

# Creative Problem Solving

(Based on J.W. Eisman's *Reconciling "Incompatible" Positions*<sup>1</sup> and C. Hampden-Turner's *Charting the Corporate Mind*)



Most conflicts are dealt with by Avoiding, by one party winning (Competing) and the other losing (Accommodating), or by each party giving away something to get something else (Compromising).

There's another option – to reach a creative solution that meets all parties' objectives, generates trust, and gains everyone's support. This level of Collaborating requires letting go of polarized, compartmentalized thinking and opening to perspectives that integrate instead of separate. The process is sometimes referred to as “integrated framework construction.” By integrating key components of both points of view, you construct a *new* frame of reference.

The components of creative problem-solving need not be followed in a step-by-step sequence; at times the concepts overlap.

**Clarify terminology:** Conflicts can often be resolved merely by discovering that each meant something different from what the other thought; e.g., the word “trust” may connote something different from, or more than, you assume.

**Understand the *other's* frame of reference** (seek information in order to create new possibilities together). Ask about:

- objectives (articulating these often identifies common goals),
- assumptions (about the relationships among relevant factors),
- options (perception of available choices),
- methods (beliefs about the steps that must be taken to meet objectives),
- values/needs (what's important to the other person; these may be implicit e.g., it may be obvious if someone needs to be seen as competent without their having stated this overtly),
- predictions (beliefs/concerns about following the suggestions of others); this can be especially powerful because it's disarming – instead of trying to persuade others why your ideas are "better," you invite them to clarify what they like and don't like about your (or others') suggestions.

**Search for new perspectives:**

- Create a continuum whenever two sets of ideas seem opposing (no matter how "opposite" they seem); e.g., instead of "People do/do not have the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 303-314 (1977), © 1977 NTL Institute

right to challenge their boss," ask, "Under what circumstances is that particularly wrong?" "When might it be acceptable?" "What might make you respect someone for doing it?" "Under what circumstances would it be wrong not to?"

- Increase the number of dimensions: In the process of creating a continuum you will discover underlying dimensions, each of which may also have seemingly incompatible "opposites" (e.g., "When certain results are critical to our success, people should/should not make independent decisions," or "When one person has more experience, the other does/does not have the right to..." etc.) Then create a continuum for each of these dimensions (e.g., How do you define independent? What would you consider critical circumstances? Under what circumstances would experience play a large factor?).

**Be visually and verbally creative** – use anything that encourages right-brain thinking (e.g., humor, pictures, metaphors, symbols, analogies); draw/write on a board or flip-chart where everyone can see and build on the ideas being generated.

**Search for integrated solutions:**

- Develop both/and thinking: Notice when you or others are communicating in either/or terms (good/bad, right/wrong, my way/your way, success/failure, etc.), when you are saying "I can't do X because of Y." Ask "How can I do both X and Y?" Make it a group guideline that anyone can point this out; open up your thinking.
- Connect opposites on a continuum; e.g., if you are arguing whether to focus on the task or focus on the relationship, imagine circumstances where it would be possible to do both at once. How would you go about that?
- State apparently competing perspectives within an integrating question ("How can we...?"); e.g., if you've been arguing competition vs. cooperation, you might ask, "Given the necessity to compete so that we dominate the market, how can we cooperate in a way that strengthens competition?"

(These last two are not always essential, but often can help):

**Verbalize the degree to which agreement is occurring.** It should be clear:

- why the initial positions were embraced,
- why the initial positions appeared incompatible,
- how the current way of thinking reconciles the initial positions.

**Map the two perspectives on vertical and horizontal axes.**