



## **Difficult Conversations**

**Peg Carlson**

**UNC School of Government**

### **Session objectives:**

- Understand what makes some conversations so challenging
- Learn tools to makes these conversations more productive
- Receive peer coaching and support on an issue of your choice

# Introductions

Think of a time when you handled a difficult situation really well. That is, the issue or problem was resolved and the relationship was maintained or improved.

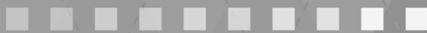
Pair up and briefly describe (3 min. each):

- A. What were the circumstances? Why was the situation challenging?
- B. How did you prepare for or respond in ways that contributed to the positive outcome?

Join with another pair and compare notes. What words or themes come up across stories?



## WHAT MAKES SOME CONVERSATIONS SO CHALLENGING?



## We notice different things

- We spend as little of our mental energy as we have to in order to get the job done.
- We take shortcuts and make assumptions about each other



## We create different stories

**I talked to Jeff about his performance**



**Anita talked to me about my performance**



Each of us is the star of our own life

- 93% of American drivers rate themselves as better than average
- Half of adults admit to texting while driving



Managing conflict starts with what's in your head . . .



Before anything comes out your mouth



Your Choice: to **Respond**, not **React**



In challenging situations, we often use  
a **Unilateral Control** mindset:

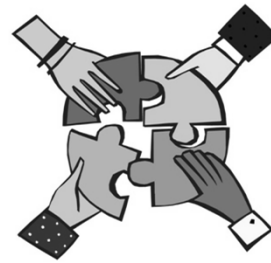
**I understand, you don't. I'm right, you're wrong.**

**I will win.**

**NO.**  
You're wrong  
so just sit there  
in your wrongness  
and be wrong.

Shifting to a **Mutual Learning** mindset  
is the first step:

**I understand some things. So do you.  
Let's learn and move forward together.**



## Rethinking Thinking

- <http://ed.ted.com/lessons/rethinking-thinking-trevor-maber>

## The Ladder of Inference



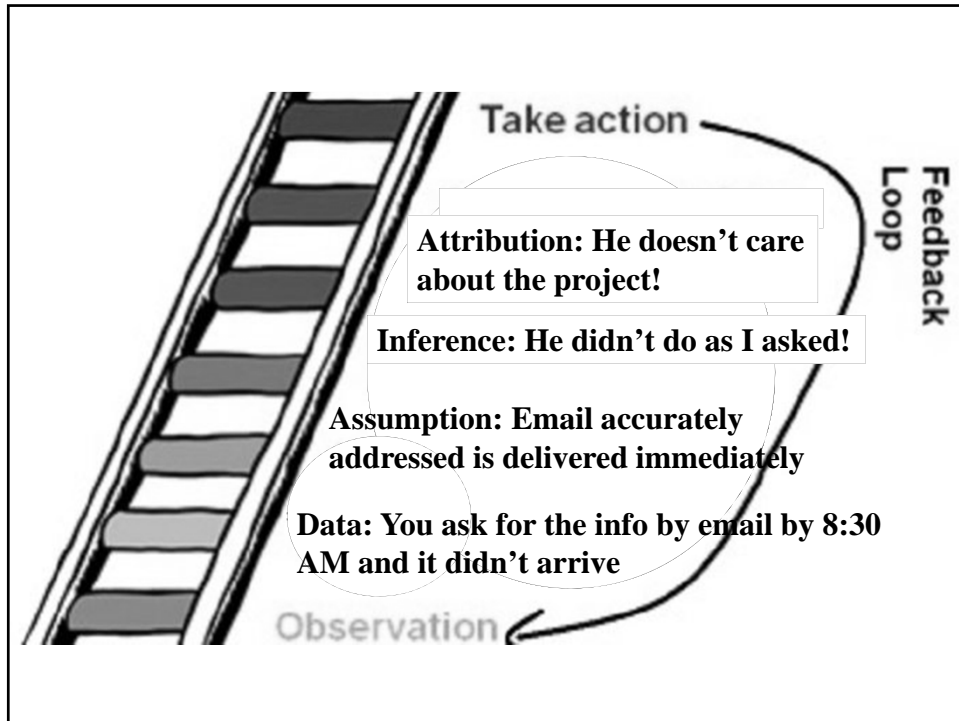
Inside your head

- Take **action** based on beliefs
- I adopt **beliefs** about the world
- I draw **conclusions**
- I make **assumptions** based on my meanings
- I add **meanings** (cultural and personal)
- I select **data** from what I observe
- Observable **data**

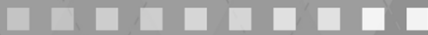
## We All Go Up the Ladder

- Assumptions
- Inferences
- Attributions





**“LOWERING YOUR LADDER” IS A KEY TOOL TO REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS**





You'll be on safer footing if you . . .

Aim for this



Instead of this



## Two people, two interpretations

	Person One	Person Two
<b>Observable Information</b>	You ask your colleague to send you the email by 8:30 a.m. and it did not arrive.	You ask your colleague to send you the email by 8:30 a.m. and it did not arrive.
<b>Assumption</b>	Email accurately <i>addressed</i> <i>is delivered immediately</i> and accurately.	Email accurately addressed can be delayed or misdelivered.
<b>Inference</b>	My colleague didn't keep his word.	My colleague's email didn't get through.
<b>Attribution</b>	My colleague doesn't care about this project.	

© 2011 Roger Schwarz & Associates. All rights reserved.

## Basic formula to “lower your ladder”

- Test **observation**

- What I noticed was...Did I miss something?

- Test **meaning**

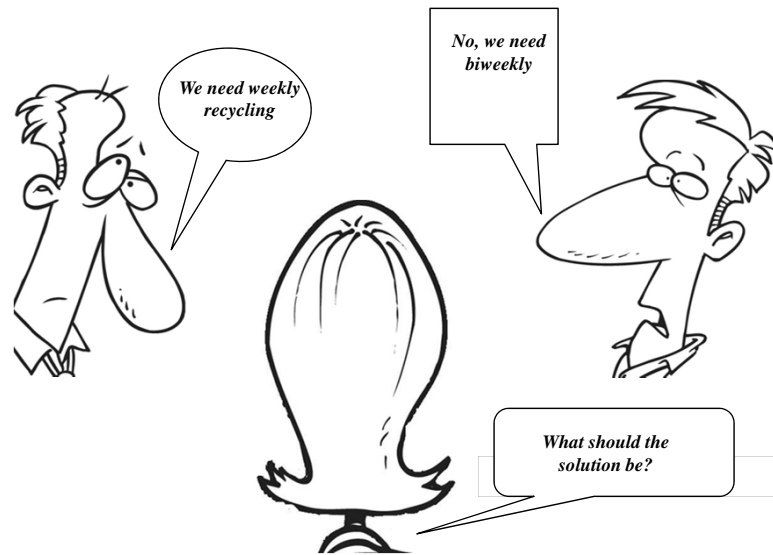
- I’m thinking...What do you think?



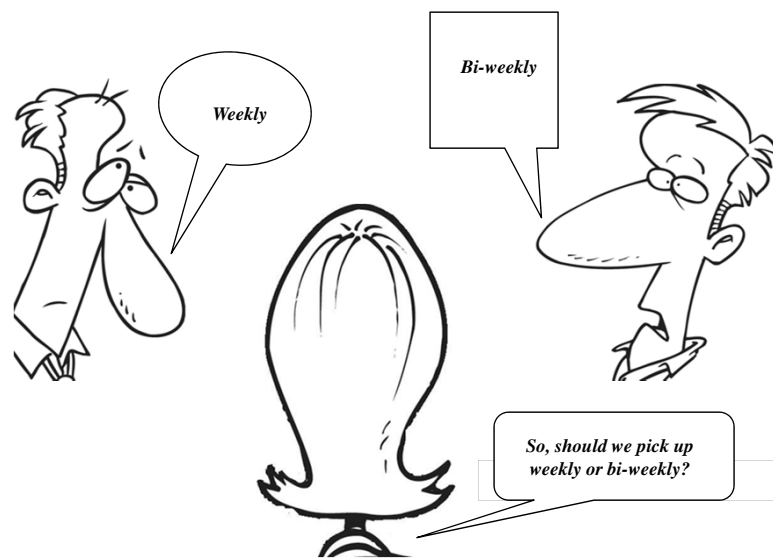
## ANOTHER TOOL TO HELP WHEN YOU’RE STUCK



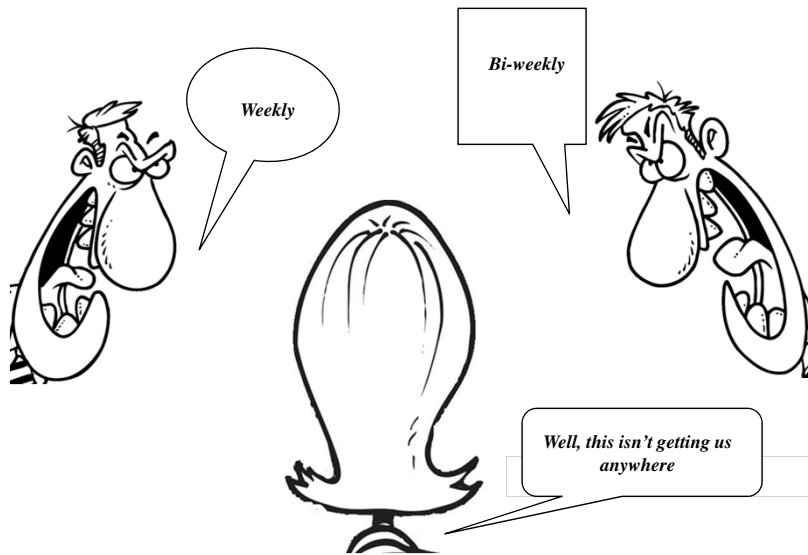
## Focusing on Positions



## Focusing on Positions



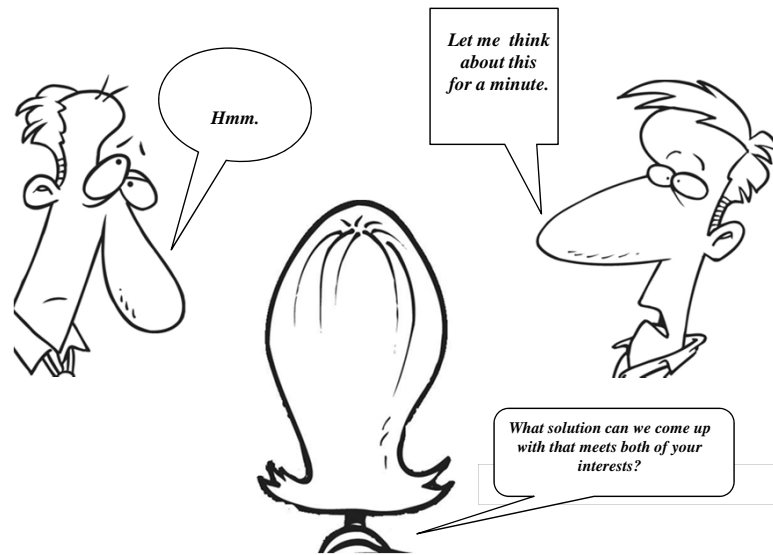
## Focusing on Positions



## Focusing on Interests



## Focusing on Interests



Focusing on Interests is a key tool to help things get “unstuck”

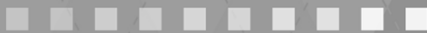
- Interests are often compatible when positions are not
- Ask people “What is it about that solution that works for you?”
- Avoid pro-con lists, which tend to make people dig in even more

## Should I raise this at all?



- How important is this problem to the organization?
- How long has the problem existed?
- What will happen if the problem is not solved?
- What is the likelihood that the problem will go away on its own?

## PEER CONSULTATION



## Time for peer coaching and support!

Form groups of three.

Each person shares:

- A specific conversation you are preparing for, or thinking about having
- Why it's important
- What you are concerned about and/or where you are feeling stuck

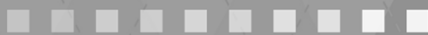
## The peer coach's job is to:

- Actively listen!
- Paraphrase and summarize to check for understanding
- Ask open-ended questions
- Hold judgment—don't offer advice unless asked

## Group Debrief

- Insights?
- Patterns of when/where we get stuck?
- Key Learnings
  - From your own situation
  - From others' situations
- What one thing from this session you can take away and start using?

**CONTINUING TO  
DEVELOP YOUR  
SKILLS**





## Additional Resources

- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (Penguin, 1999).
- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* by Kerry Patterson et. al. (McGraw-Hill, 2012).
- *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen (Penguin, 2014).

## SOG one-day Public Leadership courses (2016-17 so far—more soon!)

- Managing Conflict Effectively: Sept. 9, SOG
- Know Yourself! Understanding Leadership Preferences through the MBTI: Oct. 7, Asheville
- Positive Problem-Solving: Nov. 4, Winston-Salem
- Facilitation Skills for Successful Meetings: Dec. 9, SOG
- Emotional Intelligence: Jan. 13, Raleigh
- Social Media Strategies for Government Professionals: Mar. 17, SOG
- Building Your Capacity to Lead: Jun. 8-9, Charlotte

## Public Leadership series course listing:

<https://www.sog.unc.edu/courses/course-lists/public-leadership>