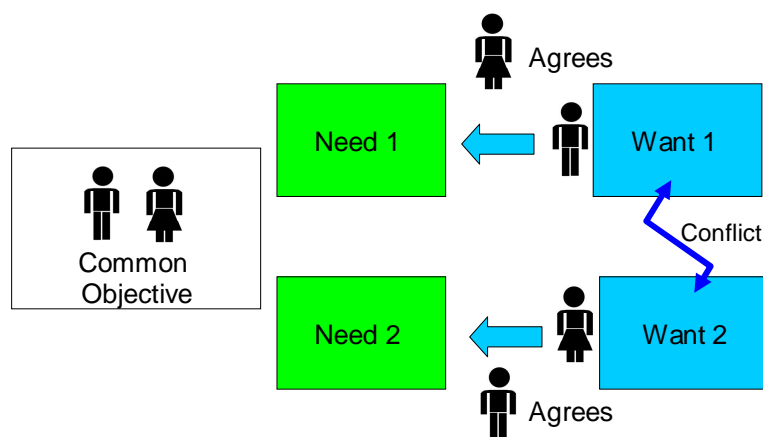
Dr Eliyahu Goldratt in his book “It’s Not Luck” shows a template of solving conflicts in a win-win way and calls it ‘evaporating cloud’ tool.



He suggests defining the conflict in the form of a block diagram starting with the ‘wants’ that are causing the conflicts written opposite to one another on the right. These are then connected to the ‘needs’ from where they are emerging in the middle blocks. Lastly these ‘needs’ are connected to a common objective of the two needs. The existence of arrows provides integration to the diagram. If the existence of any arrow is denied logically the integration is destroyed and conflict evaporates. This is done by articulating the assumptions and paradigms behind the existence of that arrow linking any two blocks. Discovery of an incorrect assumption thus, evaporates the conflict.

The first step in making the cloud is writing the wants that are in direct conflict with one another. Then the needs of the two sides are written. These needs are so important that these are not to be given up unless we expose a faulty assumption behind the arrow connecting the need and the common objective that is added to the ‘Cloud’ last.

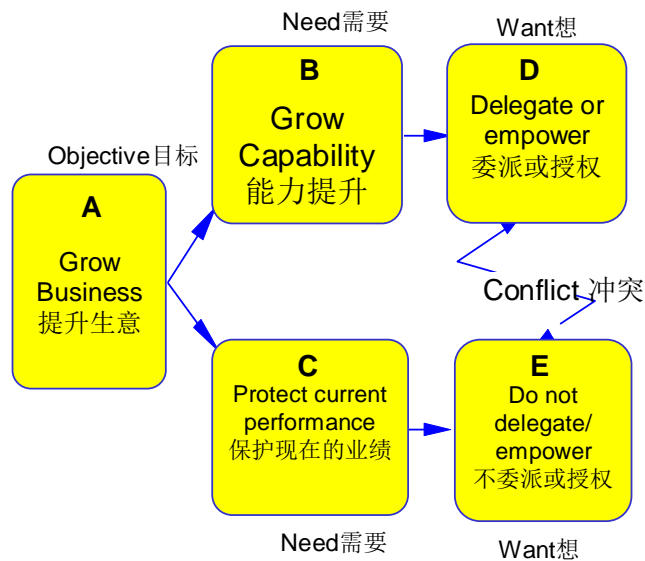
Writing the Cloud



Notice that there is a process of aligning the other party when need is being verbalized by one party. Similarly the common objective definition should be agreed by both parties.

Resolving Conflicts – “Win-Win” TOC way

Conflict of Delegation 授权冲突



We read this conflict from left to right: “In order to grow the business (A) we must grow capability (B) of our employees and also we must protect our current performance (C). However, in order to grow capability a manager should delegate powers (D) to the subordinate. But because there is a risk of losing on current performance, the power should be delegated (E).”

This conflict is typical in business environment. It causes managers to get overwhelmed with work because they are unable to delegate responsibility and sufficient authority together.

Logical analysis of assumptions behind Arrow CE (linking block C and E) is done by asking “WHY”. Why there is a risk of losing current performance when power is delegated. Answer could be - the subordinate may not have skill/knowledge to handle the job or is not trustworthy or both. If this assumption is invalidated by confirming the existence of both, the skill/knowledge and trust, then the conflict evaporates because block E would no longer exist.

I have been using this win-win TOC way of resolving conflicts since 1997 and have found that it works effectively in any circumstance. Acquiring mastery of using this tool by practice leads to capability of identifying root cause of a set of complex issues in any organization.



Author - Pradeep Kumar is from 1998 batch Jonahs from Avraham Goldratt Institute New Haven CT USA. He specializes in the application of Theory of Constraints to significantly improve business performance in all types of organizations. He works as a Business Owner/CEO coach and mentor. His coaching in both Chinese and Indian companies has delivered high success. Currently he lives in Shanghai and regularly travels to India on business.