

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

CEE Meeting 2016, Yerevan

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*
- 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)

Exercise 1

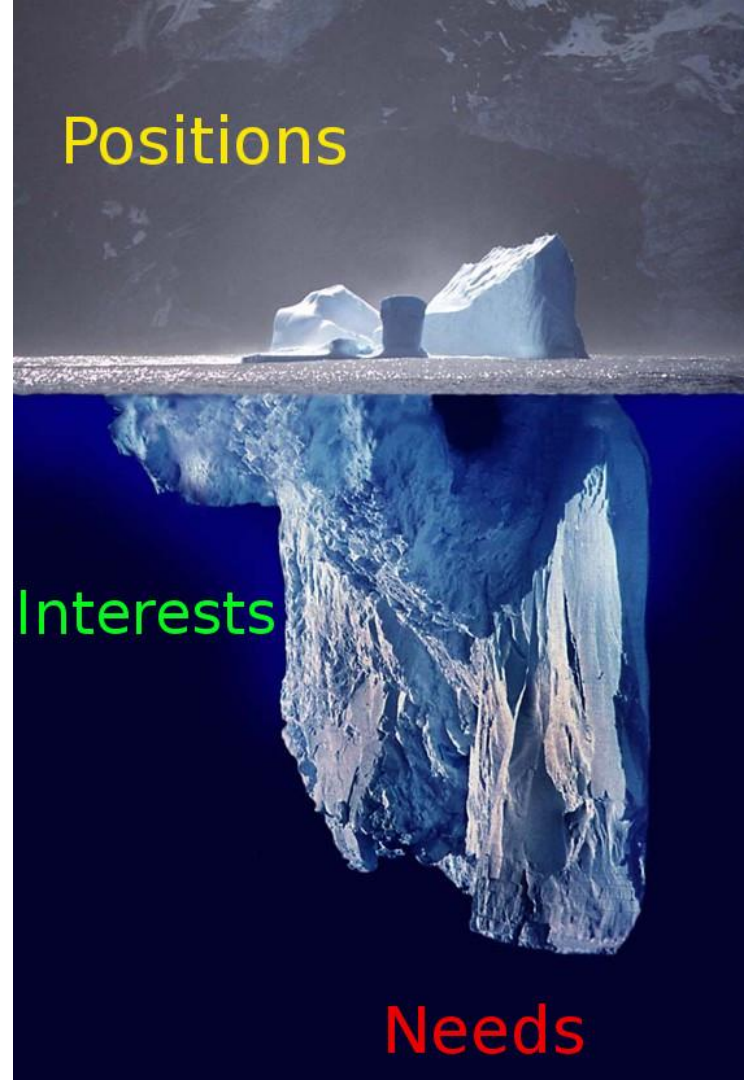
(optional)

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.



[[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*.

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**

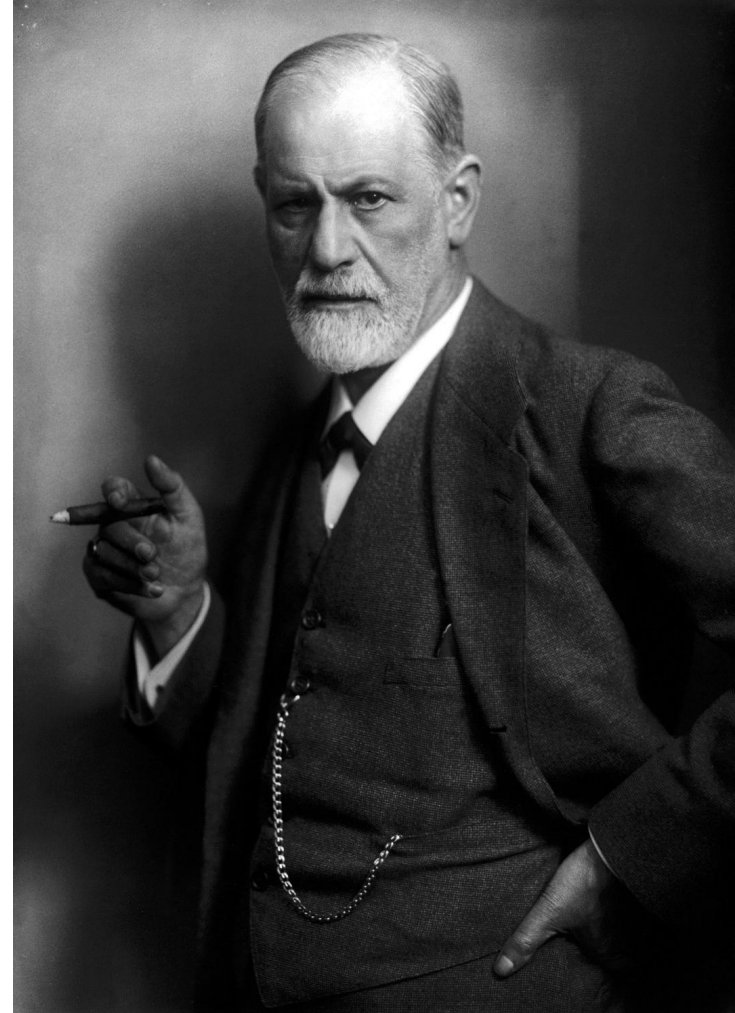
--William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene
VII

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
- 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. :)

Exercise 3

(optional)

Sources

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

Thank you for your attention

asaf@wikimedia.org