

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

Boards Training Day, WMCON 2018, Berlin

Asaf Bartov <asaf@wikimedia.org>

**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
 - Pay attention to the elephants! (explained in a moment)

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

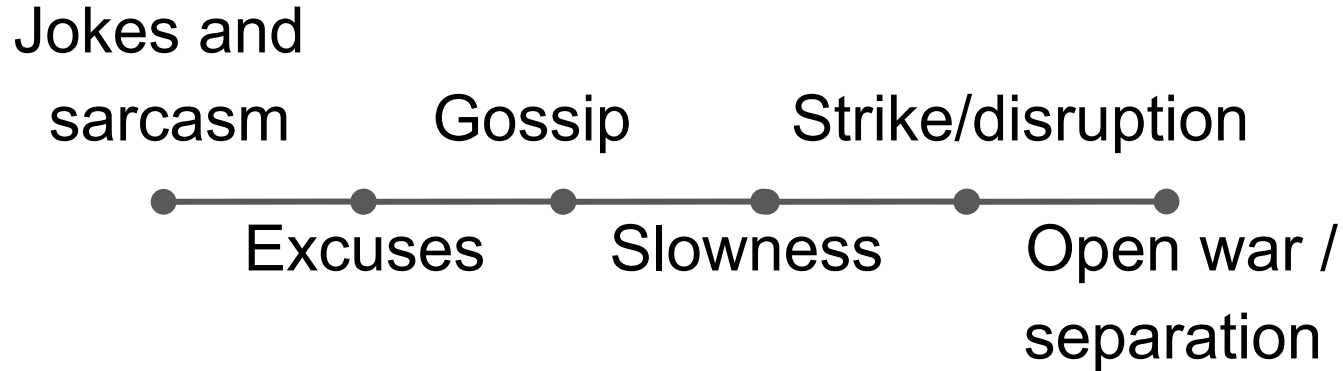
gouache on paper;
Murshidabad,
India; 18th
century.

(Victoria and
Albert Museum,
London)



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

Ideas vs. Emotions: the Resistance Line



– (Lewis 2008)

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?"

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)

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.**

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

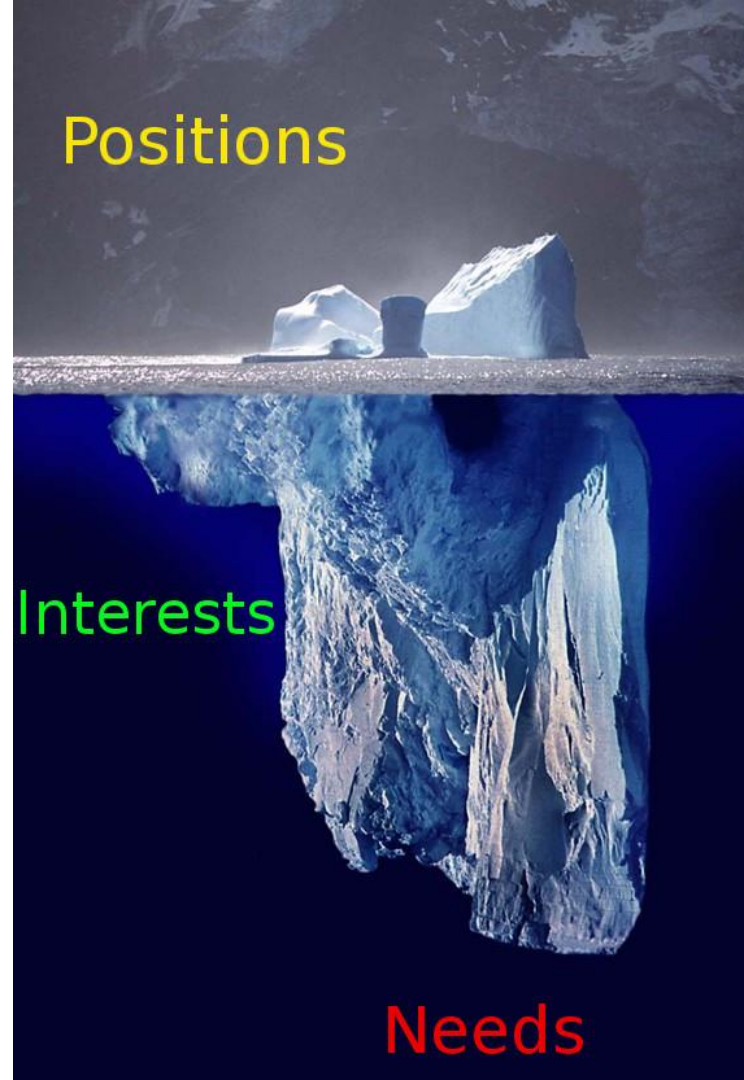
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Positions vs. Interests

distinction #2

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

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



[[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*? ("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**

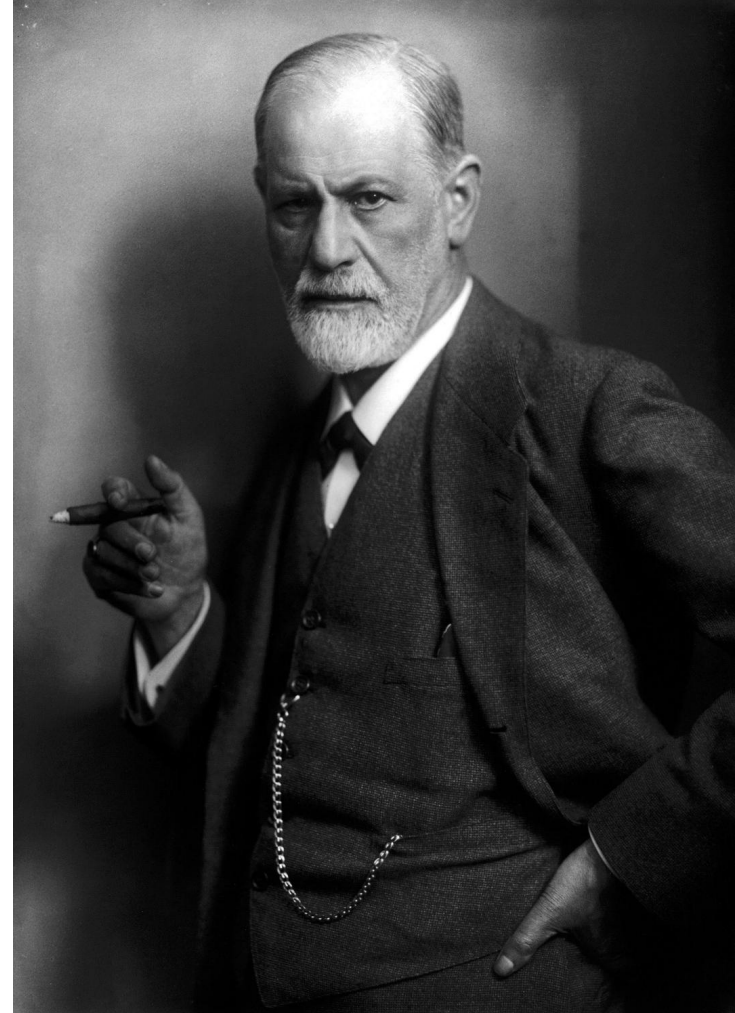
--William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene
VII

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).
- "X is a troll"; "Y is at it again"; "we need Z"
- 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?



Sigmund Freud, 1939, in LIFE. Public domain.

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?

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; 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
- McKinsey Quarterly, Feb 2016
- Dr. Aftab Erfan, University of Vancouver
- [Meatballwiki](#)

Thank you for your attention

asaf@wikimedia.org