Disagreement Success

A failure of disagreement is usually some form of polarisation or conflict. But what does successful disagreement look like? It is *not* agreement. It may be some form of recognition that the different interests of antagonists in a dispute require some kind of mutuality. A successful disagreement opens up the complexity of real-life situations and creates space for people to develop their position and opinions by better understanding people who hold opposing views and maintaining relationships with them.

The threat of difference

Inherent in every disagreement is something that threatens us at some level. Jung suggests that the negative qualities we ascribe to others reflect our own hidden desires and anxieties, those that are too dangerous to express to ourselves. A conversation that reveals to us that our initial judgement of others is false can have a startlingly transformative effect.
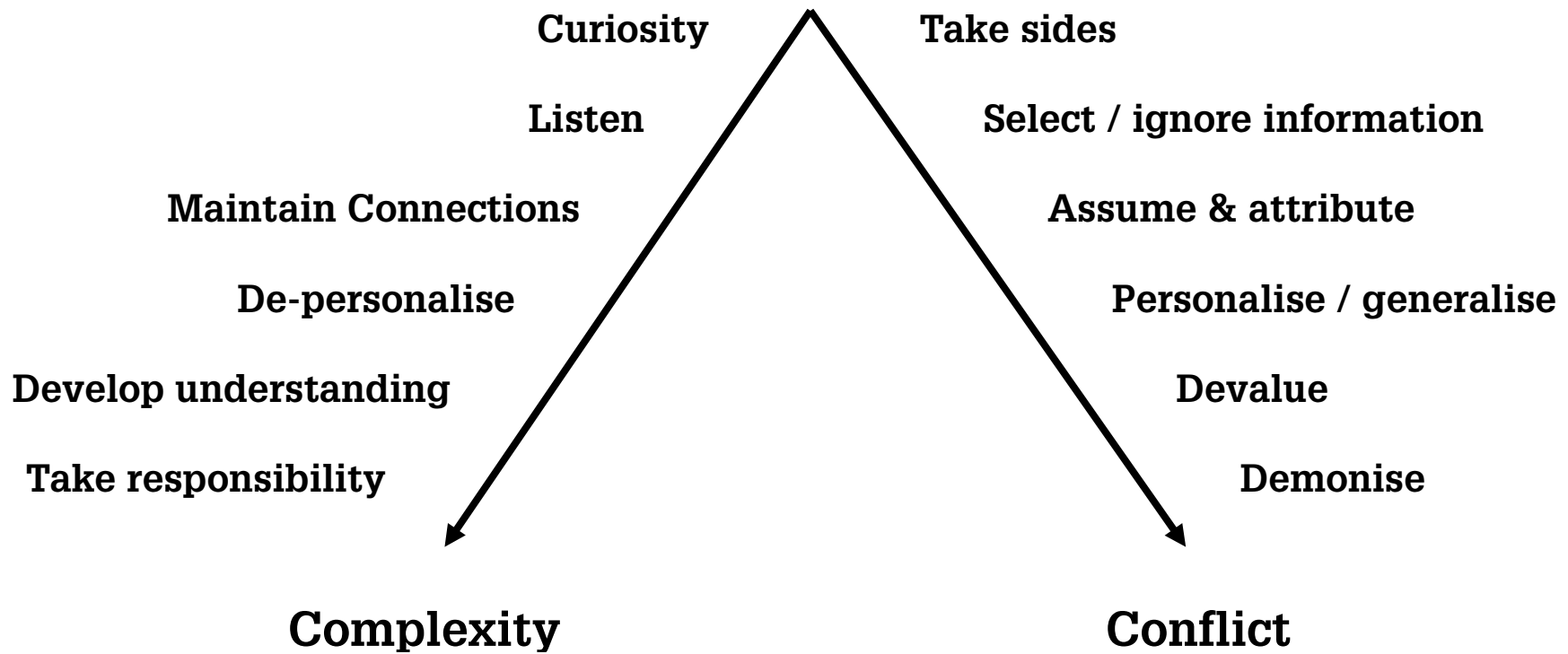
Polarisation

There are many external and internal factors that polarise our perceptions of other people, such as:

- Fear
- Prejudice
- History
- Belief
- Self interest
- Peer pressure

If our response on encountering a difference which disturbs us (i.e. a threat) is to start by taking a side, we have taken the first step to allowing polarisation to lead us into conflict. An alternative strategy is to develop curiosity about the nature of the disagreement and about our opponents' positions.

Disagreement

Success / Failure

Difference

Threat?

Curiosity   Take sides

Listen   Select / ignore information

Maintain Connections   Assume & attribute

De-personalise   Personalise / generalise

Develop understanding   Devalue

Take responsibility   Demonise

Complexity   Conflict

Alternative pathways for disagreement

a)   Towards conflict

- Take sides   Decide to defend one position rather than explore the nature of the disagreement.

- Select information   Give less value to information that doesn't fit with our opinion.

- Attribute views   Make unchecked assumptions about what our opponent thinks and attribute views they may not hold.

- Personalise   The person becomes the problem, not the issue.

- Generalise   All people who hold this view are the same.

- Devalue   The opponent is a less important human being than those with whom we agree.

- Demonise   The problem is that person's fault and they must be destroyed.

b)   Towards complexity

- Curiosity   The nature and causes of this disagreement are interesting.

- Listen   An accurate understanding of the opponent's position is important to me.

- Maintain Connections   Define the limits of this particular disagreement and keep other aspects of the relationship alive

- De-personalise   This disagreement is about issues and I maintain respect for the opponent.

- Develop position   The emerging complexity of the disagreement leads me to a more sophisticated understanding of my own position.

- Constructive action   I take responsibility for finding options for a positive outcome without having to agree.

Possible strategies for moving from conflict to complexity

1.	De-escelation:	Create safety and remove the need to pursue the conflict. Help protagonists process emotions.
2.	Depolarisation:	Reduce internal and external polarising factors (fear, prejudice, history etc) and work on deconstructing stereotypes.
3.	Explore the threat:	Enable people to explore what is really at stake for them and what lies beneath this.
4.	Stimulate self-reflection / awareness:	Generate self-reflection to enable people to recognise their own patterns of negative behaviour, and mimicry of opponent.
5.	Seek transformation:	Recognise opportunities to see the humanity of the enemy and embrace for empathetic connections.

Five principles of disagreement success
by Philip T Neisser[1]

Value the Extreme: Extreme ideas are not necessarily worse, or better, than middle-of-the-road ones. The real danger lies in the rejection of the realm of ideas as the proper forum for solving problems. Thus we need to invite all concerns – including those articulated by terrorists – into the realm of discussion, so as to take them away from, and weaken, the sphere of violence.

Challenge Manipulation by Diving Into It: With so many images and ideas coming at us all the time, with so many people trying to sell us this or that, get us to believe something, or vote for someone, it is tempting to try to rely only on undisputed facts, or instead to give up on public discourse entirely, figuring that it is all just a *matter of opinion.* But we will never get enough truly decisive facts, and public discourse is always already inside our heads – it can't be avoided. The best bet, then, is to dive in, examining and comparing impassioned views, including our own. We need not be afraid of bias. We can each learn how to weigh the claims of others, and then decide for ourselves. There is, in other words, a difference between being convinced and being manipulated, and engaging disagreement can help us reside in the world of the former.

Expect to Find Underlying Commonalities: Considerable common ground can often be found beneath even the most intense disagreement. Thus more engagement in actual disagreement would, ironically, tend to make people less angry and less accusing, helping them to reach enough agreement to better address problems.

Put Time in Now, and Save It Later: A move to more disagreement might seem impossibly time-consuming and inefficient, but in the long run the time and energy spent on the front end will be repaid, with interest, when it is time to act (or refuse to act).

combine Certainty with Uncertainty: Acting on principles does not require absolute certainty. On the contrary, it requires the personal strength to believe while also acknowledging that, as humans, we cannot indisputably prove the truth of our deepest beliefs. Humility is thus the first virtue of political morality.

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[1] Political polarization as Disagreement Failure: Philip T. Neisser, Journal of Public Deliberation Volume 2, Issue 1 2006.

Some psychological research results

1. Conflict generated by increasing the resistance of subordinate members of a group to a solution offered by a member in an authority position increases the frequency of high quality solutions. Note: mixed-sex composition in interaction with such conflict further enhances the production of high quality. *(Differences and disagreements as factors in creative group problem solving. By Hoffman, L. R; Harburg, E; Maier, N.R.F. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, Vol 64(3), Mar 1962, 206-214)*

2. Conflict between children and parents tend to result in better school grades for children in good quality relationships, but the delinquency and withdrawal where there were poorer quality relationships. *(The correlates of conflict: Disagreement is not necessarily detrimental. Adams, Ryan E; Laursen, Brett Journal of Familiy Psychology, Vol 21(3), Sep 2007, 445-458)*

3. In the conceptualisation phase of R&D efforts, polarity (conflict potential) positively influences the creative performance of R&D teams, whereas at lower degrees of complexity or in situations later in the development cycle polarity negatively impacts the creative performance or R&D teams. *(Kratzer, J; Leenders, R.T. and Van Engelen, J.M. (2006), Team Polarity and Creative Performance in Innovation Teams. Creativity and Innovation Management, 15: 96-104)*

4. In a study of the effect of online discussion between two people with different views on same sex marriages. Those who strongly opposed same-sex marriage and sexual minority rights prior to the discussions, and who perceived that others disagreed with them, became even more opposed, and this effect was not a short-term shift. *(Wojcieszak, M. and Price, V. (2010), Bridging the Divide or Intensifying the Conflict? How Disagreement Affects Strong Predictions about Sexual Minorities. Political Psychology, 31: 315-339)*

5. A study of the effectiveness of air crew in combat over Korea showed that more effective crews were characterised by greater tolerance of disagreement *(E.P. Torrance 1953).*[i]

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[i] Material supplied by St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation & Peace, Facilitation & Dialogue 2012, Simon Keyes.