

ThinkTank

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Six Steps to Agreement

It's not necessary for both parties to apply this model to get to a satisfactory resolution –just one.

Step 1 focuses on understanding that it is your mind that causes you to react the way you do.

Step 2 emphasizes being aware, in the moment, of assumptions you are making.

Step 3 asks you to rethink the assumptions that have prompted your actions toward someone.

Step 4 encourages you to help others rethink assumptions behind their actions toward you.

Step 5 calls for you and another person to discard mutually invalid assumptions and agree on ways to relate to each other in the future.

Step 6 reminds you that checking out and discarding ungrounded assumptions is a lifelong endeavor.

Referenced in all of the six steps is a tool called the Ladder of Assumptions that helps people understand how their minds work. It graphically displays how we see the world, what kinds of conclusions we reach from our observations, and how we act based on our conclusions. It demonstrates that when we find ourselves in conflict with someone, it is our own mind that causes us to react the way we do. If one of our personal goals is to establish and maintain positive relationships with other people, the Ladder provides a basis for learning how to become aware of what is in our minds, challenge what we find there, discard outmoded notions, and replace them with reality-based assumptions. To ensure confidentiality, the names Sandra and Rachel, which are used throughout the case study, are fictitious. Sandra was able to reach a mutually satisfactory resolution with Rachel, despite the fact that Rachel had no prior knowledge of the six-step process we teach. In fact, it was only when Sandra began to coach Rachel in using the six-step process to clarify their respective assumptions about each other

that they both made remarkable progress in resolving their misunderstandings.

The case study is written in Sandra's words, and includes letters that were exchanged between her and Rachel. Their communication during the three to four weeks in September 2003, when the initial phase of the conflict took place, was largely via letters to each other that they posted to the bulletin board at the barn. After that, they had numerous face to face conversations that Sandra recounts.

Context for the Conflict

For the past nine years, I have managed a horse barn for a landlord. It is a wonderful environment for my horse, and that was the reason I originally decided to take on the management responsibilities. My horse occupies a stall and paddock, and I rent the other stalls and paddocks to people who wish to board their horses at the stables. The business plan is for me to break even; I don't make any money at it. I pass along the fees from the renters to the landlord. A full care fee includes rent for the stall, daily feeding of the horse and cleaning of the stall. The fee can be reduced if the renter cleans the stall, and can be further reduced if the renter feeds on certain nights.

In December 2002, I rented a stall to Rachel. For the ensuing nine months, everything was fine with our relationship. Her horse was going to have a foal in August 2003, and so it was necessary to double the stall accommodations during the July/August/September time frame.

Rachel agreed to split the barn work with me and my other renter. She also helped me paint the barn and do other upgrades to the barn during the summer months. Her husband and their three children helped us with this work. All this enabled me to raise her fee by only 5 to 10%. In September, I anticipated that I would have to raise Rachel's fee another 25% to cover her fair share of

the costs, which included a larger stall for two horses, and feeding two horses. In my mind, I was thinking that I would charge her \$370.

How the Conflict Originally Developed

A conflict started brewing early in September when Rachel apparently looked ahead and assumed that she was going to have to pay nearly twice the fee (a total of \$770) for two horses, as soon as the foal was weaned. This higher fee, covering additional stall space and additional feed for two horses, was an amount that she felt she couldn't pay.

Rachel made these assumptions on her own; she never talked to me about them. One day in early September she told me that she would have to look for another barn. Stunned by her statement, I attempted to clarify things with her by posting the following letter to the board at the barn.

Rachel,

What do you want from me? When you moved in you wanted a small stall at low cost. I rented the middle stall to you for \$240 per month. When you needed foaling accommodations, I rented the double stall to you for \$275 per month plus extra work. Then you said that you wanted the large stall for the next six months or so. You said that you understood that it costs more and that you didn't want me to lose money. I said that's fine. Now you say that you can't afford it. What do you want? I can't offer you what I promised the other boarders, but I can offer you my stall and paddock. It's not really fair to the others to offer you the large stall and paddock at a lower price than they had previously paid.

Do you want to feed every night? That was the \$60 discount for three horses. I upped it to \$90 for four horses, when the new renter brings her horse to join us. You said that you wanted to split feeding at a \$45 discount once the new horse, moves in. The new horse's owner is expecting that split. I let you pick nights to feed for September. I can't cover all the rest of the nights in addition to breakfast and lunches every day, so I am hiring someone else to help with the feeding.

Anyway, please tell me what you want. Perhaps, I can still change things to accommodate your needs. I do my best to keep horses and owners happy.

Sandra

Rachel responded the next day by posting the following letter to the board:

Sandra,

I'm not trying to "get" anything the others don't get, but let's at least be correct on the figures. I paid \$270 per month for a small stall. Your offer for the double stall was \$275 per month--you acknowledged this in your note yesterday. If that was not OK, you should not have offered it. As compared to your other boarders, I think my family and I have done more work here than any of the others. We did two days of labor on fencing; We did two days of labor on covering things with sheeting and mesh in the middle stall; We did several days stripping paint; and we did two days painting. I spent many evenings and afternoons cooling out your horse after your rides, when you had "no time." Please keep in mind what labor costs might have been. I don't mind the \$370 per month, but I do not want to be imposed upon for extra labor. I'd really rather ride or do family activities than fix barns and fences.

I truly cannot afford to pay \$770 per month or thereabouts for two horses plus work, plus family, plus barn chores for four to five horses--I'd never enjoy owning a horse. So I will begin looking for another place ASAP because it sounds like you really need money and a laborer rather than a barn pal. Each time I come you ask for one more little favor and pretty soon they all add up to no time for me with my horse. Hope you see my points. My job hours are not flexible and my family obligations are demanding (sick parents and in-laws, too, to deal with--yreck!). I have to balance economics with time and it looks like the future here will require too much of both. I'll stay as long as I can or until I find suitable stabling for a mare and growing foal nearby--no easy feat.

Rachel

I responded to Rachel right away by posting the following letter to the board.

Rachel,

Please can we talk in person. I thought things were going well until these notes from you. I'm at a loss. I'm just trying to find out what you need. I don't see any problem if you don't mind the \$355-370 per month. The barn is painted beautifully. The fences are being fixed. The trees are trimmed. The roof is good. The hay is coming. Why would I impose on you for extra labor? Please explain.

I can't figure out how you got \$770 per month. We never talked about costs for both horses. I just asked if you'd want them here, and you thought you would. If

you took both stalls, the MOST it would cost is \$400 plus \$325 for a total of \$725, minus any feeding you wanted to do. If we had five horses, a stall or space would be shared and costs reduced. Feed credits would go up.

What favors did I ask since the big projects? I honestly can't remember. I think the only time I called you these past several weeks was to say that I could feed for you. Please help me understand what is bugging you.

Please can we talk in person? It seems that my notes are offending you. I don't mean to offend you. I think I do better in person. Let me know when is good for you.

Have a GREAT weekend!

Sandra

And then a few days later, when it was clear that Rachel had made arrangements to move her horses out, I posted this letter to the board.

Rachel,

It seems to me that you made up your mind to leave before we even discussed costs for your two horses. Is something else bothering you? I value your friendship and would love to have you stay. When I said \$725 was the most it would cost for two horses, I referred to the large and small stalls both of which are not even available. What I can offer you is the large stall and paddock for both of your horses, or a shared space. My horse could share the large stall and one horse could use the small stall, if you need your horses to be separate. You could divide up the large paddock or create a paddock somewhere else. Anyway, you could have your two horses wherever you see fit for \$560 per month plus three nights of feeding four or five horses. Feeding will be simplified and pre-measured. I was going to do that anyway.

The foal is no charge (except some hay) for six months, as the landlord has already offered. Perhaps I can convince the landlord to extend the free period to one year?

I lost a lot of money these past months and I don't regret it at all. The barn is beautiful and I am so grateful for all your help. I only wish you could stay and enjoy it. I see no reason for you to rush out of here. Let me know if there's anything else I can do.

Sandra

Rachel left the following letter on the board on September 14.

S.

Let's have a very, very honest conversation. I am not moving because of anything you did or did not do. I will explain it all. Let's talk somewhere comfy, away from the barn--maybe go for a drink someplace. Maybe I don't need to go, but I think when you see my numbers you'll understand. No upsets, just honest talk between friends, OK?

R.

This conversation never happened. I only received a brief phone call from Rachel while she was at work, telling me in very abrupt fashion that she had found another barn at a cost of \$100 rent per month plus hay and expenses, and that she would be doing all the barn work herself. Afterwards I posted this letter to the board.

Rachel,

What can I change here that would make you want to stay?

You said this place is too much work, yet you are moving to a place that needs more work and where you have to do all the upkeep. We worked all summer to fix this place up, so it is ready to be enjoyed with minimal upkeep.

You said this place is too much money. I would rather lose money than lose you. There are lots of hidden costs and time-suckers in upkeep. I always thought, and still strongly believe, that we are both better off as a team. The horses are happy here.

You said it's not me, so please tell me what I can change to make it possible for you to stay, with one or two horses as needed.

Sandra

Rachel left the following letter on the board on Friday September 19.

S--

I thought we had talked (not away from here, of course) but I have no more to tell. You know the rent I'm offered. A friend of mine may be able to keep the foal for a while, when I separate him at weaning. I'm happy to talk more, in a nice relaxing environment. I'm home Saturday AM. Saturday PM my husband and I go to his

company's picnic. Saturday evening we're out of town overnight and then home Sunday AM. Sunday PM I plan to drive to the party you and I have been invited to. Did you RSVP for the party? Are you planning to go? If so, we can talk on the drive or while eating and relaxing there. I also think we have a couple's dinner that our husbands are trying to work out. I'm available most evenings at home. Stop by for some wine and cheese.

R

I went to the landlord and represented Rachel to him very well. I told him that she worked hard, and that her husband is a contractor and had gotten discounts on the lumber and supplies that were used to upgrade the barn and the property over the summer. Given all these considerations, the landlord agreed to continue to let the foal be there for free.

I dropped over to Rachel's house for wine and cheese that evening. We talked through all the issues as friends. It came down strictly to price for Rachel. I told her that I could probably make \$350 per month work, as long as she was feeding most nights. But there were other assumptions that came out in our talk as well -- assumptions regarding work and time.

For example, over the summer Rachel had been riding the second boarder's horse, since Rachel's horse was unrideable before and after the foaling. Rachel had agreed to clean the second boarder's stall plus her own for this riding privilege. She had expected to have to continue this extra work even though she would have no time to ride starting in September when she returned to work as a school teacher. This turned out to be an incorrect assumption on her part, because the second boarder had planned, and already was starting, to clean her own stall.

Rachel also assumed that she would have to measure out feed every night, which I had assumed that I would do each morning and which I am still doing. Rachel further assumed that she would have to paint the fence, give my horse medicine when he was ill and spread woodchips. She assumed all these things without ever asking me. We discussed these assumptions at length, and in the end we were able to clarify them.

The heart-to-heart talk Rachel and I had that night at her house enabled me to show her that her assumptions that continuing to keep her horses at the barn would involve too much work, time and money were unfounded. Our discussion ended up in a win-win situation for all.

Since the landlord agreed to continue the two for one rate for Rachel's horses, I was able to base the rent more on a "per stall" rate, rather than on the much higher "per horse" rate. This made it affordable for Rachel. She was thrilled with my price estimate of \$300-400 per month, depending on how many nights she chose to feed month to month.

My benefit was that I no longer had to make a trip back to the barn at night to feed; instead I could just measure out the feed in the mornings. Since a potential third boarder had decided not to move her horse to my barn yet, my second boarder agreed to pay \$25 more rent per month in order to receive a benefit of a larger area for her horse.

After the agreements had been reached, and everything seemed OK, an incident occurred that showed me that Rachel had still another assumption that needed to be cleared up. She made an assumption that I was dissatisfied with her work at the barn and therefore I was angry at her. The incident occurred as follows. On a morning when Rachel had signed up to feed the horses, my second boarder stopped by the barn early to clean her horse's stall. She phoned Rachel and offered to feed for her since she was already there. Rachel said that was great. She told the second boarder to go ahead and feed the hay and that she would give the horses their supplements later when she got there. Shortly after this phone call, I showed up at the barn to check on my horse, who had been sick, and to take him for a short walk. I noticed that he hadn't been given his supplements and decided to give them to him.

I was in the process of giving my horse his supplements just before taking him out on a trail ride when Rachel showed up. Thinking that I was angry at her because she hadn't given my horse his supplements and because I was having to do the work she had agreed to do, she exploded at me, saying "You aren't riding that horse in drill team after he's been sick, ARE YOU?" I said, "No, I'm just taking him on a short trail ride at a walk." I was in a hurry and got ready to leave after saying that, not realizing that Rachel thought I was angry at her because of the abrupt way I spoke to her.

Rachel left the barn and went to her house, which is only a five minute drive away. As I was loading my horse in the trailer, my second boarder took a phone call on the barn phone. It was from Rachel. My second boarder yelled at me that Rachel had called and was very upset because I was mad at her. I responded that I was not angry at Rachel at all. This incident gave me a clue that there was more bothering Rachel than just the

issues regarding money, work and time at the barn.

When I returned from my ride, Rachel had arrived back at the barn. I walked right up to her, gave her a big hug and said, "Rachel, I'm NOT mad at you at all. I LOVE what you do here. I'm not at all upset. But, right now I'm in a hurry to get to my job." Being very clear to Rachel that in truth I was very positive about her and all the work she does at the barn gave a real boost to our friendship.

The next day I made it a point to sit down on some hay bales at the barn with Rachel and talk with her. I asked her please not to assume that I'm mad when in reality I'm just focused on getting some tasks done, and that if she thinks I am mad, to please ask if anything is wrong. I assured her that I would tell her when I was in a hurry, so she wouldn't interpret my focus on getting tasks done quickly as anger toward her. I asked her if it was OK to give her a quick hug when I didn't have time to talk or explain things. She agreed.

As a result of taking time to clarify each other's behavior, our friendship has grown and I have learned that to head off conflicts in the future I need to continually affirm Rachel for her work at the barn. How I applied the six-step conflict resolution process.

Working with the Ladder of Assumptions, which I learned about in the workshop, has taught me not to take things as personally nor as emotionally as I used to. At the beginning of this conflict, I was so upset that I was up until 3:00 AM several nights, worrying and writing letters to Rachel. I was obsessing on every word, hoping not to upset her more. I was working the numbers of barn costs over and over in my mind--looking for a way to keep it fair for everyone involved and still meet the costs. Once I realized that we could still be friends, however things turned out, I decided to turn the conflict into a learning experience and see how much I could learn from it. As soon as I did that, it enabled me to be less emotional and more objective about finding a solution.

I feel that I have broken a negative repetitive pattern of individuals signing up to board their horses at my barn and then later becoming dissatisfied after six to twelve months. It is an extremely challenging job for a manager of a small barn to keep the landlord and the boarders happy. It seems that over time boarders tend to assume that they have more rights than were written into the original agreements.

The Ladder of Assumptions is a tool for looking at all

the assumptions surrounding a conflict, getting rid of the emotions and as a result getting more objective about things. Applying the Ladder to our conflict enabled me to understand Rachel's assumptions and her emotions. Since they belonged to her and came from her life experience, I could step back and realize that they didn't constitute an attack on me.

Resolving this conflict has given me a new awareness of myself. I am very focused, and I am often in a hurry to get done the many tasks that I have to do in my life. I now realize that my behavior can create an impression in others that I'm angry when in fact I'm just trying to get done what has to be done. Rachel interpreted my behavior as indicating that I was mad at her. I finally was able to get through to her what was behind my behavior and that it definitely wasn't anger directed at her. Achieving this clarification with Rachel was the breakthrough that reaffirmed our friendship and allowed the agreements we had reached regarding our boarding relationship to stand up.

We couldn't have resolved this conflict if I hadn't taken the CP&R Services workshop on conflict resolution, and hadn't applied the process I learned in the workshop. I also had extensive talks with one of the workshop leaders during the conflict, which I found helpful in identifying appropriate responses I needed to make to Rachel's behavior.

Working together to carry out the agreement

What I learned about resolving conflict has given me such a different approach! Since Rachel and I resolved our differences in September, I have practiced all I learned and more. The following is an account of another difficult interaction with Rachel, which occurred on Saturday evening, November 1, and Sunday morning, November 2. It shows that you can help your relationship with people, who are unfamiliar with the six step conflict resolution approach, by trying to get into their shoes and then clarifying with them assumptions you have made in the process.

Rachel had signed up to feed on Saturday PM, but then on Saturday morning asked me if I could feed because she had other plans. I was not available to feed Saturday PM because I had to work, so Rachel said her daughter, whom she assured me is very reliable, could feed in her place. I left a note for the daughter to just feed the hay, and I would come to the barn later to feed the more complicated supplements. It turned out that her daughter was not available. In her place, Rachel got her son to come to the barn to feed. Even though I had simplified

the feeding process in the note I left for the daughter, the son apparently didn't read the note and he ended up not doing the feeding right.

On Sunday AM, when I arrived at the barn, Rachel was there. She seemed tired and in a hurry, and was abrupt with me. I sensed that she was feeling bad about the mix-up with the Saturday PM feeding, and she might be thinking that I was angry at her. When I realized that she apparently wasn't going to ask me if I were angry at her, as earlier in September we had agreed she would do, I decided to initiate the process of clearing up the assumptions I had made. So, after she left the barn, I phoned her and asked her if she were angry at me or if she had just been in a hurry. She said that she was relieved and happy that I had called. We talked a little about what had happened that morning at the barn. She said that she had been in a hurry because she was tired and that she wasn't angry at me. Later in the day, she did some extra work at the barn--always a good indication of a happy boarder!

A week later, I had a real breakthrough interaction with Rachel. It was a direct result of my efforts to apply the six-step process to my interactions with her. We were both at the barn, and both in a hurry. Tension was building between us and finally, instead of assuming I was angry at her, Rachel asked me if I were mad at her! I was surprised and ecstatic that she had asked. "No, not at all," I said and gave her a big hug--remembering our agreement from our earlier talk on the hay bales. That broke the tension immediately. "What did I say to make you think that I was mad?," I asked. She answered, "You were very quiet--not saying anything--so I thought you were mad." I was shocked to realize that all the times I had been afraid to say the wrong thing (and therefore said little or nothing), I had given Rachel the impression of being mad at her! It wasn't what I said nor how I said it. It was what I hadn't said! This really clarified things. It also set a new pattern of checking in with each other whenever there is any question of each other's intentions. It is a wonderful way to avoid the negative judgments and interpretations that can be made so easily. Our friendship is getting stronger and stronger with each interaction, now that we know each other's genuine good intentions!

I'm much better at observing the behavior of others than I was before attending the workshop. I'm more adept at observing when other people are racing up the Ladder of Assumptions in their responses to me and, as a result, I'm better able not to take their behavior personally. I'm able to understand that their behavior is due to their own assumptions that have nothing to do with me. Their

assumptions have everything to do with the way they have interpreted their own life experiences.

Concluding Remarks

This case study documents an example of an individual who used the six-step process to conflict resolution to resolve a conflict between her and another person who was unfamiliar with the process. She listened to what the person was saying as well as what the person was feeling but not saying. She applied the Ladder of Assumptions to inquire about the factual basis of the assumptions the person had made about her. In so doing, she made it possible for both of them to find the root causes in the thinking in each of them that had contributed to the conflict, and to identify positive strategies both of them could apply that would likely head off conflict between them in the future.

One of us had an impromptu conversation with Rachel on Saturday, December 6. When asked how she currently felt about the situation at the barn, Rachel responded that she was very happy the way things have turned out. She said that she lives only about a mile from the barn, which makes it convenient for her to come there to work and feed the horses. She said that Sandra is a bit quirky; she's a worry-wort and is overly concerned about her horse's medical problems. Rachel said that Sandra needs to do all she can for her horse, but at the end of the day not to take the problems home with her and worry about them all night.

We had another impromptu conversation with Rachel on Friday, January 2, 2004. When asked how Sandra is currently feeling about her horse, Rachel said that the horse is doing better health wise although he has a ways to go to return to his normal perky self. As a result, according to Rachel, Sandra does not seem to be as panicky about him as she has been. An indication of that, Rachel said, is that Sandra and her husband had gone to Pasadena to see the Rose Bowl parade and had left her in charge of the barn and the feeding of all the horses while Sandra was gone. She added that since Sandra has been away, the two of them have been working well as a team. She has been leaving voice mail messages on Sandra's cell phone every day, keeping Sandra up to date on her horse's condition and other matters at the barn. When asked how the two of them have been getting along with respect to their overall working relationship at the barn, Rachel responded, "We do a good job of tolerating each other's idiosyncracies."

Sandra and Rachel will need to continue working with the six-step process throughout the duration of their

relationship--staying focused on the assumptions they make about each other, clarifying those that may be unfounded and replacing them with ones that are reality-based. They will need to keep in mind that when one of them reacts emotionally to the other, it isn't the fault of the other person. Rather, it is the individual's own mind that causes the emotional reaction. With practice, the process of mutually checking out and discarding unsupported assumptions will become a positive habit pattern for them.

Reaching an understanding that our own unproductive thinking behavior is what causes conflict requires an inner capacity for empathy and an awareness of the reasons people seek to blame others rather than make an effort to understand their motives. This ability includes entertaining two apparently opposing positions and bringing them close enough together that a new, overarching version can emerge that embraces the formerly incompatible views.

Closing the gap between polarized mindsets begins with a process of opening hidden parts of ourselves and exposing conscious and unconscious assumptions we have made about another person so that the validity of those assumptions can be reality-tested. In so doing, we eventually reach a place where we can discard our inaccurate or distorted views and empathize with people we have disliked or feared. Working with the inevitable difficulties and disappointments that arise in all types of relationships enables us to explore the mystery of being a flawed person loving other flawed people and to experience the triumph of compassion over imperfections.

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