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*

- Approaches to 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
Avoiding conflict

- An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure:
- e.g. magical recipe – clear and open communication:
  1. Framing
  2. Advocating
  3. illustrating/supporting
  4. Inquiring
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)
- This balance is sometimes achieved at the cost of conflict
Ideas vs. Emotions

distinction #1
Mahout on an elephant; artist unknown
gouache on paper; Murshidabad, India; 18th century.
(Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

An unrelated but very warm book recommendation: The Elephant's Journey, by José Saramago
Ideas vs. Emotions: the Resistance Line

- Jokes and sarcasm
- Gossip
- Strike/disruption
- Excuses
- Slowness
- Open war / separation

– (Lewis 2008)
People need to be heard.

People need to feel heard.
Ideas vs. Emotions: what to do?

- Mirror, paraphrase; 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)
Ideas vs. Emotions: What to do [Summary]

● 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.
What do people want from a leader?

- **Inclusion**
  - "Do I belong?"; "Will I get to participate/influence X?"

- **Respect**
  - "Is the value I bring recognized?"; "Is my experience/opinion given due deference?"

- **Fairness**
  - "Am I treated like everyone else?"; "Am I discriminated against?"; "Are others favored?"

– (McKinsey 2016)
Group discussion 1

1. What upsets your elephant?

2. Think back to a recent on-wiki conflict; how were elephants upset, exactly? Did anyone manage to calm them? If so, how?
Talk page 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*? ("5 Whys")
- **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**?
Talk page 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; joker)
- Recognize your role(s). What roles do you take? What roles are you given? What roles do you fall into?
- **Conflict** can be seen as **interaction between roles**; shifting roles and people can shift the conflict.
- **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). e.g. "X is unreasonable"
● But people also project out of expectations and mental models. (Aristotle on 'character')
● We all project; we all respond to projection
● What roles are projected onto you?
People vs. Roles: what to do?

- Reduce projections
- Make roles fluid (don't resist people changing roles)
- 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? (What's keeping you?)
Talk page 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](https://example.com/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
- McKinsey Quarterly, Feb 2016
- Dr. Aftab Erfan, University of Vancouver
- [Meatballwiki](http://Meatballwiki)
Thank you for your attention
(did you learn something?)

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