A Clear Mindset

A Novel Approach To Workplace Conflict Management

Laura Lozza

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PREFACE

The Hidden Cost of Workplace Conflict

Various studies around the world have shown the magnitude of the "conflict management challenge" in different countries and contexts. Although the data is rather fragmented, especially in Europe, the general indication is that conflicts at work occupy a substantial amount of our time and energy. The best currently accepted estimation is that the average wage earner in the Western World spends ca. 2,1 hours each week in workplace conflicts (i.e. ca. 12 days/year). This prompts us to ask a question: how can we make best use of this time and energy?

The ROI of Conflict Management Training

First of all, how do we quantify the investment? To do that, we have taken some of the most recent surveys that cover Europe (e.g. CPP Global Human Capital Report; Workplace Conflict, July 2008) and have extrapolated the findings in the total Eurozone, to estimate the monetary investment, expressed as total "paid time" (which excludes other related effects like impact on personal health or negative influence on family and social environment). The impressive outcome, when we multiply the 2,1 weekly hours by the number of wage earners per country and the average country wage, is an estimated 500 billion Euros (i.e. half a trillion or 500 thousand millions!). Further, various empirical observations indicate that this number is steadily increasing.

Another question is: can we contain this number? Next question is: can we turn this number from being a hidden cost and a waste (as well as a liability in terms of stress related sickness and absenteeism) into a value adding exercise?

Several leadership researchers and practitioners believe that it is fully possible to transform many a workplace conflict into constructive opportunities to learn from each other and improve both the business and the people relationships. Yet this is no easy task.

The paradox of Workplace Conflict

The reality is that we all tend to have a polarized attitude towards conflicts. Even those (like for example cross functional business teams) that are most alert to the opportunities presented by different points of view, disagreements, or even fierce confrontations, do have mixed feelings about them. Many business teams, who most often experience the challenge of complementarity, get regularly trapped into the paradox of WANTING TO ENCOURAGE open disagreement (in principle) and yet RESISTING or FIGHTING AGAINST IT (in reality). Many take a passive-reactive approach: conflicts are an inevitable part of life, we try to avoid them, but when this is not possible we do what we can, often trying to remove them as often as possible, even at the cost of suppressing some important contributions or imposing a homogeneous one-size-fits-all solution.

How this book can help

This e-book suggests the following:

In order not to waste this considerable investment of time/money/energy (we must think both in terms of monetary and human capital expenditures) and to fully capitalize on the opportunity of disagreements and conflicts, we need to:

a) Become clearly intentional: based on the awareness of the precious time and energy we are investing in disagreements and conflicts, we can learn to make conscious decisions about how we want to show up in front of them.
b) Learn to recognize when it is most appropriate to: **resolve**, or **prevent** or rather **encourage** a disagreement.
c) Train key people in the organization on how to effectively **resolve** conflicts; train especially managers to intervene with effective negotiations and HR personnel to intervene with effective facilitation (or by recruiting effective facilitators); limit the costly step or arbitration or legal proceeding.
d) Provide teams with proper and timely training on **prevention** of conflicts.
e) Train everyone in the organization in **constructive disagreements**, specifically train on how to **encourage disagreements** and confidently open up innovative inclusive dialogues with respect, curiosity and courage, in order to foster **improved collaboration, innovation and engagement**.

In addition to providing a simple and clear overview of the two most common conflict management approaches (conflict resolution and conflict prevention), this e-book specifically focuses on the third approach of **encouraging constructive disagreements in order to co-create positive change**, also called **Conflict Transformation**.

You will be introduced to the **neuroscience of conflicts** and better understand how to constructively redirect some of the natural instinctive reactions that often hinders our ability to handle disagreements and workplace conflicts in a constructive way.

Finally, you will be offered **a Model** to guide us through a confident, courageous, and productive dialogue, as well a **simple 5-step Method** (the C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method) to help you apply the Model in practice.

For more information about the leadership and behavioral philosophy behind the Model and Method, please visit the Grooa Leading with a Smile website (www.grooa.com).

For information about available training on the C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method, please visit the dedicated website www.theclearmindset.com.

1   WHAT IS WORKPLACE CONFLICT

What thoughts come to your mind when you hear the words "workplace conflict"?

If your first reaction is to think of something emotionally or physically stressful, if the images that come to your mind are of fights or combat, if you instinctively picture or experience a state of worry or anxiety, you are not alone.

We are used to think of conflicts, both in our professional and our private lives, in negative terms, as if they were something that we could do without and that we would like to avoid at all costs. We tend to picture them as fights and our stomach churns.

And yet, not all conflicts are "fights", certainly not all conflicts are "unproductive fights": there are some extremely useful types of healthy and constructive conflicts that can lead to shared learning, innovative ideas and even improved relationships.

Conflict management is about taking a good look at all the various situations of workplace conflict and deciding whether the conflict needs to be addressed and resolved, anticipated and avoided, or even encouraged and channeled into a constructive direction, to stimulate cross-learning, engagement and ultimately innovation.

Easier said than done? Of course! So let's go step by step.

1.1   ORIGIN OF WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

The birthplace of all conflicts is our diversity; **as human beings, we are both attracted by the "new and different" and at the same time genetically programmed to be suspicious about it**. It is in this "emotional limbo" between attraction and resistance to "the different" that major clashes take form; and at the same time it is our difference that can open the door to mutual learning and co-creation.

So how does conflict happen? **Three aspects** must be present: a **disagreement about a subjective claim**, a **need to choose**, and a **high level of personal importance attributed to the claim** on which we disagree.

Let's look at the **first aspect**: **conflicts usually start from a disagreement about a subjective matter**. What is a subjective matter? In simple terms: it is something that cannot be objectively and simply measured.

The following example illustrates this difference: let's say that we are talking about two different colors, red and green. We can have two different types of disagreement:

a) We may have a disagreement about "which of the two colors carries more energy"; this is a scientific question that can be resolved objectively; we can measure the wavelength (e.g. by a spectrometer) and calculate the energy using the Planck formula ($E=hc/\lambda$, where E is the energy, h is the Planck constant, c is the light speed and λ is the wavelength). Or we can more simply consult a physics handbook. We can thus find out that green has a shorter wavelength, i.e. higher frequency, and therefore carries more energy than red. This is an objective answer, since anybody going through the same experiment or investigation, would find the same result. We can all "agree" on one position and claim that it is "the truth". **In the case of two opposing objective claims, it is possible to find out what is true and what is false, i.e. there is a "right answer".**

b) We may have a different type of disagreement about these two colors: e.g. we may have two different claims about "which of the two colors – red or green – is best to communicate optimism". This is a disagreement on a subjective matter. There are no universal criteria for finding "the right answer": perception is linked to different socio-cultural and contextual situations, thus views about this question can be many and very different, even sometimes totally opposite. This is therefore a difference of views, beliefs or preferences; it is a dilemma that does not have a universal "right answer"; it cannot be "objectively solved"; it is impossible to determine which is "the real truth". However, those who feel happy, energized and optimistic when surrounded by red will often be reluctant to accept that red may give negative vibes to other people (who might rather describe red as irritating, provocative and aggressive); as well as those who feel happy, energized and optimistic when surrounded by green will often be reluctant to accept that green may solicit different feelings in others (who may in turn describe green as boring, institutional and sad). **In the case of a subjective question, there is no "right answer"**. (However, each one of us will tend to hold our own answer to be "the truth"!)

To note: Let me here anticipate something that we will cover in some more detail in Chapter 3: human beings do not like uncertainty; we do not like NOT to have an answer; our brain will always approximate one answer and hold it to be true. While this has been a very important asset in the evolution of our species, and it still helps us get by in a number of situations today, we need to be alert to this reflex, since the blind belief in subjective "educated guesses" might turn us into righteous partisans of our own ideas, not one of our most desirable traits in modern life.

We can now add a **second aspect: conflicts usually start from a disagreement about a judgmental matter, when there is a need to select and choose between different views, beliefs or preferences**. Whether we need to choose the strategy for our business, or the setting of the office air-co system, as long as there are different points of view, chances are that we would instinctively try to approach the question as if it was an objective disagreement: we would most probably try to "find the right answer", with facts and reasons; we may try to overpower the other side with various means of coercion or persuasion; or we may all together remove ourselves from the discussion, allowing the other side to "win", but still feeling that we are the only ones to be right, and the victim of being misunderstood and unappreciated. Sounds familiar?

Let's continue with the example of the colors, to see what can happen in practice.

Let's assume that a Local Marketing Team is designing a logo or a marketing campaign where optimism is a key element of the communication. As they start to go about choosing a color theme, they may instinctively pick red as the dominant color; this seems like such an obvious choice to them that they get really surprised when the Global Marketing Team proposes a different color, like blue or green; they are even more surprised that the Global Marketing Team are strongly opposed to red. As soon as the two different preferences are on the table, and each team has had a chance to share their view and related considerations around how the campaign would look like, frustration starts to emerge. Each team brings up more elements to support the correctness of their own view and at the same time tries to invalidate the other view; eventually the two teams even start to see the two different views as "opposed". This is the beginning of a workplace conflict.

There is of course no right or wrong view here; if and when the two teams are able to overcome their initial surprise or frustration, they may discover the opportunity to learn more from each other.

Yet these are typical moments when our protective-defensive mechanisms are activated; instead of getting curious about "what makes the others see things differently from us", we might begin to "line up our weapons" (e.g. our expertise, past examples, market data, alliances, positional power) to then "deploy our weapons", or in other words "go to war": "I am right, red is the best choice and I will prove it to you, I will convince you, and I will win!" Do you recognize this reaction?

This is a very natural reaction, totally instinctive, almost impossible to suppress. It may seem we assign such a high level of importance to our views that we feel personally attacked by a different view.

So here we get to the **third aspect** of a conflict: **conflicts usually start from a disagreement about a judgmental matter, when there is a need to select and choose between different views, beliefs or preferences, and we attribute a high level of personal importance to the matter.**

Notice the expression "we attribute" which is very different from saying that the matter "is" universally important. The degree of importance that we refer to, that "counts" in order to start a conflict, is not something strictly measurable or objective. It is extremely subjective.

In the example of the color choice, some team members might look at the need to select a color theme as a simple task; for them, the importance of the task is not personal, but linked to the deadline of the campaign in relation with a product lunch. For some other team members, there may be other factors; one might consider himself a color expert, thus assigning great importance to understanding the colors' impact on people; someone might hold a belief that as a leader she must convince others, thus assigning great importance to having it her way; and so on. With more at stake to protect and defend, it is hard to stay open and curious.

If and when we are able to overcome this first defensive reaction, we can probably have a very interesting dialogue and learn from each other. We may for example learn that the low energy "warm" red color may well evoke feelings of warmth and comfort, but also of anger and hostility; and that the higher energy "cold" green color may well inspire calm optimism, but also sadness. Once we accept that others have different reactions to colors, we can have a more open discussion and discover the roots of certain assumptions. In our practical example, a Brazilian-based Local Team may learn from the Global Team that red is the color of death and hostility in South Africa, a key market for their product, while the Global Team may find out that green has a similar association with death and danger in Brazil. This will probably lead to co-creating a color and logo combination that has the best chances of communicating the intended positioning without being misinterpreted by a significant part of the audience; they may at least be able to identify the potential risks of using one overpowering color rather than another, so they can maybe test market different alternatives.

> Note: You can find out more about our instinctive protective-defensive reactions in Chapter 3.

Via this simple example we have started to look into the genesis of conflicts. It is important to mention that the subject is complex and that extensive research has gone into both understanding the genesis of conflicts in various contexts (e.g. political, religious, organizational) and proposing strategies to improve our collective "performance" in conflict situations, so to encourage mutual learning and complementarity of ideas.

In this book, we take a pragmatic approach and focus solely on the practicalities of handling conflicts in the workplace.

1.2 EXAMPLES OF WORKPLACE CONFLICTS

We here give a couple of workplace related examples to further deepen our understanding of the difference between situations where it is possible to find an objective "right answer" and those situations where subjective views are clashing, there is no "right or wrong answer", and might create a real conflict (which can then be dealt with, in more or less constructive ways, as we will see in following Chapters):

Conflict of Interest:

- A Breach of Compliance is usually easy to factually demonstrate, based on existing laws or Code of Conduct (e.g. dating a superior, steeling company money, bullying colleagues); we can easily identify an objective "right answer".

- What might become a source of lengthy conflict is the decision about implications and consequences, where not specifically included in the rules; e.g. dismissal might be mandatory for steeling, but no clear rules may exist for dating a superior. Should one of them be asked to move or leave? Which one? The choice of consequences can be subjective and the final outcome will not be the "right answer" but most probably, the opinion of the dominant party.

- Another source of conflict might be a potential lurking suspicion about the intentions or hidden motives of someone else, which may create a mounting mistrust and communication deadlock. Unless the parties manage to be transparent about own motives and trust each other, there will not be a constructive dialogue, but only a lingering situation of conflict.

Interdependence conflicts:

- The case of endangering or harming others is usually easy to factually demonstrate, based on existing Safety Guidelines (e.g. a line operator or a maintenance engineer who abandons a critical position without alerting others, potentially or actually causing a physical risk to colleagues). We can easily identify an objective "right answer".

- Conflicts can easily appear when some individuals need the inputs or output of others in order to complete their job tasks. Let's take an example. If a sales executive is late to input monthly sales figures, the accounting department will be late in submitting reports and this will create stress, frictions and potentially a conflict. Once roles and responsibilities are clear and everybody feels accountable (i.e. objective criteria exist, are understood and accepted), there might still be a margin of discretion, where the sales executive might be making a judgmental call (e.g. to prioritize a key customer intervention) that may clash with how the accounting department perceives the relative priorities (e.g. accurate figures might be needed to make a key business decision about the possible discontinuation of the market segment involving that specific key customer); unless the two parties are transparent about their own motivations, give the other party the benefit of the doubt and seriously try to understand the perspective and motivation of the other, this will result in a non-constructive conflict.

2   THE 3 STRATEGIES OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The General Field of Workplace **Conflict Management** is directed towards **limiting the negative aspects of conflicts**, and **maximizing its positive learning and collaborative effects**.

Currently, the majority of strategies that are usually applied in the organizational context are of two types, **Resolution Strategies** or **Preventive Strategies**. They are described in the following two sections. They both originate from an **underlying assumption that conflicts are generally undesirable**, that is, they address the first part of the proposition (limiting negative aspects) but mainly ignore the second important aspect of conflicts as onset of collaboration and mutual learning.

By and large these "classical" Resolution and Prevention approaches are based on two theoretical frameworks:

a. **Dual Substantive-Affective Theory**. Conflicts are classified as being of two types, often called substantial conflicts (also called task-related or cognitive conflicts) and affective conflicts (also called relationship conflicts); the former supposedly originate from a rational disagreement about a choice, the latter originate from a personal clash, i.e. they are emotional. Although not specifically enunciated in any systematic models, this is a very common and generic classification used in a variety of texts that cover organizational issues. It is also a reflection of the general misconception about cognition as separate and superior to emotions.
As we now know from modern neuroscience and social psychology, although task and people related functions could partly be identified as separate brain functions, cognition and emotions are much more strictly interconnected than the above theory infers. Most disagreements actually start from different personal intuitions, involving different feelings, emotions, memories and assumptions, that significantly contribute to our rationalization processes; this will be discussed in Chapter 3.

b. **Dual Concern Model**. Currently, the most frequently tool to select a conflict resolution tactic is based on the Dual Concern Model. This Model offers a simple analytical approach based on a utilitarian philosophy: if the issue is not important for me, I can choose to concede and oblige, or I can all together avoid if the others are also not very "hot" about it (or if I decide to discount the interest of others); if instead the issue is very important to me, I may choose to impose my view; or alternatively when I wish to (or need to) take care of the others' concerns, I may accept to invest time and energy in a complex negotiation and problem solving exercise trying to integrate different inputs. The model also allows for a grey zone: somewhere in the middle there is an area where it is possible to compromise (everybody looses something).
See **Picture 1**.

Picture 1
The Five Styles of Conflict Resolution, based on the Dual Concern Model

(Picture from: M.A. Rahim, 2002 "Toward a theory of managing organizational conflict". The International Journal of Conflict Management, 2002, Vol.13)

CONCERN FOR SELF

	HIGH	LOW
HIGH	Integrating	Obliging
	Compromising	
LOW	Dominating	Avoiding

CONCERN FOR OTHERS
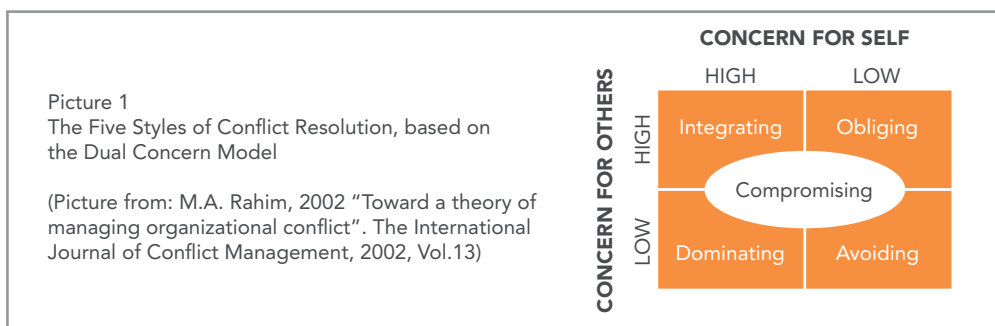
The weakness of this Model is in considering conflicts from a simple utilitarian perspective; human nature is more complex than this, as clearly shown by modern behavioral economics. For example, ignoring or avoiding a conflict because it is considered not important from a purely utilitarian point of view, might put us at risk of ignoring a subtle but fundamental difference in values and intentions, which might escalate at a later point in time.

The **Third Strategy** is to "Encourage an Open Learning Dialogue to learn from Disagreement and Transform it into Positive Change"; we can simply call it **Conflict Transformation**.

Conflict Transformation can produce significant benefits, but it requires specific training on specific skills; an open – albeit fierce – dialogue can fuel mutual learning and ignite innovative problem solving and co-creation of positive change, but it calls for courage, self-confidence, genuine curiosity, flexibility, and creativity.

Interestingly enough, once we acquire the skills to Encourage and Handle Open Disagreement, the same skills can also help us better Resolve and Prevent Conflicts when necessary.

In general we can say, for simplification purposes, that:

- When a disagreement escalates into a real conflict, the discussion becomes unproductive, different views consolidate into rigid un-reconcilable positions, and the tones become confrontational, we have a real conflict that needs **resolving**; this can be the right moment to apply Conflict Resolution Techniques.
- In many other cases, namely when establishing a cross-functional project team, there is also something that can be done before a conflict emerges. Proper **prevention** techniques can be used upfront; specifically, one can spend time on training and preparing a team, before the critical decision moment is reached, when time will be short, stress will be high, and the likelihood of impatient non-constructive confrontations may peak.
- With proper training of individuals and teams, it is of course always possible to **transform** any disagreements into mutual learning and positive change; this takes time and focus, but the benefits can compensate the investment.

2.1   CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A Conflict Resolution Strategy is defined as "any method aimed at swiftly removing the dysfunctional effects of a disagreement that has escalated to an unproductive stage, or conflict; and the relative high-level action plan".

Conflict Resolution is the most widely studied part of Conflict Management, so much that the two terms are often considered as synonyms and used interchangeably. As we saw in Chapter 2, the underlying intention of Conflict Management is to limit the negative aspects of conflicts while maximizing its positive learning and collaborative effects. By contrast, the underlying assumption of Conflict Resolution is that conflicts are always dysfunctional: they are by definition problems that need to be resolved. Conflict Resolution Strategies involve corrective interventions to an existing, perceived, or emerging conflict; the intervention methods may involve negotiation, mediation or arbitration.

Given the many documented benefits of Constructive or Transformational Conflict Handling, this is an overall unfortunate assumption. In some cases, however, due to lack of time, energy, training, or qualified resources, we may still need to quickly intervene with a Conflict Resolution Strategy. A Conflict Resolution Strategy is therefore useful when an unproductive conflict already exists or is clearly emerging. In general terms, we say a conflict is unproductive when positions have become rigid, discussions are repeated and the focus shifts from the business interest to other personal interests.

Most business leaders are trained in negotiation skills as part of their leadership development curriculum, while they usually depend upon third-party interventions by expert mediators or arbitrators in cases where the conflict degenerates and/or appears to involve compliance infractions (note: this is often a grey and judgmental area).

Typical Conflict Resolution Strategies involve corrective intervention methods, and relative action plans, that can be grouped in three different categories:

1. Negotiation Methods
2. Mediation or Facilitation Methods
3. Arbitration or Legal Litigation Methods

2.1.1 NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is the primary method that people use to settle differences. Strictly speaking, Negotiation does not rely on **Positional Power** (i.e. coercion) or **Rights** (i.e. legal/judicial contrast), but solely on **Interest**. This is an important distinction that is sometimes forgotten in the heat of a difficult discussion.

Negotiation is a structured process to get us to an end; the end is usually known upfront, although not always clearly spelled out, and in very general terms it can be expressed as "making sure that all key interests are protected in the most efficient way, both the needs of the business and the needs of each party". As you may have noticed, we have used the verb "protect". *Recall the underlying assumption that the difference is a problem and agreement is the solution. There is very little interest in investigating the reasons for the difference and there is very little attention to what could be learnt from different views or positions. The focus is on protection and minimum loss.*

You choose Negotiation when:

- An initial difference or a disagreement has created a strong divide, positions have become fixed, and the discussion is no longer productive, yet there is a clearly identified common interest (e.g. disagreement on how to reach the accepted business goal of improved divisional profitability, either by external back-office outsourcing or by sharing central HQ back-office resources).
- You are in "protection" mode: e.g. there is an immediate urgency to overcome a clash in the quickest and most efficient way in order to move on fast, even if this means sacrificing mutual learning and unanimous engagement.

- There is a preferred option that is upfront shared by a majority, or by a most relevant person/team, hence the negotiation is aimed at removing objections and opposing views by various forms of persuasion, to bring everybody on board along the preferred path.
- You wish to participate directly to decisions that affect you/your role and responsibility in order to retain control of the outcome.

Using Negotiation to Resolve a Conflict is more challenging than most other business negotiations (where there is more attention dedicated to understanding the other side) hence it is often treated as a separate competence. Yet the interpersonal skills required by a Conflict Resolution Negotiation are the same as required in all other forms of Negotiation (e.g. Commercial Negotiations, Legal Negotiations, Marital Negotiations):

- Active Listening Skills
- Verbal and Non-verbal Communication Skills
- Rational Problem Solving
- Empathy
- Assertiveness

Most business leaders are trained in interpersonal skills and negotiating skills, as part of their leadership development curriculum. What is sometimes lacking in traditional leadership training is specific methodology to help with the actual Conflict Solving Negotiation Process. It is therefore not uncommon for leaders to feel anxious about their Conflict Solving Negotiations Skills.

The most frequently taught and often used methodology is based on the Dual Concern Model: the Thomas-Kilmann Inventory (TKI) is used as a diagnostic tool to assess what tactic to use.

Examples of alternative methodologies or approaches that also take into consideration the complexity of different emotions involved in a human interaction are: Positive Power and Influence, Win-Win Negotiations, Crucial Conversations and Getting to Yes. They all have in common one important aspect: they primarily focus on how to change the other party *(keep this observation in mind, since this will constitute a significant difference with the Conflict Transformation approach, which has the opposite focus "I change myself first")*.

It is worth mentioning that each one of us has a preferred behavioral style and that each style can be appropriate and effective in one situation more than in another situation; hence being able to learn other types of behaviors and applying them appropriately can give us a more complete "toolbox" for conflict resolution.

2.1.2 MEDIATION OR FACILITATION

Mediation is the involvement of an impartial third party to support and help those involved in a conflict to find a resolution.

We usually call it Facilitation when the Third Party is either an internal or an external Coach, who encourages an informal dialogue. We more strictly refer to Mediation when we employ an external Third Party with a more formal structure.

The key difference between Negotiation and Mediation/Facilitation is that in Negotiation the parties involved work out their own agreement while in Mediation they have the support of the third party, the Mediator, to help them come to an agreement, hence "loosing" part of the control of the outcome.

Another difference is that Mediation – unlike Negotiation – might also at times rely on Rights and Obligations, not only on Interest.

However, even when Mediation uses an Evaluative process based on Rights and Obligations, this is done in a factual and objective way, without trying to find who is right and who is wrong.

Mediation, whether formal or informal, can often help solve conflicts that have gone beyond the negotiation stage.

The main goals are

- To ensure that everybody gets to be heard, feels validated and respected;
- All options are discussed thoroughly with all pros and cons;
- To get the conflicting parties to reach a common pragmatic decision and to commit to respect it in spite of retaining personal reticence or doubts

This is therefore a pragmatic approach, that often ensures an acceptable way to move forward and where the conflicting parties can learn to respect a certain mutual obligation to cooperate.

2.1.3 ARBITRATION

Arbitration is an adversary process.

It is a formal process, structured to be efficient; although less formal than a legal litigation, it is delegated to a specialist and the outcome is largely defined by the arbitrator.

In comparison with a legal litigation, there is usually a more respectful relationship between the parties, who are not expected to resort to any means in order to win: personal attacks and bad-mouthing are strongly discouraged.

This is a last resort for a deadlock situation where all the rest has failed and there is no more time/energy available to continue along a not adversary stage. Its timing and cost might be similar to a legal process, but it remains contained and private (no dirty laundry in the open).

2.2   CONFLICT PREVENTION

A Conflict Prevention Strategy involves pre-empting actions to avoid escalation of a disagreement into a real clash. It can be most effectively utilized at the very moment when a team is first created, especially a multi-functional project team.

This Strategy has only recently built up some steam. Realizing that acting earlier rather than later can at times be a more effective approach than resolving a confrontation that has already gone sour, modern leaders, researchers, coaches and trainers have increasingly been interested in Preventing Conflict Management Strategies, i.e. strategies that encourage to prepare for the tough discussions ahead by specifically training teams to trust, respect, listen, share and co-create.

Some of the most successfully established approaches are "Non-Violent Communication" and Arbinger's principles in "Anatomy of Peace".

It is also worth mentioning a very recent HBR (Harvard Business Review) publication by Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux (IMD-Lausanne) that suggests a simple, highly practical and comprehensive five-step method called the Five Conversations. It is a process focused on "exploring the differences that might hinder team collaboration" by doing so at the beginning of team establishment, i.e. in a moment when the pressure is off. This method, when timely employed on business teams at their creation, can help create a climate of trust, raising awareness of personal differences, and encouraging more acceptance and empathy; this prepares the team for the moment when the pressure gets higher, the deadlines approach and it is harder to stay clam and inclusive.

There is of course great value in anticipating conflicts before they become unmanageable, and it is certainly a big plus for a team to learn to have those critical conversations about their own biases, perceptions, emotional expectations, perspectives and judgments.

The only downside is that insisting on prevention of conflicts might generate a culture of low risk where individuals and teams become excessively "politically correct" to a point of loosing the "zest of experiencing tough challenges and very provocative new perspectives" in the name of mutual acceptance and harmony.

2.3   CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

As leaders, we certainly need to learn both how to prevent and how to resolve Conflicts, as they are both necessary strategies in various situations. However, there is one more strategy that is highly worth considering, which can offer additional benefits as well as adding a methodological approach that can also support our Resolution and Prevention Methods: namely the Strategy of "Encouraging an Open Dialogue on a Disagreement" with the aim of learning and growing together, also called Constructive Disagreement or **Conflict Transformation**.

As earlier mentioned, both Preventing and Resolving strategies stem from the desire to remove or reduce the negative consequences of unproductive confrontations; but in recent years a few leaders, researchers, coaches and trainers have started to put their fingers on **an interesting aspect of disagreement and conflicts: they tend to correlate with innovation**.

It appears that a certain level of controversy is needed in order to "spike" our individual and collective creativity and induce a major leap into "novelty land". Just think about the examples of PIXAR and Google, as studied by Harvard professor Linda Hill. She stresses that a different set of leadership skills is needed in order to foster a culture of co-creation and innovation, than what is usually required to implement a vision or execute a strategy and a plan. This set of skills includes the **ability to fiercely advocate alternative views**, the **stamina to weather uncertainties** and the **confidence to trust that the future will emerge from the chaos**, without a plan.

Here we already see a **dilemma**.

Most **managers take pride in driving ahead competently and efficiently**, without letting overly creative challenges rock their boat; if a challenge comes their way, they want to resolve it quickly and continue on the paved road; conflicts should be kept to a minimum, because harmony is seen as more productive.

Yet **innovation requires that** we stop resolving and removing all differences; it requires that we rather dig into differences, that we actually feed disagreement and look a little bit deeper into the multitude of views and perspectives of our diversity, to uncover new insights; it requires that we challenge the status quo and defy usual logic, to break the boundaries of comfort zones; it requires that **we move away from the safety of executional planning and weather the uncertainties and ambiguities of the collective creative chaos**.

I infer that, in addition to learning the skills to resolve and prevent conflicts, **today's leaders also need to learn the skills needed to encourage healthy disagreements and conflicts**. This is a scary endeavor that requires a lot of confidence and the resilience to navigate uncertainties. As beautifully said by Brené Brown, we cannot innovate unless we master the courage to be vulnerable and face shame. We cannot innovate unless we build the confidence to be authentically "who we are, not who we think we should be". We need to learn the courage to advocate a lost cause, to set aside the desires to convince, be right, be liked or win. We need to clear our head of fears, worries and biases in order to be ourselves at best and retain our ability to influence without closing doors to alternatives.

But how do we do this?

- The first step is to consciously and proactively **choose**: there are situations when we just need to run fast and put off fires, so we must use resolution techniques; open dialogue takes times and energy and we must learn to **select the appropriate place and time**.

- The second step is to develop a greater **awareness of our instinctive reactions** and learn to challenge our mindset; after selecting a situation where we want to invest in open dialogue, we still need to change our attitudes; if we only try to manipulate the situation, and simply apply some learnt behavior, sooner or later we will fall back into usual patterns; an attitude change causes sustainable behavioral changes that makes us authentic, trustable, hence more influential. **Understanding our reactions is the foundation for changing our attitude and implementing sustainable effective behaviors**. Chapter 3 and 4 will help us on this.

- The third step is to thoroughly **train and practice on Trusting Collaboration and Transforming Conflicts**. This is a journey. Chapters 5 and 6 will provide systematic guidance for this journey.

3 THE NEUROSCIENCE OF CONFLICTS

In this chapter we explore some of the cognitive and behavioral brain processes that appear to influence our attitude and approach towards conflicts, as far as we know it today, based on recent findings from neuroscience.

Neuroscience is the science that studies the brain and its functions; it specifically studies how we come to understand the world around us (cognitive neuroscience) and how we behave, as a result of our conscious or unconscious understanding (behavioral neuroscience).

Obviously, the matter is complex and we know that we shall never fully understand how our brains work. A famous quote by Ian Stewart (The Collapse of Chaos) goes: *"If our brains were simple enough for us to understand them, we'd be so simple that we couldn't"*.

However, we start to have a better understanding of some of the key brain functions that influence our way of dealing with the world around us, and in particular how we deal with difficult situations like confrontations, disagreements and conflicts.

In this chapter we shall look at three aspects of how our brains work, that are key to help us better understand and correct some automatisms that affect our ability to deal with conflicts in a constructive way. The three aspects are: the **Protective Reflex of the Brain**, the **Intuitive Shortcuts of the Brain** (Heuristics and Biases), and the **Conflicting Task-People Brain Networks**.

3.1 THE PROTECTIVE REFLEX OF THE BRAIN

Many might have heard the expression "fight or flight reflex" also more accurately called **"Fight, Flight or Freeze Response"**. This reflex was first described by Walter Bradford Cannon and refers to the physiological change that rapidly occurs in all animals when faced with a threat; they get a boost of energy that "prepares" them for fighting or fleeing. A third possibility was later discovered; in some cases the boost of energy allows the option to freeze into immobility as an alternative defensive strategy (there have also been cases involving humans who minimized harm or escaped sure death when attacked by a bear, by "freezing into a death-like immobility" thus inducing the bear to discontinue the offensive)

Yet, although many are generally familiar with this concept, a very basic and automatic protective reaction that humans have in common with all other animals, we may not fully understand how this reflex really works in the context of disagreements and conflicts, unless we take a much closer look at the brain. Further, we may not be fully aware of how to put this reflex at its best use.

Therefore, as background, we shall first look into the structure and main functions of the brain.

3.1.1 THE BASIC STRUCTURE AND MAIN FUNCTIONS OF THE HUMAN BRAIN

We shall use a **very simplified model** of the brain, the triune model proposed by Prof. Paul D.MacLean (**Picture 2**).

Picture 2
The Triune Brain Model

(From the frontispiece to MacLean, 1990)
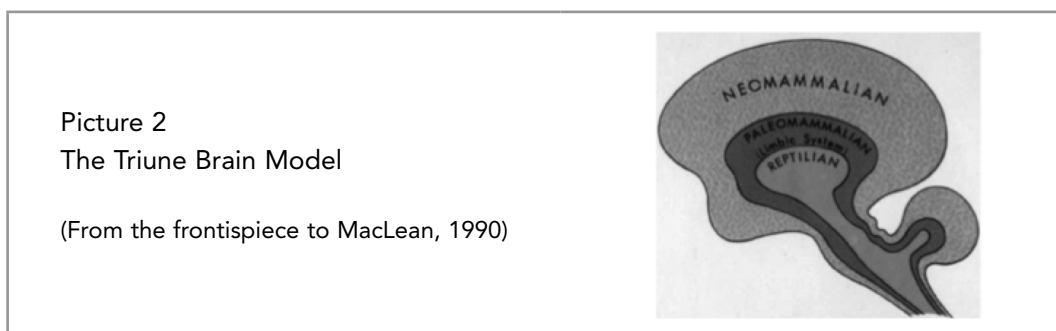
Based on a clear chemical and structural difference, Prof. MacLean divided the brain into three areas: the "Reptilian Brain", the "Paleo-Mammalian Brain" and the "Neo-Mammalian Brain". These names were assigned based on evolutionary considerations and comparative observations with other species.

In the words of Prof. MacLean, it is like if we possessed a "hierarchy of three brains in one – a triune brain. Or, stated another way, we have a linkage of three bio-computers, each with its own special kind of intelligence, sense of time, memory, motor, and other functions." "It should be emphasized, however, that the three brain types are in no sense separate, autonomous entities".

The **Reptilian Brain** is responsible for some very basic functions related to staying alive, protection of the individual and survival of the species, specifically:

- To keep us alive: it regulates automatic and unconscious body functions like breathing, heart rate, blood circulation and digestion
- To ensure self preservation and preservation of the species: it organizes and supervises instinctive behaviors like eating and defending food sources, sex and procreation, defending self and territory
- It is also importantly responsible to **enact the Fight, Flight or Freeze Response**

The human Reptilian Brain is the oldest (in terms of evolution) formation of our current brain, one that we have in common with most other animal species. Reptiles for example, have a form of brain that is very similar to the human Reptilian Brain and performs similar functions, while they only have a very rudimentary cortex around it. An evolutionary expansion and elaboration of the very primitive reptile cortex is presumed to be the next step of human development, with the gradual appearance of a more complex cortex, one that includes the Limbic System: it is the Paleo-Mammalian Brain.

The Paleo-Mammalian Brain provides an enhanced view and understanding of the world, and a better way to survive including forming (protective) social bonds. It is involved into more complex functions, mainly:

- Consciousness
- Thought
- Memory
- Emotion
- Social Connection
- **Triggering of Fight, Flight or Freeze Response**

This is the part of the brain that we humans appear to have in common with other mammals and some other "intelligent animals". The Limbic System, which is an important part of the Paleo-Mammalian Brain, appears to be responsible to gather information, which guides the behavior necessary for self-preservation and preservation of the species.

Late in the human evolution, the cortex further expanded; in MacLeod's words "it mushroomed" until it culminated into the creation of the modern man's ability to read, calculate and produce abstract thoughts. This further expansion of the cortex, with several layers, distinct parts and inter-wired networks, creates a new large and complex part of the brain, which in the MacLean model goes under the collective name of Neo-Mammalian Brain, or Neocortex.

The **Neo-Mammalian Brain** (Neocortex) is involved in numerous complex functions including the revolutionary new function that appears at this stage: the **promotion and preservation of ideas**. Specifically, the Neocortex is involved with:

- Sensory Perceptions
- Motor Commands
- Spatial Reasoning
- Language
- Conscious Thought
- Conscious Interpretation of Emotional State

While three parts of the Neocortex (Occipital, Parietal and Temporal Lobes) are mainly involved with sensory, motor, spatial and language functions, it is **the Frontal Lobe** (see **Picture 3**) **that presides the most sophisticated functions of our brain**, like abstract thinking, regulation of behavior, decision process, interpretation of emotions, estimation of probabilities, and making "right or wrong" choices.

Picture 3
The Neocortex

(From Gray's Anatomy)

A **very important part of the Frontal Lobe is the Pre Frontal Cortex**, the cerebral cortex that covers the front part of the Frontal Lobe. **The Prefrontal Cortex is the most "recent" part of the human brain in evolutionary terms.** It is also the part that is showing the most macroscopic changes during the natural growth of a human from childhood to adulthood, as well as the part that appears to be the most macroscopically involved in the generation gaps. In other words, this highly sophisticated part of the human brain, which is skilled in mediating between survival instincts and productive empathetic social behavior, is the one that matures after adolescence and is more strongly present in our youngest generations (the Millennials).

3.1.2   THE FIGHT, FLIGHT OR FREEZE RESPONSE

The **first conflicts** appeared very early in the evolutionary history of mankind, something like 250 million years ago (the era of "homo habilis"). Initially, there was just one main form of "disagreement": "something wanted to eat you" vs. "you did not want to be eaten".
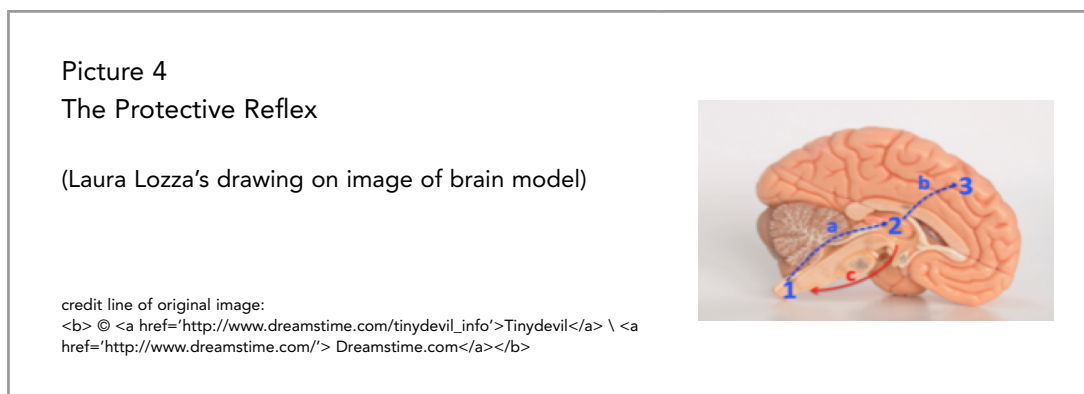
In front of any sensory stimulus, **it was vital to be extremely quick in the identification of a possible danger**. The brain needed to decide fast between e.g. berries and a lion; or the voice of another man and a roar. Therefore a very efficient system was perfected throughout evolution, to allow humans to perform three operations, extremely fast:

-   A quick recognition of what things are (berry or lion)
-   A quick evaluation of whether it is good or bad (berry is good; lion is bad)
-   A quick reaction (berry: approach and eat; lion: RUN!)

It was especially important to **keep this system very simple and separate from all other functions** that were required when collecting, analyzing and reacting to new and varied information. It needed to be so fast that it could precede any forms of consciousness. Hence **a preconscious system was gradually perfected and became an automatism still present in our brain today**.

Let us look at how this system works:

Everything that we see, smell, touch, hear and taste, i.e. every sensorial stimulus that we experience, is collected by our nervous system and converted into an electrical signal. In this way, all the sensory information that we gather from the outside world can be passed on to our brain – in a form that the brain can understand – for further decoding. Look at **Picture 4**.

Picture 4
The Protective Reflex

(Laura Lozza's drawing on image of brain model)

credit line of original image:
 © Tinydevil \ Dreamstime.com

The signal travels along the Spinal Cord (1) towards the frontal part of the brain (3), via a path (a+ b) that goes via the Limbic System (2). The Limbic System acts as a first decoder. Its main task is to protect us. Its function is very simple and quick: it is a "black or white" filter. Either the signal is deemed safe or it is unsafe. No grey, no nuances, no uncertainties. Anything that is not already known to be safe (from stored memories), anything out of the ordinary, let's say anything that is not familiar, is classified as potentially unsafe, in other words, a potential danger.

As we have seen in the previous section, the Limbic System (which is part of the Paleo-Mammalian Brain) is responsible for triggering the Fight, Flight or Freeze Response. This trigger is extremely rapid; **as soon as the Limbic System detects a potential threat, a message is almost instantaneously sent to the upper part of the Spinal Cord, which is part of the Reptilian Brain and is responsible to enact the Fight, Flight or Freeze Response**. The trigger message travels back (c) while the signal continues its path towards the front of the brain for further analysis.

When the Reptilian Brain receives the trigger, the Automatic Response is to put the body in a state of alert: the Spinal Cord "tells" the entire body to get ready to face a danger: thus we start to breathe more rapidly in order to take in more oxygen, the heart beats faster to pump the oxygen to the muscles and to other organs, the limbs' muscles start to tense in order to prepare for a defense action, our pupils dilate to enhance sight, and all our senses are more alert. **We are getting ready to counteract the danger by either attacking or running away or freezing (to minimize harm in case of close attack).**

> *To note: These biological alterations are happening so fast, their trigger being preconscious, that we may become aware of a "potential danger" situation only because of the body changes that we experience and that we have learnt to instinctively associate with a feeling of fear, far before we can formulate any conscious thoughts about it.*

Meanwhile the signal continues to travel (b) towards the frontal part of the brain in order to get better analyzed by the Neocortex (3). The two paths (c) and (b) are simultaneous, but the Neurocortex (3) takes longer time in its evaluation process than the simpler "black or white" process of the Limbic System (2), although it eventually produces a much more precise analysis.

This is often represented with a diagram that visualizes the two simultaneous processes as the "Low Road" (yielding a quick and very approximate interpretation) and a High Road (yielding a more comprehensive interpretation).

Picture 5 shows the main organs involved in the process: the Thalamus, Amygdala and Hypothalamus are part of the Limbic System, while for this discussion the Hippocampus can be approximated to a connector between the Neocortex and the Limbic System.

Picture 5
High Road and Low Road

(drawing by Laura Lozza)
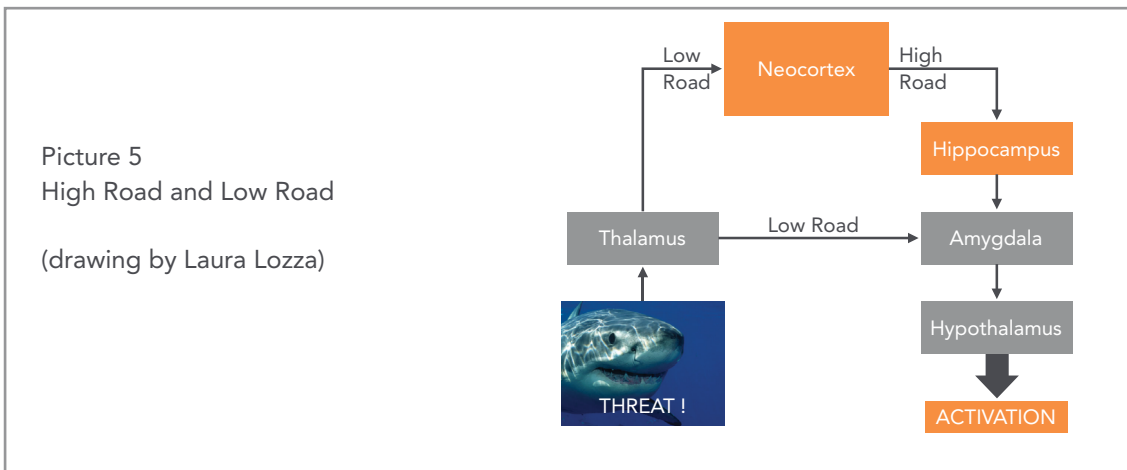
Why do we need both roads? First of all, we must consider the primary need of self-protection; staying alive is of such a paramount importance that the Low Road is designed to ensure that "we take no chances". The High Road allows us to complete the evaluation, so in case the danger is not life threatening, we can fine tune our reaction, i.e. readjust our behavior.

To quote an example reported by Julia Layton of Duke University, "if the front door to your home is suddenly knocking against the frame, it could be the wind; but it could also be a burglar trying to get in; it is far less dangerous to assume it's a burglar and have it turn out to be the wind than to assume it's the wind and have it turn out to be a burglar."

Another example is the classical **stick or snake question**. If we were to walk in the woods and to suddenly stumble into something like what shown in **Picture 6** we would probably feel a little "pang" of fear. If you were to look closely, you would see that it is simply a stick, with such a shape and in such a position that it reminds us of a snake.

Picture 6
Stick or Snake?

(Photo by Laura Lozza)

Unfortunately, once our physiology is changed, it takes time to return to normal state. Even when the High Road process yields a message of "false alarm", it actually takes several seconds to bring it all back to normal! Some empirical measures indicate that it might take at least 6 to 7 seconds to return to a normal state, which means that our body continues to experience "anxiety or fear" for 6 to 7 seconds after we have consciously discovered that there is no real threat!

Importantly, in today's world we are unlikely to experience physical threat to our lives on a regular basis, but we are regularly exposed to unexpected events. Although not life-threatening, **a different opinion, a disagreement, or a workplace conflict, are treated by our Limbic System exactly as if it were a lion ready to eat us**. Thus for 6 to 7 seconds our body tell us that we are threatened and in danger. It is no surprise that we get defensive, or start to counterattack, or freeze; only to regret our behavior afterwards, when we have calmed down.

3.2   INTUITION AND RATIONALITY (AND THE INTUITIVE SHORT-CUTS OF THE BRAIN)

Let us now consider more closely the Neo-Mammalian Brain and more specifically the Prefrontal Cortex, which is the part of the brain that is involved with the understanding of complex problems and that depends upon the information collected by all the other parts of the brain. As we have seen before, this is also the part that is able to formulate abstract thoughts and create new ideas, to guess probabilities, extrapolate and approximate, hence also to make mistakes.

In the words of psychologist Dr. Julie Sasscer-Burgos: "The Prefrontal Cortex loves understanding; it will consider inputs from many other areas of the brain and pull it into a coherent understanding. However, if there is not sufficient information, it will use what it has and drag in other material, and you will not always know what was dragged in."
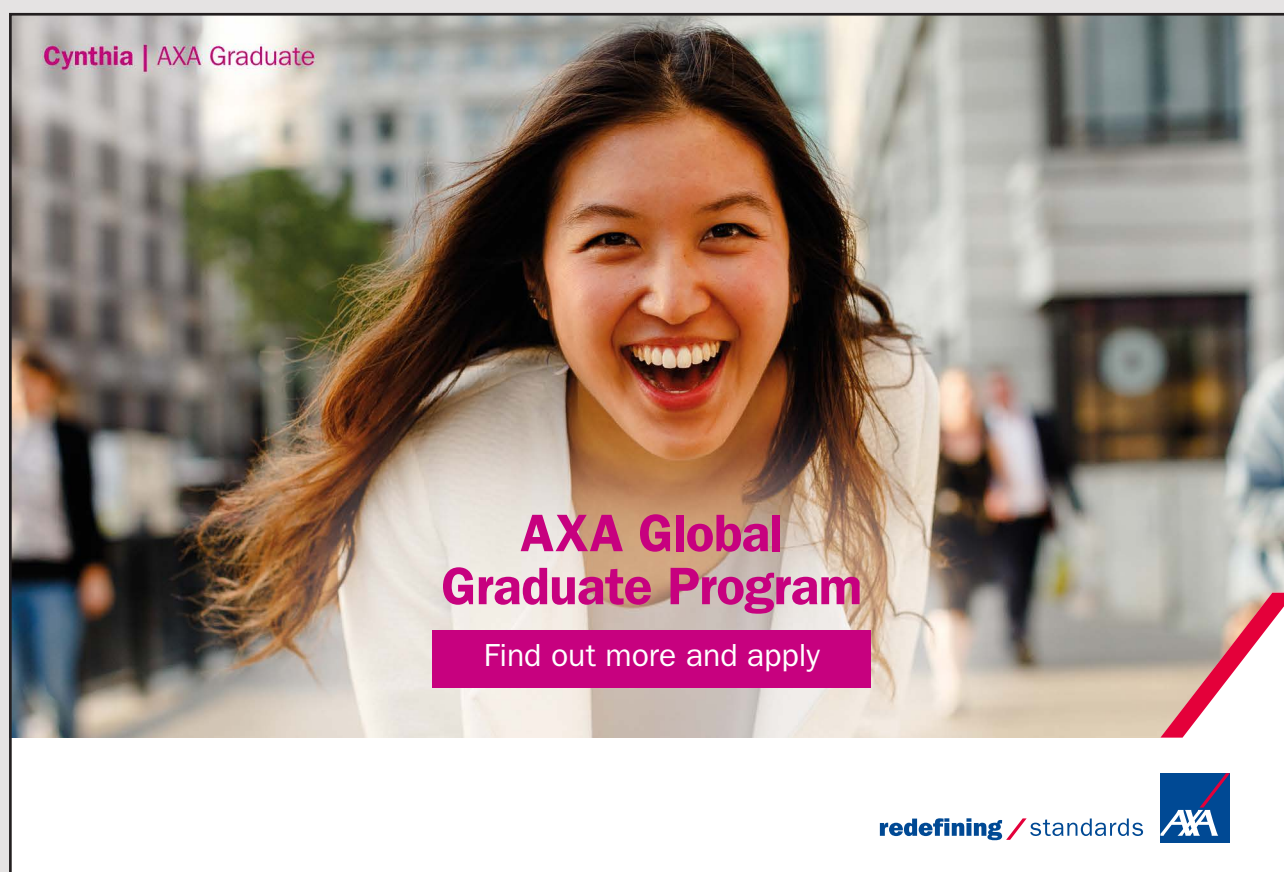
This might sound like a surprisingly provocative statement, but it descends from a revolutionary perspective that has shaken the academic world for decades and has culminated in the recognition of a Dual System in the functioning of our brain: a **fast System**, that so to speak "saves energy" by use of approximations and short cuts; and a **slow System**, that yields more precise results, but at a higher energy cost.

One of the biggest surprises from the last 50 years of neuroscience research is that **rationality is not the answer to everything human**. Specifically, **decision-making solely based on logic and rationality tends to be biased, and can only be improved when emotions and intuitions are taken into due account**.

For over two thousand years humans have believed in rationality as "the" superior form of knowledge. Plato was one of the known initiators of the idea that we form knowledge by logical thinking, not by following bodily sensations, because "the senses can fool us, but the brain does not". Aristotle even went as far as to state that the brain starts every thought from scratch (tabula rasa): i.e. "logic is not influenced by any preconception". Descartes said, "what is real is rational, and what is rational is real" and the bulk of Enlightenment theories followed through celebrating the primary role of logic in human cognition.

At the same time, the role of emotions was often viewed to be a lesser form of cognition; even for Hume, who went counter-current and maintained that we do not chose what makes logical sense, but what we care for, saw emotions as a necessary evil, with passions spoiling an otherwise rational decision process. Rationality was believed the absolute form of superior human cognition, while emotions were seen as evil, to be controlled or suppressed.

Today we know better. Thanks to the pioneering work of A. Tversky and D. Kahneman on "heuristics and biases" we understand that things are not as clear-cut as we thought 50 years ago.

3.2.1 THE DUAL THINKING SYSTEM

The idea that our thinking can follow two different (sometimes simultaneous) processes, one conscious and one unconscious, has been around for over a hundred years, but it was Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman who recently provided more extensive support and clarification of the implications of this duality.

Kahneman's theory has become well know also outside the academic field, thanks to his book "Thinking Fast and Slow" in which he gives a thorough and quite entertaining account of several experiments that shatter the traditional beliefs around how we think, solve problems and make decisions. He named them "Intuition" or System 1 and "Reasoning" o System 2.

Contrary to what we used to think, we DO NOT form our opinions solely based on logic; most of the time, we actually do the opposite: we often start by having an intuition; this is like taking a short-cut by using a process of quick associations, using various memories collected and stored in our brain (from genetic to educational or experiential), that are able to give us a "feel" for an approximate answer, faster than what System 2 can – with greater effort – compute. This often allows System 2 to not even get involved at all: System 2 might give a good enough answer anyhow.

We can therefore say that using intuition, or System 1, is a way for the brain to "save energy"

Consider the following example:

> Imagine that we are asked to perform a sequence of arithmetic sums, starting with small numbers; at the beginning, we find it easy and we calculate the result quite quickly (2+3=5; 5+4=9; 9+12= 21), but as the numbers get larger, we may need to slow down; at the beginning we might be able to perform the calculation while walking or doing something else, but as the complexity increases, we cannot concentrate on the calculation unless we stop doing whatever it is that we are doing. We need more dedicated energy for the task; the brain cannot do complex tasks fast without dedicating all its attention to it. When the numbers get really large, we may not be able to keep them in mind, we may need to write them down.

> However, something interesting happens: although we may struggle to get to an accurate result with the same speed as before, we actually anyhow have a certain "feel" for the approximate result.

> So for example, when asked to calculate 24 567+ 35 678 we may not come up with 60 245 right away, yet intuitively "we know" that the result is not going to be 1 000 or 100 000; we may even have a vague idea that the result will be close to 60 000.

> This is **our brain making an estimation** – we may say "an educated guess" – **to save energy**.

This example shows a great asset of our brain: it can make quick approximations, it does not really need to work hard all of the time. However, sometimes intuition takes us astray.

Consider this other example:

> Imagine you need to give an answer to this question: "John lives in Connecticut, likes to work alone, loves the open spaces and has a passion for agricultural machines; what is more probable, that John is a farmer or an accountant?" Most people, including trained statisticians, would answer "farmer". And they would be statistically wrong.
>
> They use their Intuition, the Fast System 1, which approximates the answer based on some clues like "open spaces" and "agriculture" that have a strong association with the concept of a farmer. However, this answer is statistically incorrect, because there are far more accountants than farmers in Connecticut and the probability is much higher that John is an accountant, albeit one who happens to like open spaces and tractors.

This is one of many examples of puzzles that have been used in a number of experiments, to study the advantages and the limitations of System 1. Many times System 1 gives us an approximation that is "good enough" or close enough to the truth that we learn to trust it. However, sometimes it gets us to be really wrong.

Interestingly, Kahneman has also observed that we not only trust the conclusions intuitively reached by the System 1 process, we also have a tendency to rationalize it, by collecting all supporting evidence, and then…we tend to rest our case. We seldom play "devil's advocate" with our rationalization.

Since we have traditionally believed that we make our everyday decisions with a conscious and rational process of deliberation, we are reluctant to accept that our rationalization is "tainted" by an initial intuition, because this diminishes the certainty that we assign to our conclusions.

The reality is that decisions made purely on independent logic and careful rational deliberation are only a very small fraction of the thousands of decisions that we make in a normal day.

The consequence of this is that sometimes we are convinced that our truth is a universal truth, and that anybody would reach the same truth by simple logic, even when our own intuition may have caused us to reach an incorrect (biased) conclusion.

This takes us to the next section about Heuristics and Biases.

3.2.2 HEURISTICS AND BIASES

The intuitive, unconscious shortcut mentioned in the previous section is also called a **"heuristic"**.

A heuristic is a useful quick mental process that generates an approximate answer to complex questions, an answer that is often close enough to the correct and comprehensive answer that could be produced by a more time consuming examination.

However, **sometimes heuristics lead us to draw incorrect or incomplete answers**, which are called cognitive biases, or prejudice. Since this type of bias descends from an unconscious process of intuition, **we may often tend to ignore the possibility of being "prejudiced"**.

There are some intuitively obvious reasons why certain biases can lead to conflicts; suffice to mention election periods in political multiparty systems, where equally minded people with different intuitive preferences (heuristics) develop different priorities (cognitive biases) and have no wish/capacity to explore the differences in order to find a comprehensive answer to an almost impossibly high level of complexity (i.e. what is really needed short and long term for the best of the people and the environment); they rather resort to emphasizing and exploiting the differences, in order to simply "fight" for who is proven "right" by an election victory (which is clearly an illusion; victory is the result of many similar intuitive preferences, not a proof of cognitive correctness).

A less obvious way in which biases can lead to conflicts is that a personal bias might guide our interpretation (sometimes misinterpretation) of certain facts, which can create misunderstandings and clashes when others have reached a different interpretation.

Some of the most frequent biases are about whether or not we or other people have biased views: most of the time we tend to underestimate the extent to which we are biased, while at the same time we tend to overestimate the extent to which others are biased. This clearly will not favor our willingness to challenge our own biases.

For our discussion, it is not important to dig further into types of biases, it suffices to be aware of how easy and frequent it is for each of us to **believe to be holding "the" universal truth**, proven by logic, whereas **chances are that our truth might only be one part of the entire truth or maybe not even true at all**.

This awareness is what we need in order to be more humble and more curious, which helps us open a dialogue instead of creating confrontations.

3.2   THE TASK AND PEOPLE ORIENTATION EFFECTS

In the first part of this chapter we have used a very simplified model of the brain, for the purpose of understanding instinctive defensive mechanisms, as well as helping to make sense of the need to complement reasoning with heuristics.

We however know that our brain processes are much more complicated than what seems to be implied by any simplified structural model (not only the earlier mentioned Triune Model, but also for example the popular left/right hemisphere model).

The introduction of fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, also simply called functional neuroimaging) has allowed a better understanding of the brain, in terms of brain mapping and specifically localization of brain activities.

These recent observations have shaken some fundamental beliefs that we used to hold true.

Specifically, all earlier models of how the brain works were somewhat simplistic in that they "assigned" some brain areas to some specific functions and vice-versa, and also imagined certain hierarchies. So for example we used to think that the left brain hemisphere is the sole home of geometric spatial thinking and emotions, while the right brain is the sole home of arithmetic and structured thoughts; we therefore associated creativity and intuition with left brain activity, while we expected algorithms and rational problem-solving to derive from right brain activity. We also thought that rational thinking is hierarchically superior to intuition, and that long term abstract thinking is the highest form of rationality, hence we saw the frontal parts of our brain as a sort of CEO of the brain, with a CFO on the right side and a CMO on the left side.

As it turns out, it seems that we could not be farther from the truth; **the brain does not appear to function as a simple compartmentalized hierarchy**, it looks like **it works with autonomous, so-to-speak cross-functional** (or maybe inter-functional) **neural networks**, that involve various parts of the brain with no immediately obvious order. These "computational" networks are not "procedural", i.e. they do not start on one line and then continue systematically to the next; they are much more complex than that; they process information collectively, in parallel, from different zones and by crisscrossing various nodes (neurons); they are complex and adaptive (i.e. changing their structure as needed) systems; and they are independently intelligent, as they can learn. Rather than a simple hierarchy, it appears that **our brain rather resembles a highly integrated collaboration of numerous specialized taskforces and several adaptive inter-functional learning teams**.

There is of course a lot more that we do not know on the subject, but we know for sure that the earlier models, although useful to explain certain macroscopic effects, are not telling the whole story.

So why are neural networks important in our discussion abut disagreements and conflicts?

To answer this question, we need to first look at some important neural networks and their functions:

The **Default Mode Network or DMN,** plays a central role in **emotional self-awareness**, **social cognition** and **ethical decision-making**. It also appears to be strongly linked to **creativity**, **imagination** and **insightful problem solving**.

One of its most peculiar characteristics is that it appears to activate in absence of external task demands; it is associated with cognitive processes that require self-generated thought, such as mind-wandering, future thinking, perspective taking, and mental simulation.

Task Negative Networks or TPN, are important for **problem solving**, **focusing of attention**, **making decisions**, and **control of action**. They get activated by demanding tasks and include several sub-networks like the Dorsal Attention Network, DAN (involved in top-down goal directed processing requiring mental effort) and the Central Executive Network, CEN (involved in executive processes such as sustained attention, working memory and decision making).

In simple terms, our brain has the capability to focus great attention to BOTH tasks AND social interactions, but CANNOT DO BOTH THINGS AT THE SAME TIME; there are two distinct cortical networks that appear to take care of these two distinct processes.

Under normal conditions these networks are alternatively activated, so that we "seesaw" between the two. But take an abnormal situation, e.g. stress or peer-pressure, when we start to over-use one of the two networks; what happens is that we actually shut down the other! Thus becoming less effective, and less "whole", or less "authentic" than what we can be.

Consequences are that "an over-emphasis on task-oriented leadership may prove deleterious to social and emotional aspects of leadership…similarly, an overemphasis on the cortical network that supersedes emotional self-awareness, social cognition, and ethical decision making, would result in difficulty on focusing attention, making decisions, and solving known problems" (liberally quoted from Boyatzis, Rochford, and Jack; Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, March 2014).

This explains why under strict deadlines we may easily risk to discount the importance of actively listening to other views (i.e. we do not take the time to enquire and explore the concerns and doubts of others), thus missing the obvious opportunity to create a more sustainable alignment, identify innovative alternatives and strengthen both relationships and shared commitment.

(Note: the opposite is also true. If we focus too much on social interactions and open dialogue, we may loose sight of the tasks and our decision process gets blurred; we are at our best when we have inner harmony and can tap into both sets of skills)

4   THE 3 MAJOR MISTAKES, EVEN BEST LEADERS MAKE

Let's start with a practical case study:

> *"Nils is a successful leader. He is engaged and able to engage others, he is focused, upbeat and pragmatic, he and his team deliver consistent results, and he is humble about it, conscious that external circumstances and luck have also played a role in their success.*
>
> *There is only one dark spot in his stellar performance, something he is not proud of: he stresses about disagreements. He knows that whenever he is faced with a disagreement, wants to voice a different opinion, or needs to help resolve a clash between other people, he feels very uncomfortable; he also knows that **when he feels uncomfortable, he is not at his best**. He hates not being at his best.*
>
> *In spite of various training courses that taught him the key strategies to manage conflicts or the best tactics to influence, to "get to yes" and to turn around crucial conversations, he has yet to find the key to overcome his discomfort.*
>
> *Nils knows that his challenge has nothing to do with his problem solving skills; anything that can be analyzed and measured rationally is a no-brainer for him. His difficulty is rather with the type of situation when different views clash, and they cannot be reduced to equations, the type of situation when people see things from different perspectives and develop surprisingly different perceptions to which they appear to be very emotionally attached. In these cases he experiences a mix of surprise, misbelief and dislike; he becomes judgmental and disconnected, and at the same time emotionally stressed; he finds it very hard to stay cool and anxiety appears to cloud his thoughts."*

Nils is not alone in his struggle. Most leaders admit to experiencing a lack of self-confidence when dealing with disagreements, something very close to **fear**.

Some try to avoid disagreements in order not to face their fear; some try to fight their fear by becoming overly righteous or domineering, some prefer to wear the mask of the non committal "pleaser"; the vast majority tend to regret in hindsight how they finally chose to behave, and they ruminate at length over what they "should", or "should not" have said or done.

These experiences are however very rarely shared with colleagues, or openly discussed in a development plan; it is mainly the external consultants or executive coaches who get to hear these stories. For example, about 70% of my executive clients (ca. 500), have at one point or another "confessed" to frequently experience this state of distress in front of disagreement. However, less than 10% include conflict management in their development plans.

It seems like a certain uneasiness, or a mild feeling of shame, would prevent them from admitting to a weakness that seems to point more at "how and whom we are" than at "what we do".

> *To note: These percentages are very consistent with data collected in various US and European surveys that indicate that 85% of respondents have experience with conflicts in the workplace and use an average of 2 to 3 hours per week in dealing with workplace conflicts, which in about half the cases escalate into real problems.*

How can we explain that so many brilliant minds experience such a deep anxiety about a frequent business situation and do not even dare to openly talk about it?

4.1   THE 3 FUNDAMENTAL BIASES

There appears to be **three unconscious biases that make us truly stressed and ineffective in dealing with emotionally charged conversations and disagreements**. These major unconscious biases cause **mistakes** in the form of inappropriate or ineffective behaviors, that seriously affect our ability to deal with disagreements in a constructive way.

Unfortunately, the more we experience being ineffective, the less self confident we become, which increases our stress and anxiety; which in turn makes us less effective; and so on, in a negative spiral.

Becoming aware of these 3 biases is the first step to break the negative spiral, to overcome the anxiety and to fuel a constructively open conversation.

We shall look at these biases in an **ascending order of importance and difficulty**; we shall start with the third most important one, a bias that is relatively easy to grasp and correct; and we end with the first one in order of importance and the most subtle one to identify, accept and correct.

4.2   THE NEGATIVITY BIAS

The Third most important Bias is what we can call the "Negativity Bias".

As we have seen in Chapter 3, we are genetically programmed through evolution to protect ourselves from everything "new" by always choosing to believe the worst scenario. We tend to instinctively focus more on weaknesses rather than strengths, on risks rather than opportunities, on problems rather than achievements. It is like if our brain were hard-wired for negativity.

Even a simple difference of opinion is perceived at first as a threat and our body is automatically activated into a state of alert (e.g. accelerated heart beat). Unless we are aware that this is just a reflex, we might "believe" to be really facing a threat, hence our perception of anxiety or fear, an impression of being at risk or under attack. This makes us defensive, which in turn makes us less effective.

> *In the words of Nobel laureate Daniel Khaneman "The brains of humans and other animals contain a mechanism that is designed to give priority to bad news".*
>
> *Or, in the words of* Rick Hanson, Ph.D. *Psychologist; Author, 'Hardwiring Happiness'* To keep our ancestors alive, Mother Nature evolved a brain that routinely tricked them into making three mistakes: overestimating threats, underestimating opportunities), and underestimating resources (for dealing with threats and fulfilling opportunities. This is a great way to pass on gene copies, but a lousy way to promote quality of life.

Two things happen when we unconsciously suspect a threat and get defensive: first, our body stiffens into the automatic Fight, Flight or Freeze Response; second, we start to unconsciously behave in such a way that causes the other person to get defensive as well (even an act of defense is somewhat an act of war). Unfortunately most of the time this escalates the conflict: the defensiveness of the other person confirms our initial perception so that we become truly convinced that we are facing a threat, hence we act even more defensively. This phenomenon is called the **"self fulfilling prophecy"**: we act in a way that makes the prediction true.

– How do we recognize the Negativity Bias?

The simplest way to recognize that we are trapped into the Negativity Bias is to notice our posture: often **our chest is closed and we need to breathe faster**.

We may assume a protective position (crossed arms and legs) and make ourselves smaller, or we might be tensing our muscles, assuming a rigid posture or bending forward. To better check if we are "on the unconscious alert", we can try to roll our shoulders back and "open" our chest: if we notice a difference, find that we breathe more freely and feel lighter, we are sure that we were tensing and confirm the earlier state of defensive alertness (this physical shift is also the beginning of changing our emotional state).

We might also learn to recognize our own very specific physical signs beyond taking a closed/rigid posture, for each of there might be other individual indicators, possibly easier to identify, e.g. clenching teeth, fidgeting, rise of pitch voice, closing fists, blushing, trembling voice, sweating, shifting position, moving away or creating distance.

– What can we do to offset this bias?

There are some **simple methods** that can be applied, both to **overcome** this bias and in some cases to even **prevent** it. But remember: simple does not mean easy, you still need to do the work and practice, practice, practice!

a. **Preventing or Minimizing Occurrence**

Is it possible to prevent falling into the trap of this bias? Not always, but it is possible to at least minimize its occurrence. Think about this: when we feel happy and relaxed we are less likely to view differences as threats and rather more likely to feel a joyful curiosity; when we are worried, concerned, stressed, we are much more likely to quickly feel threatened and "go to war" to protect ourselves. Suggested preventing exercises are:

- **Start every working day with three positive thoughts of appreciation or thankfulness**. If we arrive stressed to our workplace we are more likely to fall into the negativity bias at the first opportunity; so instead of focusing on what is not working (the traffic, the out-of-order coffee machine, the complaining colleague, the mess on the desk) let's make a point of finding three things to feel good about (a good breakfast, the smile of passer-by, a warm welcome by the receptionist, a kindness of a colleague, the memo arrived in time, a cool office when it is too hot outside, or a warm office in a cold day).

- **Learn to breathe more regularly**. The old advice of "taking a deep breath" is actually counterproductive to reach a calm unstressed state. We are often unaware of the fact that when we feel stressed, we may already be in a mild state of guarded alert, with an irregular or altered breathing pattern, which makes us more likely to get into a defensive mode, the precursor of a negativity bias. The simplest Breathing exercise only takes a few minutes:

    o *Sit down comfortably with straight spine and feet flat on the ground*
    o *Place one hand on your stomach, and the second hand over your chest.*
    o *Breathe in deeply through your nostrils, letting your first hand be pushed out by your stomach; you should find that your chest stays stationary.*
    o *Breathe out through your lips, pursing them as if you were about to whistle. Gently guide the hand on your stomach inwards, helping to press out the breath.*
    o *Slowly repeat between 3 and 10 times.*

- **Regular Meditation or Mindfulness Practices** can greatly help.
    Even a few minutes of meditation or Mindful Walk have a positive effect.

b. **Overcoming the Negativity Bias**

Preventing is not always so easy, since work and peer pressure affect us all and we do not always manage to stay truly and fully relaxed, open and happy, so we also need to learn how to spot and overcome our negativity.

- The best way to **overcome** the negativity bias is the four-step formula: **"recognize, declare, pause and breathe"**.

  o The first step is of course to learn to **recognize** the bias; the more we cultivate positivity and appreciation for others, the better we become at noticing when our reaction to other views becomes negative.

  o The second necessary step is to spell this out clearly in our mind or even **declare** it out loud, elaborating how we feel, e.g. "I start to feel a bit irritated" or "I am getting annoyed" or "I am anxious to move ahead" (not "you irritate me" or "you make me waste time"!). This conscious verbalized recognition initiates a physiological change, and it opens the door to the next step.

  o The third step is to **pause; to make a conscious decision not to rush** into whatever reaction is immediately emerging from our defensive state; once we have gained practice in recognizing the signs and spelling it out clearly in our mind, this third step only takes a fraction of a second.

  o The final step is to **focus on making our breathing more regular**; in this way we can influence our body to relax; our mind then gets ready to focus externally and we find back the curiosity to learn about different views and perspectives.

- Additional methods are:

  o **Overcompensating with positive expressions**: e.g. implementing the discipline to use two positive sentences for each negative consideration (e.g. "I am glad that you take this issue at heart, I feel a bit pressed for time, but I am curious to hear your side" instead of "Let's have it quick, I have no time for this"). Remember: we are not just looking for a nice way to tell, we are trying to shift our own mind to positive!

  o **Substituting the use of "BUT" with "AND"** or even with "what I like in what you are saying is…AND…let me add…" (again with the aim of making a mental shift, not simply to tell it nice to the other person)

To Note:
A more structured Methodology to address this and the other two Biases is offered in Chapter 6.

4.3   THE EGO BIAS

The Second most important Bias is what we can call the Ego Bias.

This is a phenomenon also referred to as "self-deception". It is again linked to a mechanism of self-protection, but this one goes a bit deeper and involves some assumptions and heuristics (discussed in the second part of Chapter 3).

In a nutshell, it is an over concern or an exaggeration of our responsibility that leads us to almost identify with the job and its challenges and makes us loose perspective of reality. Whenever we are confronted with an issue (a difficult challenge, an uncertainty, a difference of opinions, a disagreement or a complaint) we may feel **ashamed** of not being able to tackle it and to resolve it by ourselves, embarrassed that we may need others. The more responsible we feel, the more ashamed we are of feeling unsure. We "get into our head"; instead of sharing the responsibility and inviting an open dialogue, we exaggerate the issue and feel so bad that we need to either justify ourselves or pin the problem to someone else. We loose sense of perspective and deceive ourselves with the belief that we must master everything and protect our self-image at all costs.

Look at Picture 7, it tells an interesting story. Where is the real business issue? It's the graph on the table, right? Where are the people looking? At each other! One is blaming, the other is justifying. This only escalates the confrontation; it is definitely not a good start for an open dialogue.

Picture 7
Where is the issue? On the table
What do people look at? Each other.

(Photo by Libux77 | Dreamstime.com)

– How do we recognize the Ego Bias?

The easiest way to recognize that we are experiencing the Ego Bias is to notice the following **signs of self-deception:**

- We move the dialogue inside our head (repeatedly asking and answering questions to ourselves);
- Other people cease to look like people and start to look like obstacles; whatever issue we are considering, it grows and gets more serious inside our head;
- We also notice that we start to collect past examples to confirm our opinion and seek alliances to confirm our convictions
- We become very self-conscious and self-righteous; we "ruminate".

At this point, if we try hard to smile and joke within ourselves, or to minimize, we may feel the beginning of a shift. This is the beginning of changing our mental state.

– What can we do to offset the Ego Bias?

We can only start to work on offsetting the bias when we are able to recognize it, exactly as we said earlier regarding the Negativity bias.

In the case of the Ego bias, though, there is an additional level of awareness that comes to our help: we may learn to recognize two typical signs:

- **Impasse**. We may feel "stuck"; we start to exaggerate the seriousness of the issue, and by ruminating about it in our head, we actually block any possibilities to act; we numb our curiosity and paralyze our initiative; we prevent any possibility to have a healthy conversation that could help address and resolve the issue. From inside our "mental box", we may focus so much on judging and doubting that we do not find a way out into action; we blame, criticize, justify, express pessimism, and basically do nothing constructive.
- **Fatigue**. We use a lot of mental energy in our "rumination" so we may notice that we feel fatigued, even exhausted.

Once we recognize that we are stuck into rumination, we can do the following:

- The most effective technique consists of asking ourselves questions like: "Am I talking to myself? Who else can I ask instead? Am I exaggerating? What is the reality? So what?"
- We can also try to remember happy moments when we were curious and influential and capture back the feeling.

- We can finally learn to verbalize how we feel; saying out loud "I am feeling a bit judgmental now" makes it easier to smile at ourselves and get out of our head.
- We can also minimize the occurrence or decrease the impact of the Ego Bias by learning to accept ourselves, and our limitations; or, in the words of Brene Brown, we learn to **"let go of whom we think that we should be in order to be who we are"**.

To Note:
A more structured Methodology to address this and the other two Biases is offered in Chapter 6.

4.4   THE RATIONALITY BIAS

The First most important Bias is what we can call the Rationality Bias.

This is the most profound bias of all, the hardest one to overcome. In a nutshell, we deeply believe that "rationality will get us there".

In Chapter 3 we have already discussed the research and studies from which we derive our understanding of this bias; we can now look into its practical manifestation and see how it actually affects our ability to create a constructive learning dialogue from a disagreement.

This is what happens:

- *We often think that given enough data and enough time to go through the proper rational thinking process, everybody will come to the same conclusion. Hence we focus on "explaining and convincing" based on extensive data and facts.*
- *We seem to believe that if we prepare really well, we can certainly get to an agreement.*
- *When we fail, we think that it must be our fault: we have not sufficiently prepared, or we have chosen the wrong arguments; we start a chain of self-doubt (we are incompetent, unable, not influential); or we blame, feeling misunderstood, unheard, and insignificant. We get highly stressed and develop a deep feeling of shame.*
- *Then we try again with even more data and explanations, getting lost into our story and missing out on checking others' reactions.*
- *We may carry on a feeling of being unappreciated or a fear of not being capable, so we accumulate negative feelings, thus increasingly becoming less likely to make a positive impact. We are at a loss and do not know what to do.*
- *But we learn another perspective.*

- *For centuries we have been taught that we form our opinions based on rational thoughts rather than from pure instincts; instinct is for animals, we were taught, rationality is for educated human beings.*
- *Now we see that this is an over-simplification. We do use our rationality, but only after we have already collected an initial rough impression, or intuition, and the rationalization is tainted by our intuition; unless we are aware of this, we might truly be convinced to hold "the" absolute truth. But of course the paradox is that another equally rational person with a different intuition can easily reach another perfectly rational position.*
- *Comparing our respective rationalizations will be of new use, because we ignore the real difference, which is our "a priori" diversity of intuition; unless we get curious to explore each other's assumptions, preferences and biases, we will not make any real progress in the mutual understanding.*

The Rationality Bias takes us on a risky path: as long as each one of us is convinced to be right and expects that everybody else will be able to reach the same conclusion, we will push our view and try to "convince" the other with logic. Do you see where this is going? It is going into a confrontation.

The Model in the next Chapter shows this confrontational path (where we battle for "who is right", "who wins", or who has the better "truth") and the alternative possible open dialogue path (where we try to understand, learn, grow and co-create a new truth).

– How do we recognize the Rationality Bias?

Here are the key signs that you suffer of Rationality Bias:

- At the end of a conversation your position is exactly the same as it was at start
- In case of failure your next step is to "get better prepared next time"
- If afterwards a third party asks you "what did the other person think or feel?" you have no idea, because you have not asked; all you have is your assumptions and your interpretations.

– What can we do to offset the Rationality Bias?

The vast majority of Conflict Management Courses teach us how to deal with confrontations when we already **are** in a confrontation.

But a different approach is possible. We suggest that it is possible to open a constructive dialogue from differences, viewing them as complementary rather than antagonistic. We need to learn to say "Let me share how I see it from my standpoint, and I am curious of how you see it from your standpoint" instead of "Let me explain to you why I am right".

As always, awareness is the way to start. Once we are aware, we can take the appropriate steps to lead a courageous and open "learning dialogue".

To do this, we need to **make a fundamental shift,** from "trying to resolve or to convince or to reach a fast consensus" to "wishing to learn together". This is not easy to achieve, it is a real shift of mindset, which requires time and practice.

A strategy is then required to move from simple awareness to **leading and mastering courageous and open conversations**.

To Note:
A more structured Methodology to address this and the other two Biases is offered in Chapter 6.

5   THE CLEAR MINDSET MODEL

In Chapter 2, we briefly looked into the Dual Concern Model, currently the most broadly used Conflict Management Model. Here we present a **new Model**, the **CLEAR Mindset Model**.

This Model challenges several common myths or assumptions, like:

- Disagreements are (or inevitably lead to) conflicts and conflicts are "bad"
- Our reasoning is (or should be) primarily rational
- Focusing on influencing others or the process is the only (or most effective) way to communicate and move positively forward in negotiations
- There is a universal "truth" that can be proven by facts
- Managing a business always requires agreement
- Organizations are only effective when there is asymmetric power (hierarchical authority)
- Managers' responsibility is to keep the dialogue inside set boundaries and to retain control of outcome
- Controls and measures are the key contributors to productivity
- Explaining is more effective than asking
- It is important to avoid mistakes
- We must work hard in order to reach success, so that we can be happy

The CLEAR Mindset Model instead assumes the following:

- Disagreements are a healthy difference of opinion, which only escalate to conflicts when we hide behind our reasoning (self consciousness) or use our reasoning to attack and invalidate others' reasoning (self-righteousness)
- In most cases, we first intuitively "feel" and then reason; unless we become aware of this process, and challenge our own assumptions, our reasoning will limit us
- Focusing on self-learning helps us being more intentional, clearer and strategic; and at the same time more courageously curious; thus maximizing the chances of a productive dialogue
- Facts can often be interpreted in ways that lead to different truths;
- Managing a business requires alignment
- Reducing asymmetric power in an organization (introducing autonomous teams and collaborative partnerships) can help increase productivity
- Managers' responsibility is to create exploratory opportunities by relinquishing control of outcome

- Measures and controls hinder engagement, creativity and ultimately productivity
- A 1:1 ratio of asking and explaining is a more effective communication approach than 0:1
- We learn from mistakes
- When we are happy, we can be at our best, most creative and most productive

PERSON A   **PERSON B**
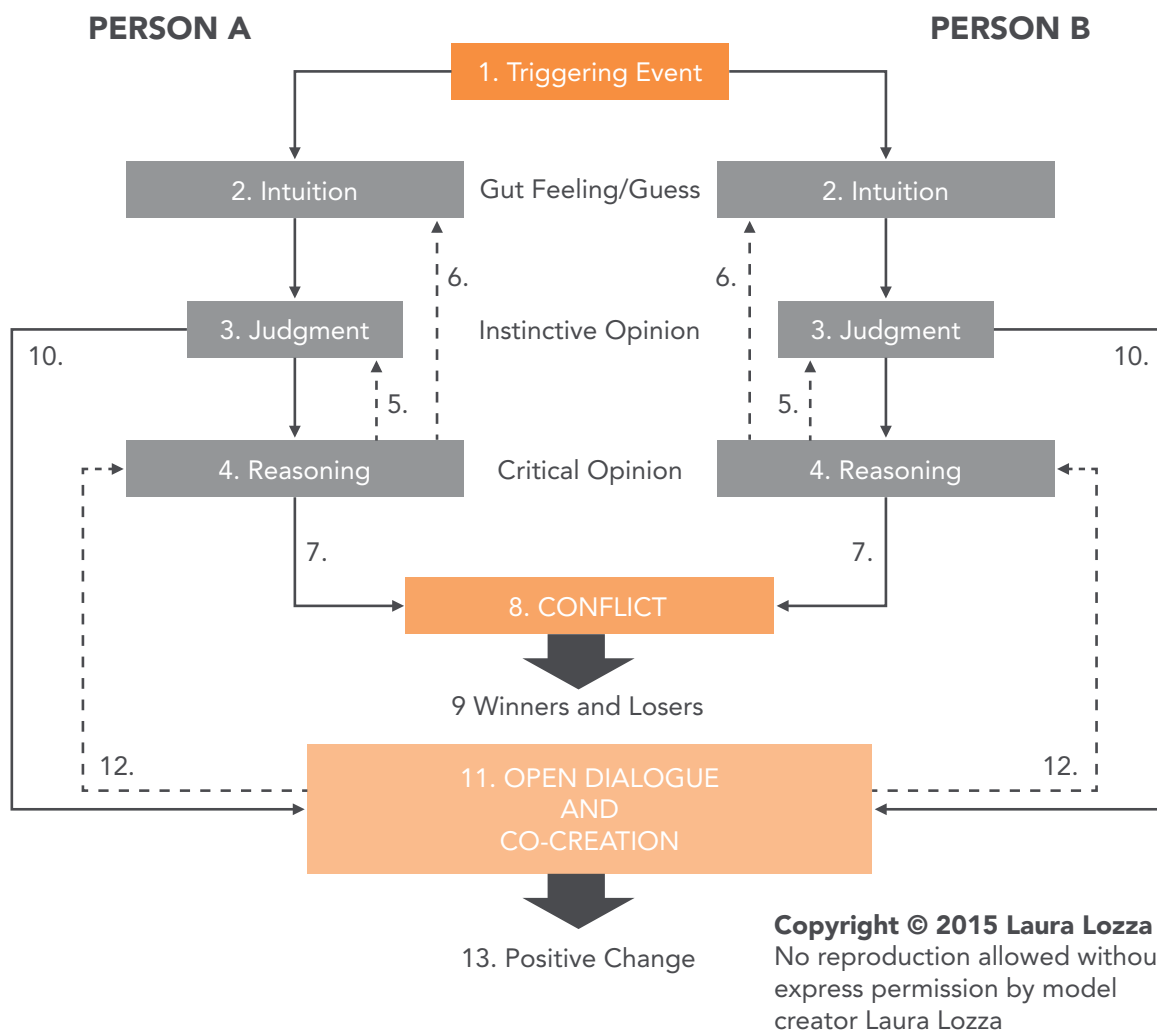
Picture 8

The **CLEAR Mindset Model** that you see in Picture 8 illustrates what happens when two parties disagree; they might either get from disagreement to conflict, or take a constructive alternative path and transform the disagreement into positive change.

Specifically:

The process begins with a **triggering event (1)**, which is the starting point of the disagreement between Person A and Person B. Remember that in Chapter 1 we defined a Conflict as a "disagreement about a judgmental matter, when there is a need to select and choose between different views, beliefs or preferences, and we attribute a high level of personal importance to the matter."

> *An example of a triggering event could be the results of a large product test, unexpectedly showing poor acceptance of a New Product developed by Innovation, and the consequent need to decide what to do about it. Person A represents the Innovation Team and is strongly convinced about the merits of the New Product. Person B represents the Product Supply Operations and sees any new products as an operational complication, and a temporary step back in productivity. They need to come to a common recommendation for the business, shall we give the New Product another chance or not?*

As we have seen in Chapter 3, our brain is very quick in making **intuitive assumptions (2)** and **assigning judgment (3)** at the risk of being at times biased and without being aware of our bias. We can say that the cognitive process of each Person begins with a "fast", automatic, subconscious and emotional intuition, or "gut feeling". A judgment is then formulated based on the initial intuition and each Person starts to become aware of a strong inclination, preference, or opinion.

> *In our example, Person A believes that the New Product can better satisfy the consumers and bring better business results than current; his "gut feeling" tells him that there is something wrong with the test and is eager to investigate further.*
>
> *Person B is equally motivated towards solid business results based on customer satisfaction, but she is proud of the current production; the test has not confirmed the expected improved acceptance of the New Product, so she is eager to continue with current.*

At this point, the two get ready to express their view. As they search for reasons and words, each one unconsciously and instinctively picks the preferential **reasoning (4)** that best appears to support their own initial "heuristic". As soon as they are ready, each with their own conclusions, they are **eager to share what each of them believes to be the obvious conclusion (7)** and each forgets to **play devil's advocate with their own quick and biased conclusion (5)** or to take a moment to honestly and humbly **explore and uncover own assumptions and intuitions (6).** In this way, they end up engaging in a **confrontational clash (8)** where the two positions remain basically fixed, there is no real interest in learning and little collaboration.

Person A instinctively feels the need to investigate further, while B is tempted to stop the whole project. Each starts to rationalize their intuitive judgment into a structured intention; A wants to investigate "because we must be sure to capitalize on the investment, otherwise we might have just lost time and money", B wants to stop "because we cannot afford to loose more time and money". As you notice, the reasoning is similar, but each has a bias. They can continue for hours to debate what is best: to give up on what already spent for fear of wasting more? or to give up on trying to make a return on what already invested? There is no universal truth and there is nothing to gain in a clash between two rigidly opposed and irreconcilable positions.

Now we can consider the alternative offered by the **CLEAR Mindset Model**. It is possible to **be humble about our reasoning, recognize it as potentially partial and/or biased, and offer our true perception; to firmly and clearly state our intuitive preference or judgment (10), without the pretense to be in the right or to have all the reasons, but with the curiosity to learn and complete our reasoning thanks to the insights gained from the other person (12).** In this way, we establish an **open learning dialogue (11)** rather than a confrontational clash.

In our example, B might ask what makes A believe in the New Product, so A spends more time on explaining the observed consumer benefits. A might ask what are the most critical issues for PSO, and will learn that it is especially costly to keep two types of packaging in the pipeline. Suddenly, the dialogue shifts to more relevant considerations and they start to co-create alternatives, maybe there is no need for a different packaging for the New Product? A very quick test might verify this idea. Maybe we can already convert to the new packing material on current product, thus realizing a more immediate saving and reducing the risk by changing only one variable a time? New ideas emerge: co-creation has started.

Confrontational Clashes and Conflicts typically create **Winners and Looser (9)**.

With an **Open Dialogue we can learn and grow; chances are that we can innovate or at a very minimum co-create a new positive outcome (13).**

6   THE CLEAR MINDSET, THE METHOD

Developing the psychological **confidence** and the **behavioral competences** necessary to transform disagreements into positive change requires time and focused practice.

Although the **CLEAR Model** proposed in Chapter 5 might appear simple, its practical application is not necessarily easy. In the heat of the situation, things might get out of hand. As we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4, there are many unconscious automatisms that drive us to unconstructive behavior. Identifying and overcoming these automatisms to replace the unconstructive behavior with a more constructive and effective approach in our own specific situation and within our own personality, usually requires a focused period of application. With constant practice, we can eventually transform our automatisms into new positive ones.

Let me further stress the point about **"our own specific situations"**: although the pattern of the mentioned automatisms is pretty much the same for everyone of us, the exact form and intensity of our biases is very personal and depends upon each person's unique combination of values, principles and memories (genetic, educational, environmental and experiential); thus each one of us needs to apply the learning and practice in our own context.

The **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is a systematic approach that allows everyone to "customize the learning" to their own unique attitudes and preferences.

Unlike most Conflict Management methods, which are strongly focused on "the other person" (i.e. influencing and convincing others), the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method starts with the "self" and then moves to developing a "we" in order to co-create the "what"**. Another important difference is the clear and systematic **integration of thinking and feeling**.

ME	**C** Thinking	**L** Feeling
US	**E** Thinking	**A** Feeling
IT	**R** Thinking and Feeling	

This systematic approach (see Table) involves **two steps related to the SELF**, to understand and redirect our personal **thinking** and **feeling** patterns, **two steps related to how we RELATE WITH OTHERS**, to understand and redirect our **thinking** and **feeling** patterns about relationships, and **one final step** to understand and redirect the way we **think** and **feel** about the **PRACTICAL OUTCOME**.

6.1 CLEAR YOUR MIND OF WORRIES, ANXIETIES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The First Step in the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is

- focused on the self (ME)
- covering the Thinking Processes that affect our attitude towards Disagreements and Conflicts

The Goal of this First Step is to help us clear our head of:

- the Worries created by unconscious fears, that paint an unrealistically negative reality,
- the Anxieties that occupy our mind when we ruminate and loose sight of the outside reality,
- the Assumptions and unconscious biases that derail us and may lead us to wrong interpretations.

Although there are many "feelings" linked to our worries and anxieties, as well as there is an obvious "emotional" attachment to the belief that our assumptions represent "the truth", in this step we only concentrate on our **thinking processes**, and leave the discussion about feelings and emotions to the next step of the method.

In this step, we specifically work on uncovering the **thinking loops of self-deception**, that make us believe one-sided interpretations of reality and obsess about them, to a point that we loose our thinking clarity, our problem solving and decision making abilities are impaired, and we are consequently not at our best.

As much as we hate to admit it, self-deception is a reality, as we have clearly seen in previous Chapters. We may understand it in principle, but the question that most people ask is "how does it affect me on a day to day basis?" More specifically "what does self-deception mean in practice, when I find myself facing or wanting to raise a disagreement?"

So let us look at one thing at a time, starting with "Worries".

6.1.1 CLEARING OUR HEAD OF WORRIES

From a Thinking standpoint, "**Worries**" can be defined as "apparently uncontrollable and totally absorbing loops of repetitive thoughts about the potential negative consequences of a given challenge".

We may worry about different aspects of our personal life (e.g. our health or our income), family life (e.g. health and economic situation of spouse and children), professional life (e.g. job security, career progression) or social life and larger themes (e.g. friends, politics, environment, terrorism, technology).

All worries are initially linked to our natural defensive instinct. As we have seen in Chapter 3, our brain is programmed to give priority to bad news, i.e. we tend to anticipate the worst. However, there is a difference between anticipating a risk (concern) and obsessing about it, in such a way that it occupies almost all our mental energy (worry).

For our scope, we make this simple distinction between **worries** and **concerns**: **concerns activate us**, while **worries temporarily cloud our thoughts, slow us down and/or make us less effective**.

> **Examples:**
>
> - *We might become concerned about the possibility that our house gets burgled, since other houses have just been burgled in the area, so we insure it, install an alarm, establish good locking routines, and then stop thinking about it. However, if after taking all precautions we still cannot stop thinking about it, we repeatedly go over everything that can possibly happen, and get so absorbed in our thoughts that we cannot remember whether we have locked the door or activated the alarm and we need to go back and double-check several times, we are worrying.*
> - *Similarly, we might be concerned about a possible reorganization that risks to make our job redundant, so we streamline our priorities while revamping internal and external networking, sure that this is the best insurance and all we can do for the time being. However, if we cannot stop thinking about the worst case scenario and get so worried about it that we have no energy for anything else than routine work, we may risk to focus on menial tasks, avoid conversations with others for fear of hearing bad news, even wait until the last possible moment to enquire as to possible internal or external alternatives, and basically increase the probability that the final outcome will look exactly like the worst possible case.*

What happens is that we are triggered by a challenge (real or perceived, based on past events or future possibilities), we start to imagine all its negative consequences, initially a natural defensive mechanism, that prepares us to protect ourselves, but then we start to doubt whether the protection is sufficient and we thus begin to exaggerate. This can happen for a number of reasons, and we shall look into some of the emotional causes in the next section, but for now it is enough to recognize that this exaggeration sometimes happens, and has consequences that affect the clarity of our thinking.

How does this affect our ability to deal with disagreements and conflicts?
When we are absorbed in our own worries, we are in a defensive mode. This often clouds our ability to consider sound alternatives; instead of taking a broader view, like we would do in normal circumstances, we tend to interpret everything in the light of our fears. We might for example acquiesce to every new management's request, even those of doubtful merit, worried that every disagreement might endanger our job security, thus missing the opportunity to demonstrate clear thinking in a critical business moment. Or we might continue to fight for our own project, in spite of having doubts about its strategic fit, for fear of looking like a failure, thus missing the opportunity to share insights that might qualify us for an alternative project.

So what can we do to avoid the trap of worrying, and rather ensure that we face challenges in a "proactively concerned" mode?

1. **Make a list of "risk areas", specifically our vulnerabilities.** As a first step, it is useful to identify what we are especially afraid of: each one of us tends to go from concern to worry in specific areas of vulnerability; there are challenges that make us more afraid than others. For example, one person might be more afraid of loosing her job than of getting her house burgled, while someone else might fear more the loss of his possession than the loss of a position.

2. **Learn to recognize when we are stuck in unproductive worrying thoughts**. Once we know our risk areas, we are more likely to quickly recognize the moment when we stop having proactive concerns and start a pattern of obsessive repetitive thoughts about negative consequences.

3. **Make a list of alternative scenarios.** When we find ourselves obsessed with a single picture (e.g. we see over ad over in our mind the image of burglars entering the house) we can write down and envision different images (e.g. we are so worried about being robbed that we forget to renew the insurance, our son lost the keys and tries to force a window, a policeman happens to pass by just when a burglar is forcing said window, a dog bites the burglar, the burglar knows you and likes you and leaves you in peace;…the more funny and absurd these images are, the better, the whole point is to get unstuck).

4. **Use the alternative scenarios to challenge any initial reaction**. We can finally pick one of the alternative scenarios and use it to recalibrate our thinking (e.g. forgetting to renew the contract or to ensure that the son has keys or that he calls in case of need, are more important issues to focus on, so that we avoid a broken window or an expired contract). In this way, we can get a sense of perspective and focus on more realistic thoughts.

6.1.2 CLEARING OUR HEAD OF ANXIETIES

We make a distinction between Worries and Anxieties. Whereas Worries are repetitive thoughts about negative consequences of challenges, we define Anxieties as "loops of thoughts in the form of an inner dialogue or rumination, where we extensively justify the causes of our worries and exaggerate the seriousness of negative consequences"

So in our definition, Anxieties have a further element that clouds our thinking: the escalating justification.

Let us look at an example:

> *Paul is an accountant who prides himself of being very accurate and is used to being complimented about it; his new boss Ann takes accuracy for granted and never mentions anything about it; Paul may start to wonder about this lack of compliments, maybe Ann does not really appreciate him? One day Ann asks to talk about the last monthly report and enquires about a few numbers that she finds inconsistent. Now Paul starts to feel **anxiety** and his thinking process becomes something like this: "Here we are, just as I thought Ann does not trust me; she wants me to explain where my numbers come from, like if I were unable to produce accurate numbers; I knew it, I knew it, that is why she never compliments me; my peers also told me that she never compliments anybody, she probably wants all the credit for herself; I also heard that in her previous job she sacked half her people; so I am at risk, I need to fight to prove my accuracy otherwise I risk my job." So Paul starts to defend his numbers, while Ann gets puzzled and disappointed: her original intention was not to question the accuracy of the report per se, she actually wanted to have a discussion around the meaning of certain inconsistency, and was looking for additional insights from Paul (whom she regards as highly competent, hence not needing to be reassured) to help with the interpretation.*

This example has all the key elements of this type of self-deception:

- The challenge that triggers our worries touches an area of personal importance and pride
- The initial worry escalates to real anxiety as soon as we start to justify it, and to rationalize its causes in our head
- The justification usually involves: our own interpretation of factual evidence (e.g. she does not compliment me, hence she does not appreciate me), supporting opinion of others/support of alliances (e.g. the peers tell me about Ann, they agree with my interpretation), alleged or interpreted history (Ann's motives for reducing previous team)
- The situation is black and white, with the other person becoming "the enemy" or "the obstacle" (there is no benefit of the doubt or curiosity about what Ann is really interested in)
- We get busy with an inner dialogue, we draw conclusions and then look for supporting evidence; we ask and answer questions in our mind.

How does this affect our ability to deal with disagreements and conflicts?
Already in the mentioned example we see how the rumination distracts us completely away from the present and by failing to admit the possible existence of another type of interpretation or perspective, we actually create a confrontational conflict, which often exists only in our head.

This type of self-deception was well described by Arbinger in the book "Leadership and Self-deception" and is specifically called "being in the box".

So what can we do?

Similarly to worries, we need to:

1. **Make a list of "risk areas", specifically what we value most.** We typically tend to become very self-conscious and start to ruminate in areas that we consider important. In the example of Paul, accuracy is both his strength and his area of risk. Another person who rather values creativity over accuracy may not mind if his numbers are questioned, but might get an anxiety attack is someone defines one of his proposals as "too conservative".

2. **Learn to recognize when we are stuck in rumination**. It is useful to learn to note when we go into an escalating self-justification pattern like in the example of Paul. Typically we start to collect proving elements. If we cannot simply describe how we feel, but need to add "because after because" and "proof after proof" (as in "she does not compliment me because she does not trust me; she cannot trust me because she is only busy with her self; proof is what the others and history tell about her) this is the moment to stop and reconsider.

3. **Run a reality check in our head**. In order to stop the rumination, we need to run a reality check in our head (e.g. in the case of Paul, he may change the questions he is asking himself to a more realistic flow of enquiry, like: "Is it really possible that she does not trust me to be accurate? Has she had issues with my previous reports? Not really, so what are the chances that she has suddenly lost all her trust in me?)

4. **Bring the questions outside of our head.** At this point we must bring the question out of our head and ask others (e.g. Paul may ask Ann "do you doubt my numbers?" and learn what Ann really means).

6.1.3 CLEARING OUR HEAD OF ASSUMPTIONS

Unfortunately, we are usually unaware of our Assumptions: as we discussed in Chapter 3, we are not only Rational Beings, we are also Rationalizing Beings; our brain "does not like" uncertainties and rather tries to rationalize in order to "construct certainties". By using a process of association, we approximate an interpretation of reality that may or may not be "correct", we quickly find elements to support our interpretation and we start to believe it to be 100% correct. Hence our assumptions may often drive a biased interpretation of reality.

We have evidence of these biases on a daily basis; we may for example dress in a certain way, in order to convey a certain image, because we have experienced ourselves that others often quickly judge based on appearances, i.e. we know that others are "favorably biased towards accepted dress codes"; or we may develop a quick preference for a brand name even before trying the product, simply because we heard it several times and it starts to sound comfortably familiar, i.e. we are "positively biased" about familiar names; we may also assume and believe bad intentions in someone who looks unfamiliar or different, i.e. we may be prone to be "negatively biased" about minorities.

How does this affect our ability to deal with disagreements and conflicts?

As we mentioned earlier, we tend to underestimate the degree by which we are biased and overestimate the degree by which others are biased. We might risk to believe our rationalization to be the "the better truth". We might therefore tend to assign a stronger belief in our own opinion, which makes it very difficult to listen to, and respect, an opposed point of view.

So what can we do?

Bias or Prejudice Reduction is a complex issue that has no "quick and easy" solution. For our scope, however, it suffices to be **aware of the possibility that our opinions might be biased** and **learn to be humble about it when we are confronted with a different opinion**.

Useful tools to apply in case of disagreement about the interpretation of certain facts are:

a. Imagine alternative perspectives, using conflicting hypothesis ("what if")
b. Seek critical feedback from others ("am I only looking at one side of the issue?")

6.2   LEAD AN OPEN DIALOGUE WITH CONFIDENCE, COURAGE AND A SMILE

The Second Step in the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is:

- focused on the self (ME)
- covering the Feeling Processes that affect our attitude towards Disagreements and Conflicts

The Goal of this Second Step is to help us:

- develop the Confidence to be humble and admit not to own the universal truth
- build the Courage to open a dialogue when the outcome is uncertain
- learn to channel and recalibrate emotions

In the first step of the method we tackled the thinking processes associated with worries and anxieties. Now, armed with this enhanced clarity of thinking, we can dig into the more complex area of **feelings and emotions**. As earlier mentioned, traditional education may have taught us to ignore or suppress or somehow "control" or at least not show emotions. This is why our Method starts with recalibrating the Thinking Process and only as a second step do we turn to emotions.

To facilitate the experimentation around this complex subject, and at the risk of oversimplifing the matter, we propose a correlation between the thinking patterns and shifts described in the previous step and the corresponding emotional patterns and shifts.

We shall therefore look into

- tackling the emotional aspects of worries by building our self-confidence
- tackling the emotional aspects of anxieties by building resilience and courage
- easing the acceptance of alternative assumptions by building the mindful skill of equanimity

6.2.1 FROM VULNERABILITY TO CONFIDENCE

Vulnerability can be viewed as either weakness or strength.

When we worry, our obsessive thinking about potential negative consequences is linked to a feeling of vulnerability that we interiorize. In our Western world, we are often so uncomfortable about emotions that we have a hard time talking about them; cultural customs may often dictate our behavior; in public we may sooner joke about them (e.g. in the British tradition), dramatize them (e.g. in the Italian tradition) or deny them (e.g. in the German tradition) than simply and quietly talk about them in a personal and matter-of-fact way. We therefore find it difficult to accept and even more to share our vulnerability. We may even be unaware about it.

By now, we know that when we encounter a disagreement, the first natural reaction is to feel defensive; chances are that we want to counterattack; sometimes we avoid or get unsure. In most cases we tend to feel that "we should" somehow **show our strengths**. Even when we avoid or freeze, in our head there is a defensive reasoning that goes like this:

- if my boss does something that bothers me, I think (and I might tell him) that he should change
- if my colleague tells me something that I think is unfeasible and stupid, I think (and I might tell him) that his suggestion is a bad idea.

Do you see how this defensive approach **assigns the responsibility of how we feel to the other person**?

But **what happens if we try a different approach**? What if we make a conscious effort to shift to taking full responsibility for how we feel? This is an example of this shift:

- if my boss does something that bothers me, I search inside me and find out that his behavior makes me feel uncomfortable, confused and unsure, so this is exactly what I tell him, how I feel, and I might also enquire as to his side of the story;
- if my colleague tells me something that I think is unfeasible and stupid, I stop and search inside me and find out that his proposal surprises me and shakes my view; it seems so far fetched that I am afraid I might be missing something, it appears unrealistic to me, but what does he see that I do not? so I tell him just that, and encourage him to help me understand his point of view.

Importantly, whether or not the boss really intended to be rude, whether or not the colleague's idea was truly unrealistic, the important thing about **the shift** is that we have **modified our attitude to a calmer and less defensive one**; this usually produces two benefits: the first and more important one is that **we grow in self-confidence** (the more we dare to show ourselves as we are, humble and vulnerable, the faster we learn that we are OK and do not need to defend ourselves, the less afraid and defensive we are, in a positive spiral). The second is a by-product of the first; **chances are that the others find us more human and the relationship improves**.

As we consciously practice this shift, we will learn that **vulnerability has power**:

- it builds our self-confidence and makes us less defensive
- it encourage others to be open instead of defending themselves
- it creates trust
- it reveals our humanity and encourages others to reveal theirs, thus building the relationship

6.2.2 FROM UNCERTAINTY TO COURAGE (COURAGE TO OPEN A DIALOGUE WITHOUT KNOWING THE OUTCOME)

Have you ever heard someone say: "If I can't fix it, I don't want to hear it"? Although we may have not actually heard them spell it out, their behavior might give them away.

Especially managers may hesitate to open a completely free dialogue (rather forcing the discussion to stay restricted to specific points within an agenda) for fear to end up in unchartered territory where they have no opinion, no answer and no guidelines, i.e. where they feel naked, vulnerable and unable to perform with the decisiveness that they expect of themselves. They start to ruminate. As we have seen in previous Section (6.2.1.) rumination means anxiety. Uncertainty gives anxiety.

> *I have coached hundreds of executives and many have shared their doubts by saying something like: "I wonder what my associates think about the new policy". To my reply: "Have you asked them?" their response often is: "I cannot ask them, it is policy, we have no choice and if they want something else, I have no solution to offer."*
>
> *Whether it is the open space or flexible hours, or part-time, or even strategy, there often seems to be a reluctance to open the dialogue when it appears that certain company decisions are already made. Like: "What if they tell me that they really dislike the open space because of noise and lack of concentration? I cannot change things, this is already decided".*

We have previously seen how to challenge our thinking process in case of anxiety. "Bringing the question outside our head" is the main step in stopping the rumination.

> *In our example, we can see the advantages of "asking the associates to express themselves":*
> - *First of all, giving people the opportunity to express themselves is a minimum form of respect. For example, if I am annoyed by the open space and I only hear the lengthy explanations of the reasons why it is believed to be the right decision, I feel totally discounted as individual. Not only am I forced to accept a situation that I do not like, my own effort to accommodate the demand is not even validated, it simply goes unheard. How about my engagement? Even when I am willing to accept the difficulty, it would help me a lot to be heard.*
> - *Second, the fact that people voice a disagreement or they complain does not mean the recipient of the complaint is suddenly responsible to have an answer or to find a solution. If the team tells the manager that open space creates too much noise and distraction, this does not mean that suddenly the manager has to "fix it". If it is important for them, they may propose some alternatives (e.g. working part-time from home or having breaks in quiet areas)*

However, we may still feel (emotionally) very uncomfortable about this.

The best approach to stop the rumination and calm our emotional feelings (anxiety and mounting fear) is to…"take a break and do nothing"!

Remember when we discussed the Antagonistic Task-People Networks (in Chapter 3)?

Beyond the obvious reasons linked to assumptions about our role and credibility (we may dislike admitting that we have no power to fix things), there might be a more subtle mechanism at play: when we are very focused on our responsibilities (the task) we may de-activate the DMN neural network that helps us with empathy and relationships.

> *In the given example, it might be very difficult to contemplate the possibility to "simply ask the associates to express themselves" because we are temporarily only able to access the TPN network, and unable to access the necessary supporting function of the DMN that would assist us in dealing with our and our associates' emotions.*

The feeling of uneasiness about our ability to handle the emotional reaction of others when they complain, and the reluctance to open a dialogue that can potentially distract us from pragmatically taking care of the task-related priorities, that we might interpret as anxiety, fear, or emotional weakness, might in fact have real neurobiological roots: our DMN is temporarily unavailable.

But as we have seen, as soon as we are at rest, the DMN network is re-activated.

Thus a break, or even better meditation or mindfulness practices, can greatly help us reach a calmer emotional state and be able to stop the rumination also on the emotional level.

6.2.3 FROM EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY TO MINDFUL CALIBRATION

In the latest section, we have hinted at Meditation and Mindfulness Practices.

Extensive evidence points at the positive effects of these practices to achieve a better calibration of our emotional state.

Instead of suppressing emotions, we can learn to accept them and channel them to better serve our abilities to relate with ourselves and others in a confident and joyful way, so that it becomes easier to stay open and curious in front of disagreements and we become better equipped to make more informed and sound ethical decisions.

Many business people, who pride themselves of being rational and pragmatic, are still skeptical about these practices, mainly because they are often associated with some spiritual contexts that seem alien in a business reality.

However, companies like Google and Apple are successfully leading the way in training and adopting Mindfulness as a key leadership tool.

No chants and no pachouli, it is fully possible to consciously practice Mindfulness in a way that allows us to be happy, more fulfilled and much more effective leaders, by following some simple guidelines.

There are nine elements of Mindful Leadership, or said in other words, there are nine ways to be a Mindful Leader; each element is very effective per se, but of course the synergy of all nine, and their regular practice, is what gives us best results, not unlike any gym work-out.

The nine elements are:
Be Present, Be Aware, Be Calm, Be Focused, Be Clear, Be Equanimous (= Inner Balance), Be Positive, Be Compassionate, Be Impeccable.

I here want to specifically highlight the concept of "being equanimous": Equanimity can be defined as calmness and composure, especially in difficult situation; but it is important to note that this is an inner calmness, that derives from emotional balance rather than suppression of emotions.

We do not need to further expand on this, as there is dedicated extensive literature on the subject. Suffice to say that we recommend to introduce Mindfulness practices in our daily routines in order to learn how to better calibrate and positively re-channel our emotions.

6.3   ENCOURAGE AND INVITE DIFFERENT VIEWS

The Third Step in the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is

- focused on the we (US)
- covering the Thinking Processes that are involved in opening the dialogue to hear everybody

The Goal of this Third Step is to learn the skills necessary to encourage everybody's contribution to an open dialogue, specifically:

- learn the Skills of Conscious Listening
- learn the Skills of Active Listening
- learn the Skills of Critical Listening

In order to be able to encourage everybody to safely and confidently share their view, we need to take care of two aspects: we must create a safe space where everyone feels confortable in expressing own views, and of course we need to be able to listen.

We will look into the emotional aspect of creating a safe space in the next section. But there is no point in creating an emotionally welcoming space for everybody to speak up their mind, unless we are seriously prepared to listen. Unfortunately, listening is much more difficult than we think. So we first focus on Listening Skills.

6.3.1 LISTENING SKILLS

In most Western cultures we tend to value "talking" more than "listening" and we may often give unsolicited advice or quick solutions as part of showing our interest and care; sometimes we are so eager to "help" that we even push our views as the only "right" view and forget to check what the other person really feels, thinks or wants.

In the business world, many feel under a lot of pressure to build credibility and we often assume that this means being well prepared and showing the we "know", so that asking too many questions would almost be seen as an admission of incompetence.

The hard reality is that unless we ask in depth questions we are left with a single-sided interpretation of what we hear and consequently might miss out on a number of important points; also, listening to others establishes a respectful relationship that is more likely to build credibility.

Listening is a rare and valuable skill. It is both **the most used communication skill**, and **the least taught**; the most needed and yet the least mastered.

Studies show that in our modern society we spend on average 9% of our time writing, 16% reading, 30% speaking and 45% listening. The same studies however also show that most people are poor and inefficient listeners. The most common explanation is that "we think faster than we speak"; this means that our brain is sort of multitasking, formulating lateral thoughts and preparing responses while listening to what we hear. This usually means that we are ready with a new flow of ideas and extensive responses far before the others have finished their sentences, and often act upon our new thoughts, in so doing "forgetting" to listen to the whole message.

Yet the real answer is that **Listening is a competence that requires training and practice**. Unfortunately, very little listening training is available in regular education and only a few specialized professionals receive proper listening training (e.g. therapists, market intelligence experts, coaches).

How does one train in Listening Skills?

First of all, by increasing awareness and making a conscious effort to listen (Conscious Listening); second, by powering up the effectiveness of our listening via rephrasing, summarizing and asking great questions (Active Listening); and third, by nurturing a systematic dedication to critical thinking and problem solving (Critical Listening).

6.3.2 CONSCIOUS LISTENING SKILLS

The first part of Conscious Listening is to **learn how to focus**, specifically, to pay attention to "where we put our focus" while listening, and then to do it consciously.

Depending on where we put our focused attention, we can identify thee main "levels of listening"

> **Level 1 or Internal Listening**: this is when the focus is on ourselves and we listen more to our own inner voice than to what the other person is really saying; when we are busy asking ourselves "what does the information mean to me?"
> **Level 2 or Focused Listening**: this is when we focus entirely on the other person, oblivious of the rest of the world including ourselves; when we hear and notice every nuance and stay focused on the single question: "what is this person really trying to communicate beyond the facts and the story?"
> **Level 3 or Global Listening**: this is when we are aware of the energy surrounding us and have a soft focus on the entire environmental context; when we sense and formulate a background question "what do I detect in the atmosphere?"

In our everyday life, we are used to the Level 1 listening, which is extremely useful (e.g. I hear the "change of gate" announcement at the airport and I think: "what does it mean to me? is this my gate? do I have to start to run?" or I hear a comment about the traffic at a party and start to think if I can make a pertinent comment to keep the conversation going)

However, when we are trying to understand what the other person is really saying, we need to manage our temptation to follow our thoughts and rather focus on the other person (Level 2) as well as the context, like body language, impact on others, and the "unsaid" of silences (Level 3).

It takes a lot of practice to be able to consciously use Level 2 and Level 3 and even more practice to turn it into an automatic habit. The biggest challenge is to be able to separate the flow of our thoughts from our listening process and become fully absorbed in the other person, which brings us to the next point.

The second step in Conscious Listening is Learning to **self-manage**.

It is often quite hard to resist the temptation to get distracted away from what we hear and to start to form solutions or answers by ourselves. Learning to stay attentive requires patience, discipline in taming our own eagerness, and the humbleness to offer alternatives and new perspective only as contribution to brainstorming; in a word, it requires self-management.

The best way to self-manage and tame our impatience to speak, is to develop more curiosity for the other person; developing trust, or at least giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, greatly helps to feed our curiosity, which in turn helps to be less self-focused (we remind to the earlier discussion about learning to challenge our own prejudice and assumptions).

The third step is to be transparent and matter of fact. Everyone can get distracted and, rather than pretending to listen, self-management means acknowledging and resuming attention ("sorry, I went into my head for a second, do you mind repeating?").

6.3.3 ACTIVE LISTENING AND POWERFUL QUESTIONS

It is not enough to listen carefully, unless we continuously check our understanding and actively move forward to deepen the understanding. Powerful questions (i.e. open ended questions) can help us uncover the real issue that everybody may detect, yet nobody might mention or bring up to consciousness (the classical elephant in the room).

An important difference between Active Listening and simple listening is the application of a Repeat – Add – Ask approach:

-   Repeating what we have heard is like putting a mirror in front of the other persons, it helps them become more aware of what they are actually saying or meaning; it also helps them recognize how effectively they have communicated their meaning. An effective variation of the repeating technique is rephrasing, which can help deepen the awareness; another variation is to summarize.
-   Adding is also an effective way to encourage a more in depth elaboration of thoughts.
-   Finally Asking open ended and non-judgmental questions is the most powerful tool of Active Listening. An open question is a question that cannot be simply answered by yes or no; the broader the question, the more we can stimulate the other person to reflect, explore, and contribute to the mutual learning, in which case we talk about Powerful Questions.

Examples of open Questions:

-   What are the downsides of this option?
-   What do you need to make it happen?

Examples of broader Powerful Questions:

-   What are the possibilities?
-   What would you do if you were the company owner?
-   What are your concerns?
-   What do you wish for?
-   If it only depended on you, what would be your choice?

Final note: the more we talk, the less space we give to our listening; the more information we give in one single "go", the less time we give to the other person(s) to absorb, reflect, form an opinion and interact. There are of course situations when we need to explain (e.g. teaching mode), and there are moments when too much explaining is too much information.

6.3.4 CRITICAL LISTENING: CHECKING UNDERSTANDING

In the previous section, we already mentioned the importance of checking our understanding.

It is important to be clear about one aspect of checking our understanding: in order for this step to be truly effective, we need to be humble. We need to be aware of the fact that our understanding might be fallacious.

Specifically:

- It does not help to state: "I know what you mean, you are saying…"
- We must rather ask in this way: "if I understand you correctly, you infer that…"

6.4   ALIGN ON A COMMON INTENTION, ACCEPTING DIFFERENCES OF APPROACH

The Fourth Step in the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is

- focused on the relationship (the US)
- covering the Feeling Processes that create engagement around a common intention

The Goal of this Fourth Step is to help us co-create Alignment, while accepting that we may have our differences in terms of a preferred approach.

Sometimes, in meetings and conversations we loose sight of the initial intention; this often happens when we are so focused on the task at hand that we disconnect from our emotions (as we have seen in Step Two). We might be so focused on our opinion, that we are unable to be interested in other views, and we start a battle for "who has the best data" or "who has the most support/alliances/votes" (as we have seen in Steps One and Three). When this happens, the result is "winners and losers", which often means lack of engagement, damaged relationships and bad feelings.

The best negotiators, the leaders with confidence and influence, stop such unproductive battles and put the classic "elephant" on the table by going back to basics and by reminding everybody of the "why we are here". When everybody is aligned on the intention, everybody wins and choosing between alternative options is no longer an ego fight or an anxiety game.

This might appear rather obvious at this point, after going through all what was discussed in previous Chapters. However, in this Fourth Step we want to look at the **emotional side of creating mutual Engagement on Intention**.

Let's start with some definitions:

- We can define Intention as a positive commitment to attain an aim and we can define Alignment as Congruence of Intentions.
- We can then define Opinion as a Supposition elevated to the status of Conclusion (another way to express what we earlier discussed as rationalized intuition that we believe true, although it might be biased) and we can define Agreement as Congruence of Opinions.

When we look at it in this way, we may grasp how **insisting on reaching an Agreement before we are Aligned can lead to Conflicts**. Encouraging Alignment means opening the dialogue, stimulating curiosity, understanding and mutual learning; it means establishing an inclusive dialogue that creates Intelligence. Pushing for a quick Agreement is rather a process of excluding, limiting, and closing the dialogue. Still, our emotions often lead us to forget the process of Alignment.

So how can we create an Emotional Alignment on Intention? Better said: how can we **Engage everybody in seeking Alignment on Intention** before we start to evaluate task-based alternatives to reach an Agreement on more specific Goals and Actions?

The key word here is **Engagement**. We can use an anecdote to illustrate the concept of Engagement:

> *An architect visits a construction site and asks several people what they are doing; an electrician answers "I'm connecting cables", a painter answers "I am painting a wall"; he finally asks a bricklayer who – with a big smile – answers "Don't you see? I am building a cathedral".*

The bricklayer of this story is clearly engaged; he is happy and proud to do a good job, that he intuitively and emotionally sees as important in the larger context; he may not agree with the exact style of the design (might prefer classical gothic, while the planned cathedral is modern), he might not even be motivated by the same reasons that originated the work (he might belong to a different religion, yet still appreciates the value of the architectonic importance of the building). He is emotionally committed, and happy to contribute, albeit not agreeing on everything. He is "Aligned on a broader Intention", he feels proud to contribute to a larger scope, even when he disagrees on the specific rational purpose and on several executional details. He is **willing to put his heart into it**.

So the Key to Align on Intention is to **invite frequent open discussions about "what makes us proud to be together and to create together" and to frequently remind each other of this common intention.**

As Jim Collins said in "Good to Great", one of the success factors of Great Organizations is that they first decide "who they put on the bus before they even discuss where the bus will go".

To note:
Does it mean that engaged people always agree? Of course not; the opposite! Engaged people argue and fight fiercely, but not to further the ambition of their ego, they do it to further the ambition on behalf of the aligned dream, they want the dream to be as grand as it can be.

6.5   RECOGNIZE OPPORTUNITIES AND CO-CREATE POSITIVE CHANGE

The Fifth Step in the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is

- focused on the outcome that gets co-created (the IT)
- covering both the Thinking and Feeling Processes that are involved in co-creation and innovation

The Goal of this Fifth Step is to help us recognize opportunities, specifically:

- cultivate the dedication to cycles of diverging-converging thinking
- develop the emotional stamina to tolerate uncertainties and trust the co-creation process

When we disagree, we also uncover new opportunities to learn and co-create, but co-creation can be a very challenging step unless we train on the difficult double challenge of "thinking outside of the box" and of "tolerating the high level of uncertainty associated with imagining possible alternatives that do not yet exist".

This double challenge is especially arduous, since we still know very little about the neuroscience of creativity and we are in a very tentative field of experimentation.

What we **do** know is mainly from empirical studies that guide us towards an **iterative process in which we alternate cycles of divergent and convergent thinking, while gradually gaining increased emotional confidence in the inevitable uncertainty of "the new"**.

We therefore suggest to train and practice on co-creation in this way:

- **Employ a sequential thinking process** in which we first brainstorm without establishing any preset criteria (diverging phase), then introduce a phase in which we attempt a critical evaluation based on tentative criteria (convergence) and then continue with a further divergence phase that might bring us to question the said criteria and then re-evaluate based on adjusted criteria.

  o *I first encountered this approach about thirty years ago when working in P&G: we were using this sequential approach for Concept Generation in cross-functional Innovation Teams (with participation of Product Development, Marketing and Market Research functions); this approach was instrumental to the co-creation of major successful innovations like Crest Tartar Control toothpaste and Swiffer.*
  o *Further examples of this type of approach can be found in a number of recent academic works like – with all due respectful approximation – Theory U ("Leading from the future that wants to emerge" by Otto Scharmer) and especially the Double Diamond Model by the UK Design Council, currently employed in the Applied Neurocreativity Course offered by the Copenhagen Business School.*

- **Apply what is currently known to be some of the "Best Practices" that make us emotionally more resilient in dealing with uncertainty**:

  o Practice Mind Wandering: we get more creative and emotionally more prone to tolerate uncertainty when we let our mind go free without the preoccupation to have to filter distractions in order to refocus.
  o Bring more frequent Physical Exercise in our daily routines: this is proven to enhance creativity and decrease stress.
  o Adapt our Physical Environment to Creativity-Inducing Conditions, like soft lighting and soft noise (not absolute silence!).
  o Allow Constraints and Messiness: creativity is enhanced by real conditions, not by a perfect pristine world of complete order and total empty freedom.

7   CONCLUSION

To conclude, we leave you with the following final thoughts.

Workplace conflicts currently occupy the average working person an estimated time equivalent of 12 days/year. The majority of these conflicts stem from different views about subjective matters. The very diversity that creates the conflict is an opportunity to learn, grow and co-create. Often, however, the time, effort and skills required to benefit from this diversity make us choose to simply work on removing the conflict as quickly as possible.

When we see conflicts as simply negative, we can apply Conflict Resolution techniques to make the conflict go away, or sometimes we can apply Conflict Prevention techniques to minimize the severity of expected conflicts.

With proper preparation, however, it is possible to learn to apply the type of Conflict Management techniques that help us harness the benefits of our diverse views and opinions.

Transforming Conflicts into Co-creating Positive Change requires some important shifts.

- Fist of all, we need to be willing to change ourselves: we cannot leverage on our diversity if we expect that it will be the others who need to change.
- Second, we need to better understand how our brain works, because it is often our assumptions and biases that make us miss out on the opportunities to understand each other, learn from differences and co-create.

Neuroscience has made many advances in the last 50 years, that help us understand why we think and feel the way we do; some of these discoveries are sometimes hard to accept, since they shatter some of our well-rooted beliefs; it might be especially hard to accept to recognize our biases.

- We now know that our brain is programmed to see most differences as possible threats, hence we may get defensive instead of curious when hearing a different opinion.
- We now know that the brain has mutually exclusive neural networks, so that we might get so focused on practical goals and tasks that we shut down our ethical and empathetic abilities.
- We now know that logical thoughts take so much energy that the brain often takes shortcuts (intuitions) and then quickly works on rationalizing them; thus different people with different backgrounds can have very different intuitions, then rationalize them with impeccable logic and each become convinced to hold the universal truth because it appears logically rational.

Based on the understanding of how our brain works, we have looked into the behaviors that affect even the best Leaders, and hinder their ability to be at their best when dealing with conflicts:

- The Negativity Bias makes us behave in a way that calls for negative responses, creating a spiral of defensive-aggressive reactions (the self-fulfilling prophecy effect)
- The Ego Bias makes us ruminate and distracts us away from the real issue (the self-deception or "in the box" effect)
- The Rationality Bias makes us so convinced that everybody can reach the same conclusion by using the same logic, that it makes us blind to the different initial intuitions that bring us – with impeccable logic – to totally different conclusions (the unconscious belief in one superior and universal truth)

We have proposed a Model that can guide us to open the dialogue rather than to close the discussion to find the "best truth": the CLEAR Model.

We have also discussed a revolutionary method: the **C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method** is a systematic methodology that guides us, through a simple five-step approach, to learn the skills required to free our thinking and feeling from biased concerns, so we can handle disagreements with confidence, and influential wisdom.

Hundreds of business leaders who work in international blue chip organizations (e.g. Unilever, Yara, Société Générale and Mars), have already been trained according to this method, and report substantial benefits in its application (some of these testimonials can be seen on www.theclearmindset.com). They specifically highlight how building more confidence with their newly acquired skills makes them more effective in dealing with workplace conflicts with increased ease and influence.

This is a recap of benefits:

The C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method helps save time and money.

Workplace disagreements, that often risk escalating into unconstructive confrontations and conflicts, are a major cost in every company.

Strengthening our skills and learning a proven method to transform disagreements into constructive dialogue can help us reduce some inefficiency, and save us time and money.

The C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Method helps stimulate innovation.

It is widely proven that diversity and differences of perspectives are the birthplace of creativity and innovation; however, meeting different opinions often leads to interpersonal tensions rather than curiosity and mutual learning.

This Method helps us transform disagreements into co-creation of positive change.

The C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Training helps reduce resistance to change.

By validating different views and welcoming an open dialogue, we can learn to transform "change" into a mutual opportunity of engagement and better tackle resistance to change.

The C.L.E.A.R.™ Mindset Training works.

Based on a unique neuroscience-based Conflict Transformation Model, this Method offers a very practical and proven effective Five-Step approach that makes the application of the theoretical principles simple and straightforward.

The practical Method has been developed based on the experience of hundreds of international managers, leaders and change agents, who have been trained and coached according to the Model.

For more information about training opportunities, please visit: www.theclearmindset.com

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Executive Summary for THE CLEAR MINDSET

Workplace conflicts currently occupy the average working person an estimated time-equivalent of 12 days/year. The majority of these conflicts stem from different views about subjective matters. The very diversity that creates the conflict is an opportunity to learn, grow and co-create. Often, however, the time, effort and skills required to benefit from this diversity make us choose to simply work on removing the conflict as quickly as possible.

This book provides an updated and no-nonsense framework for understanding and then overcoming the unconscious biases that hinder our ability to deal with disagreements and conflict in a constructive way.

With the help of sound and up to date insights about the Neuroscience of Conflict, you will be guided through an understanding that will forever change the way you talk, listen and negotiate during stressful conversations.

You will learn a simple five-step approach, proven effective by hundreds of leaders in blue chip organizations, that will make you and our teams able to transform workplace conflicts into positive opportunities for open constructive dialogues leading to co-creation and enhanced engagement.