Elephants and Mahouts: Conflict Engagement for Wikipedians

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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** openess 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.

What actually **matters** to us.

What we're trying to **protect or ensure**.
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
- Dr. Aftab Erfan, University of Vancouver
- [Meatballwiki](http://meatballwiki.org)
Thank you for your attention

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