

# Elephants and Mahouts: Conflict Engagement for ~~Wikipedians~~Humans

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**Are we going to learn how  
not to have conflicts, ever?**

**nope.**

**But we *are* going to learn  
how to have *better* conflicts!**

or

**how to have conflicts *better!***

# Understanding conflict

- Conflict ≠ disagreement
  - Conflict is disagreement *that activates our emotional resources*
- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure:
  - e.g. clear and open communication: 1. framing; 2. advocating; 3. illustrating/supporting; 4. Inquiring
  - Mind the elephants!
- Conflict on Wikipedia
  - Re content: discuss; consensus; transcend and represent the conflict
  - Re behavior: rules and boundaries; adjudication by community and committees; sanctions and exclusion

# Wiki and communities as living systems

- All systems **need** new input/feedback to survive (and grow)
- Difference/feedback is *also* seen as **threatening** because **systems are defined by boundaries**
- Healthy systems **balance** openness to input/change AND boundaries that maintain and protect. (e.g. notability policies)

# Ideas vs. Emotions

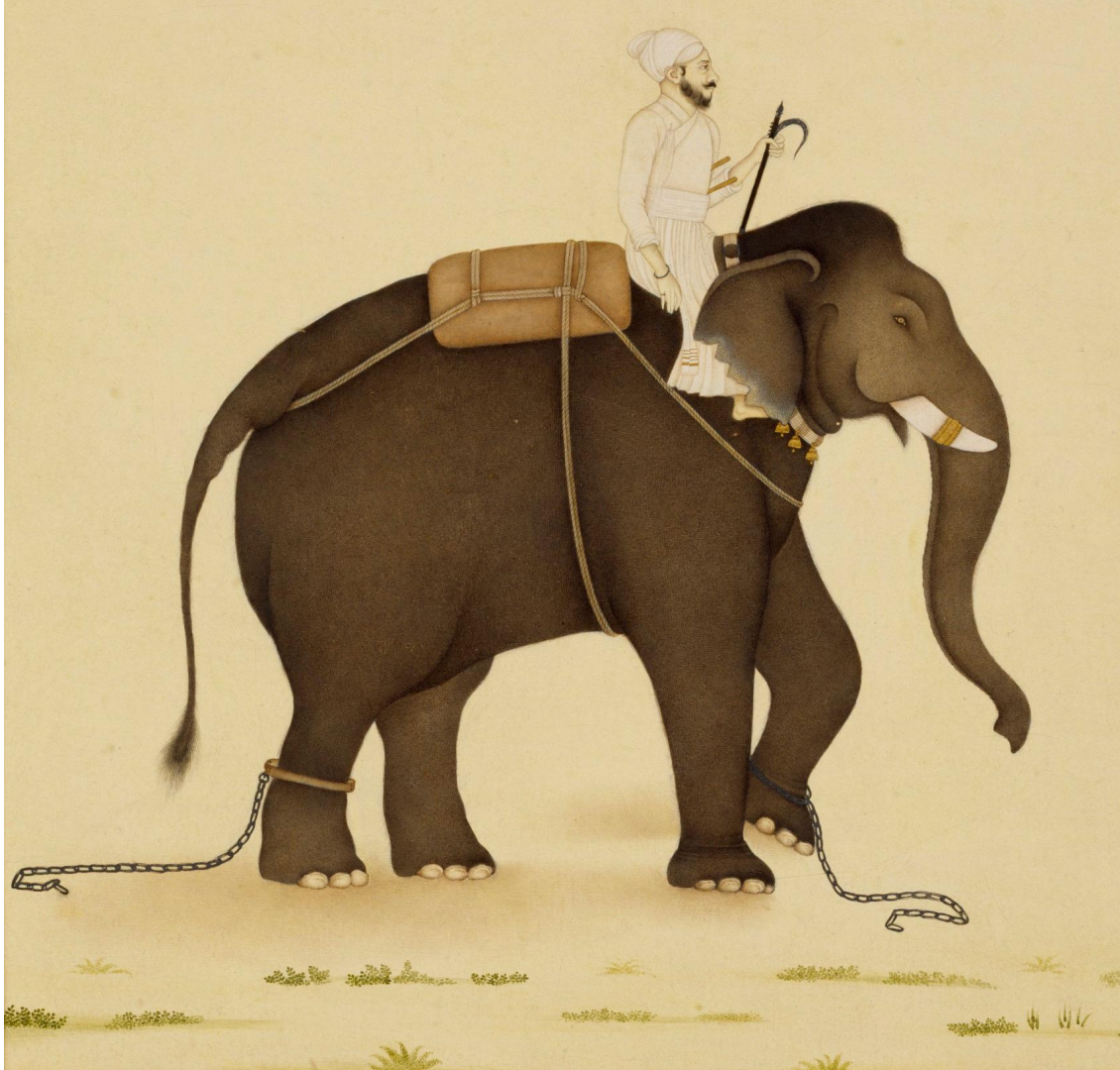
distinction #1



**Mahout on an  
elephant;** artist  
unknown

gouache on paper;  
Murshidabad,  
India; 18th  
century.

(Victoria and  
Albert Museum,  
London)



A random but very  
warm book  
recommendation:  
**The Elephant's  
Journey**, by José  
Saramago

# Ideas vs. Emotions

- The **Resistance Line** (Lewis 2008)
  - Jokes & sarcasm -> Excuses -> Gossip -> Slowness  
-> Strike/disruption -> open war / separation
- **What to do?**
  - Listen to your elephant; respect it; manage it
  - Listen to others' elephants; respect them
  - Make disagreement safe; criticism = feedback;
  - **People need to be heard; and to *feel* heard.**

# Ideas vs. Emotions: what to do?

- Mirror; agree with what you can; solicit more opinions and support; give agency
- Build consensus around majority; seek maximal accommodation of minority view; recognize their frustration. Support face-saving.
- Use humor to heal and not to harm
- Shut out bad faith (trolling = deliberately upsetting elephants); recognize rider-less elephants (lost control)

# Group discussion 1

1. What upsets your elephant?
2. Think back to a recent on-wiki conflict; how were elephants upset, exactly? How were they calmed?

# Exercise 1

(optional)

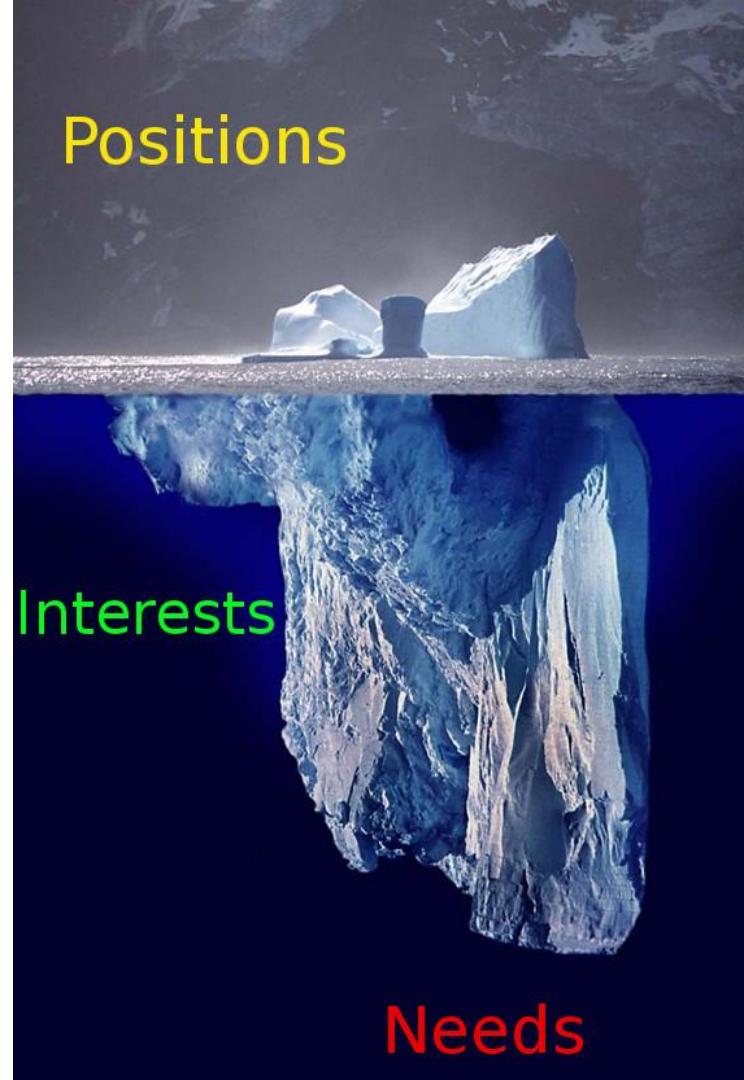
# Positions vs. Interests

distinction #2

What we **state**  
(or think) we  
want.

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What actually  
**matters** to us.  
What we're  
trying to  
**protect** or  
**ensure**.



[[File:Iceberg.jpg]], CC-by-sa 3.0 by Uwe Kils (iceberg) and User:Wiska Bodo (sky). Modified by Asaf Bartov.

# Positions vs. Interests: what to do?

- **Examine** your *interests*. *Why* are you so passionate/determined about this *position*?
- **Inquire** into the *interests* of others.
- **Observe** and **report** on others' conflict
- **Evaluate** your *interests* according to objective criteria and reconsider your *position*.



## **Group discussion 2**

Think back to a recent conflict:

Were the **interests** and **needs** expressed, or only the **positions**?

# Exercise 2

(optional)

# People vs. Roles

distinction #3

**All the world's a stage, And all the  
men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their  
entrances, And one man in his  
time plays many parts**

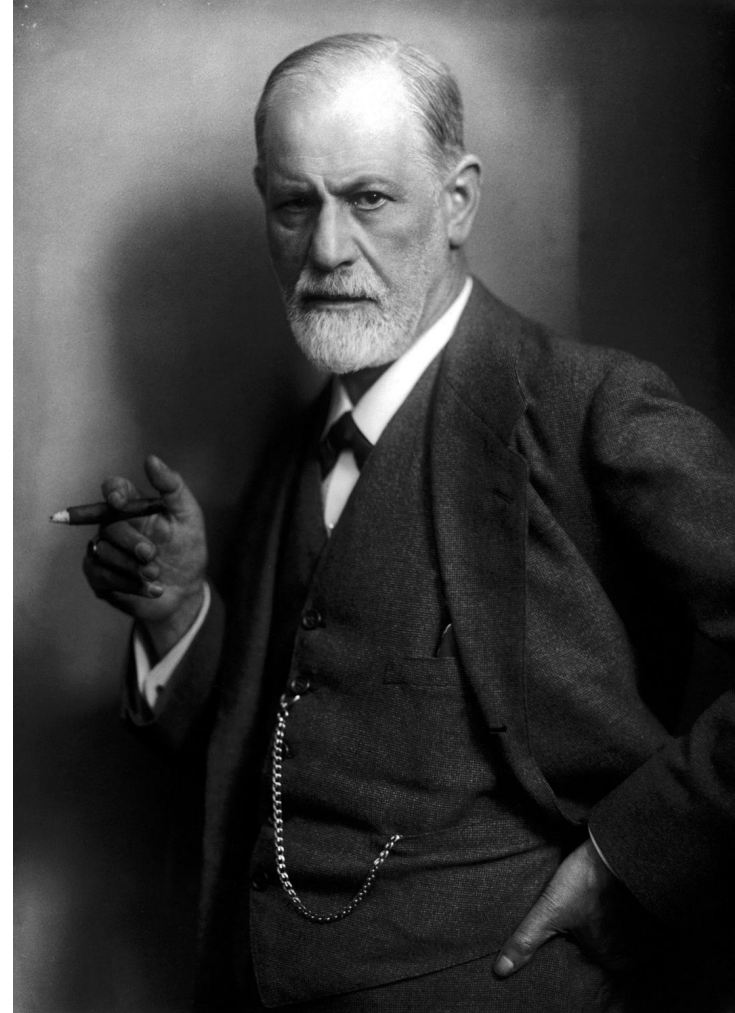
--William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene  
VII

# People vs. Roles

- Roles can be formal (admin, chairperson) or informal (copyright expert; grammar nerd; devil's advocate; peace maker)
- Recognize your role(s). What roles do you fall into?
- **You can play many parts!**

# Projection

- A tendency to attribute to others what we're not able or willing to see in ourselves (whether positive or negative).
- "X is a troll"; "Y is at it again"; "we need Z"
- We all project; we all respond to projection
- What roles are projected onto you?



Sigmund Freud, 1939, in LIFE. Public domain.

# People vs. Roles: what to do?

- **Reduce projections**
- Make roles fluid (don't resist people changing roles)
- Conflict can be seen as interaction between roles; shifting roles and people can shift the conflict.
- Focus on expressing your (current) role, rather than attacking others' roles.
- What roles do you tend to avoid? Why? What's valid about them nonetheless?
- Model flexibility; be the change you want to see. :)

## **Group discussion 3**

1. What roles do you usually play?
2. What roles are projected onto you?
3. What roles are you interested in trying?



# Exercise 3

(optional)

# **Patterns That Work**

Accumulated wikiwisdom

# Some More Patterns That Work

- Assume Good Faith (yup)
  - +[[Hanlon's Razor]], +WP:PACT
- Reframe, focus, restate, weed out irrelevance and digression
- Exclude trolls (deny recognition; pick out substance and restate)
- Fix broken windows. Model good behavior and act against bad behavior when the stakes are small.
- Avoid favoritism; fair and due process for everyone.

# Sources

- *Inside the No*, Myrna Lewis, 2008
- *Getting to Yes*, Roger Fisher and William Ury, 1981
- Dr. Aftab Erfan, University of Vancouver
- [Meatballwiki](#)

Thank you for your attention

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