

Abstract: Progressive Resolution

Step 1: What to Change?

We must change the way we capture differences in perspective and diverging convictions. Disagreement is often surrounded by a fog. In the course of a disagreement, or argument, the fog prevents us from putting past issues in perspective and often causes us to dismiss legitimate interests of the other party. It is often difficult to separate emotion and personalities from the true objective problem. Recent strife, anecdotal situations, and metaphors populate our memory. These recollections are not necessarily true fact and experience, but stakeholders often perceive them as reality.

This phenomenon, overall lack of clarity and reluctance to engage, limits the application of our thinking tools just when they are most needed. In a manner analogous to the 5 Focusing Steps, if we apply thinking tools, especially the evaporating cloud, to dilemmas which are not core conflicts, then we may waste effort and miss critical opportunities to improve the organization. The change we need is to adopt a way to remove this fog so that we can effectively deploy our thinking tools to evaporate core conflicts and pave a path toward a future reality the entire team desires.

Step 2: What to Change to?

We need to consider a new technique to add to our repertoire of conflict resolution tools and techniques: consider progressive resolution. Progressive Resolution aims to progressively and visually reveal where true disagreement exists in complex, distressed organizations. The technique is to plot instances of real or perceived disagreement on a spectrum. The spectrum is defined by the level of agreement each party has on a particular instance. For example, if there is considerable disagreement about the instance, then it is plotted in the middle of the spectrum. The spectrum also denotes which party is the strongest advocate for the example, and whether or not the other party agrees with that advocacy. Consider this basic illustration of the spectrum:

Here is an illustrative example: Consider an “Automations” department in an important government program. The team’s purpose is to manage existing IT systems and communicate effectively with the IT department to charter projects and system enhancements. The challenge they face is that the line between IT and program has become blurred.

This tool enables you to graphically portray points of agreement and disagreement over a logical and intuitive spectrum. It is a Cartesian graph of consensus and dispute. The ensuing plots of instances of agreement and disagreement begin to paint a picture of where there is true disagreement and where there is perceived disagreement. With both parties in the room, cases can be tested by both groups. In such forums, you might hear the comment: “Well, we in IT don’t have a problem with you all doing that task, we just need to know about it.” Once true disagreement is captured in the center (salmon-colored) part of the spectrum, we can isolate the conflict and create an evaporating cloud to break it.

Here are two more examples, one extremely simple, and another extremely complicated. But both illustrate how the Progressive Resolution concept can be successfully applied to isolate true conflict, while simultaneously identifying legitimate interests. In the first situation a parent is having an impassioned discussion with a child. The discussion revolves around nutrition and preferences. The parent feels strongly that the child should eat nutritious food rich in vitamins and the child would like to eat what tastes good. The child feels adamant that he or she should like the food they eat! Where do the parent and child truly disagree and what are each side’s reasonable “legitimate interests”?

Let’s plot the conflict:

As we consider the plot we realize that we do have disagreement, but we begin to see that there are many nutritious and delicious options that both sides agree on. An injection might include building a win-win menu that is both healthy and tasty.

The origins of progressive resolution are to be found in the diplomatic techniques used by the US State Department, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, to educate US Military officers detailed to serve in the US Security Assistance Command in embassies around the world. The effort reflected here is to take those foundations and visually apply them to organizations striving to improve and apply

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Theories of Constraint to their processes. As demonstrated in the examples, Progressive Resolution is a concept that can be applied in any area where there is conflict and disagreement, from the battlefield to the boardroom to government.

Step 3: How to Cause the Change?

In keeping with Eli Goldratt's conviction that we spend so much time and effort on positional bargaining and compromise, we must peel away assumptions and perceived differences in order to expose legitimate interests and needs. Progressive Resolution helps accomplish this in a visual, enterprise way. True disagreement is often found only in a few instances and, once isolated, can be effectively captured and evaporated through the use of a conflict cloud. Or the disagreement can be eliminated with injections and the use of a prerequisite tree.

Progressive Resolution is a good name for this tool because it helps you to map existing disagreement so you can resolve the difference, and then progress as a team. However, the name, Progressive Resolution, can be viewed as a bit of a misnomer in the sense that it does not aim to achieve agreement or consensus, but rather to graphically display the disagreement. On the other hand, the concept does progressively advance the entire enterprise team toward a resolution by finding true disagreement and revealing core conflict. At this point, other TOC tools such as Evaporating Conflict Cloud can be used to break dilemmas, dispel assumptions, and, via injections, build consensus and viable solutions. Why not give Progressive Resolution a try the next time you and your teams are faced with a conundrum?