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
  ○ 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

Jokes and sarcasm - Gossip - Strike/disruption

- (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?"

– (McKinsey 2016)
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
(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).
● "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
- McKinsey Quarterly, Feb 2016
- Dr. Aftab Erfan, University of Vancouver
- [Meatballwiki](https://meatballwiki)
Thank you for your attention

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