Reaching Agreement: A Solution-Seeking Model

I n Chapter 10, I began to tell a story involving my youngest son, Eric, and his request that I co-sign a loan so he could buy "the *coolest* 1979 Camaro." When I responded with an instant "No!" we were suddenly in a heated argument ending with "You just don't love me!"

At that point, Eric knew we were stuck. So did I. With a huffy, "I'll talk to you later," he slammed the door on his way out. Shaken, I headed back down to my office, asking myself, "How did that happen?" Blindsided again. This predicament had perplexed me for years. How could this child of mine, so unspeakably dear to my heart, still catch me in these angry tangles? Shouldn't I know better?

Yet, how quickly we can get locked into a positional argument. He opened the discussion with his position, his answer to the question, "a 1979 Camaro." My instant response was my position —no. What people often do from that point is to argue over their positions, just as Eric and

I did. The longer we talk, the more we dig in, each holding on to being right. Both parties are fearful of losing something; in my case, I feared losing money and time, and Eric (I speculate here) feared losing his dream. Unfortunately, this is the point at which many people start dealing with a problem—at the end. By stating their positions, they are effectively saying "Here is the answer!"

Fortunately, our story didn't end there. Half an hour later, I was back at my desk working when my phone rang. It was Eric. He had called me from another phone line in the house.

"Mom, can we talk? Will you agree to listen to me?" By this time the adrenaline had dissipated in my own brain. "Yes. I'll try, if you'll try to listen to me." Guidelines (or ground rules) had been established—he really knew a lot about resolving conflicts—so we launched into another, very different conversation. And now we were listening, trying to understand each other and find some way forward, beyond our initial, rigid positions.

Remember, almost everyone loses his or her cool sometimes, even when the person should know better. But with a solution-seeking model, such as described next, you can still achieve a mutually satisfactory resolution.

A Four-Step Process

Figure 13-1 shows a solution-seeking model with a four-step process: prepare, discover, consider, and commit. I go through these steps in detail, and apply them to the workplace. But, first let's watch them unfold with the Camaro.
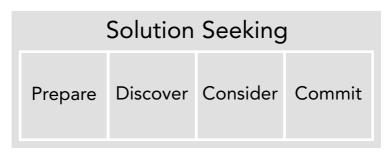
Solution Seeking			
Prepare	Discover	Consider	Commit

Figure 13-1. A solution-seeking model.

▶ *Prepare*: When Eric said "Will you agree to listen to me?" and I responded, "Yes, I'll try, if you'll listen to me," we established a straight-forward guideline (or ground rule) for our discussion.

▶ *Discover*: The problem, as we argued over it in the kitchen, was whether I would co-sign a loan for that 1979 Camaro. During the tele-phone call, the matter to be resolved was broadened to whether I could help Eric get a car and if so, how. In that phone call, we never used the term *interests*. But what we really had was an *interest*-based discussion, whereby each of us talked about what was important to each of us and why.

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Eric's independence was important to him—and the coolness factor really mattered. At the time, I was driving a ten-year-old Honda Accord, and Eric was clear. "I'm not going to get a Honda Accord, Mom." He also loved working on cars, and want-ed something he could tinker with.

For me, the matter was partly about the money. With Eric as the youngest, I already had experience co-signing loans. One thing I knew was that, whatever happened down the road, I would still be responsible for the debt. If the car bit the dust, the loan would live on. I was also concerned about safety. A parent of an eighteen-year-old has to give up a lot of the ways we can protect children when they are younger, but a car that is safe and some-what reliable does provide some added sense of safety.

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▶ *Consider*: As we listened to each other, we began to find ways we could reach some common ground. I, too, was interested in his inde-pendence—I didn't want to be tied to hauling him around or to juggle his schedule with mine so he could use my car. And I trusted his driving habits more than any of his friends'.

▶ *Commit*: Finally, we reached an acceptable solution: I would co-sign a loan for a limited amount, on the condition that Eric first have any car he picked out inspected by an independent mechanic (someone we would both agree on). This relieved some of my concern about the safe-

ty and reliability of the car, and some concern about the soundness of the loan. And Eric knew what he could count on from me as he looked for a car. (Eric bought a 1989 Mustang instead, after it passed the inspection, and we went to the bank. Our solution met enough of his interests and enough of mine to be acceptable to both of us.)

Why Use a Model?

Holding the solution-seeking model in your mind can help you slow down the decision-making process. When the temptation is to jump to a solution, the first rule is to *stop*. Before you jump to a discussion or rush to a conclusion, consider what you need and how you can get there most effectively.

Go slow to go fast. In this model, more time and attention is paid to the first two stages, Prepare and Discover, than to the last two stages. Most often, you will find that paying attention at the beginning has payoffs in the end stages. Not only will you reach a more sustainable solution but that solution will usually emerge more easily.

The second rule of this model is: Keep an open mind. That is, keep an open mind to what the other side may be concerned about. Keep an open mind also about what may be in your own best interest. Keep an open mind about what possible options might exist. This book provides guidance on resolving conflicts with others, focused on manager-staff disagreements. Often, building solutions by working together with employees creates more lasting and effective solutions. There are occasions, though, when the manager may have the authority to make a unilateral decision and is willing to live with the consequences of taking that approach. When you need their cooperation to implement decisions, consider using this approach.

To understand this model and be able to use it, consider each step in turn.

Prepare

As you *prepare* to take on a difficult conversation, consider how to conduct a discussion during which each person can participate effectively. Here are some questions to answer before the meeting.

PREPARE

- ➤ *What* the issue is.
- ➤ *Where* to talk.
- ➤ *When* to talk.
- ➤ *How* to make it "safe."
- ➤ *Who* needs to be included.

What Is the Issue?

Identify first the problem(s) to be solved or issue(s) that needs to be resolved. This step is key! The clearer you are about the purpose of the discussion, the better prepared everyone will be and the easier it will be to keep

> *If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.*
> —LEWIS CARROLL

the conversation on track. Your notion that there is a problem, or your initial idea about what the problem is, will often be quite limited until you can hear from the others what their perspective is. That said, narrowing the focus of the discussion by providing a general common objective will allow people to be more prepared to participate.

An issue should be defined in neutral terms—without a built-in answer or bias toward one view or the other. The beginning of the discussion will be to define and clarify the issue. A careful dialogue here can change both the direction of the discussion and the outcome. Establish agreement on the issue to be discussed. Be clear, as well, about what the conversation is *not* about. Other issues may need attention, but not at this time. Consider, also, what is important to you regarding the relationship, as well as the issue at hand. What might be the consequences of *not* finding a mutually acceptable solution?

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When Serena sat down to complete her weekly report, she did not have the information from Jack. His report was due to her by close of business on Thursday, so that she could roll his report into hers, which was due on Friday. This was the third time in a month that Jack had not submitted his report on time. Before talking to Jack, Serena needed to be clear: Would this con-

versation be about what happened with this week's report, or about his pattern of late reports? Intentionally separating the two topics would enable Serena and Jack to focus their attention and appropriately address the issue at hand.

Serena sat down at her desk. Her shoulders tightened as she grabbed the phone. When Jack answered, Serena demanded that he come into her office immediately. In less than a minute, Jack was standing in front of her desk. "What do you need?"

She launched into, "It's Friday afternoon and I have to get that report out before I leave! Why didn't you get yours to me?"

Jack began to respond, "I had it on my computer and …"

Serena interrupted, "This is the third time this month you have been late. This is unacceptable. What is your problem?"

Jack became defensive. "I tried to tell you…" Before they knew it, they were in an argument about who said what to whom, and when.

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Now, consider the replay.

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Serena sat down at her desk to prepare the weekly report. When she discovered that Jack's information wasn't there, she felt the tension rising in her shoulders. In response, she paused a moment to inhale, taking a couple of conscious breaths. Somewhat calmer, she picked up the phone and asked Jack to come into her office. In less than a minute, Jack was standing in front of her desk. "What do you need?"

"Jack," she began, "I have to have the information from your report and I have not received it. I'd like to find a way to resolve this. Help me understand why the report hasn't been filed."

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She recognized that she needed a better understanding of why she had not received the report before the two of them could agree on the issue and begin to find a solution. It was possible, for instance, that there were technical problems in the e-mail system, or maybe Jack had to wait for information from someone else. Rather than make assumptions,

Serena asked for more information first. She also knew that the other question, about the pattern of late reports, must be addressed in a separate discussion.

The two had a conversation about the transfer of information through the system from his computer to hers. They then began to resolve the problem rather than make accusations or justifications, without piling on other issues.

Consider This

☑   Think of a recent disagreement with which you have been involved. State the issue that you needed to resolve. Is the language neutral, not assuming fault on one side or the other? Is an answer embedded in the question?

☑   If the answer to either question is yes, state the issue again in neutral terms that do not imply one solution.

Where Can We Talk?

To have a productive conversation, both parties have to have a safe place where they can listen, think, and respond. Standing on the shop floor, or at the copy machine, or at the counter in front of others is not the place to exchange thoughts, ideas, opinions, and concerns when the issue is significant. If you are in the middle of a meeting and harsh words are spoken, or a delicate issue is raised, wait until after the meeting to discuss it further.

Find a place that is private, where others will not be drawn in and where neither person will be embarrassed. When someone—boss, employee, customer, peer, anyone else—is embarrassed, he or she will often get defensive. A person who is defensive will spring into "fight or flight" mode. Some will escalate the exchange into an argument, some people will shut down, and some others will look for a way to get even. While many of us get defensive, others seem to enjoy the drama, performing for an audience of onlookers. Sometimes a person seizes the opportunity to create a difficult moment *because* there are other people there to watch the show. Other times, it just happens—without even realizing it, one person brings up a sensitive topic in the middle of the group and another reacts. In either case, the public space does not lend itself to a productive conversation.

Also, look for a place that is neutral and away from the distractions of e-mail and phone. Staff members may feel intimidated in the boss's office. The power that the desk conveys is real. And when one person uses a power play to impose his or her will, others are less likely to participate or to support the decision in the long run.

Sometimes a "safe place" means that you need to have a conversation, the two of you, alone. At other times, for a variety of reasons—for instance, if there is a history of emotional or even physical outbursts—there is more safety if you have another person present. That other person may be helpful by providing support to one person or another, managing the discussion so that each can hear the other, and providing expert advice or information.

Think strategically about the discussion beforehand. If another person can be helpful to the conversation, who might an acceptable person be? You will need someone you both trust, someone who will keep the conversation confidential, who will not take sides, who will keep you on an even keel and on point, and who will help you to hear each other. Sometimes this person is within the organization. This may be your own manager, or a co-worker or colleague. Sometimes the HR department may provide an acceptable alternative. Sometimes when the trust is low, the tensions and stakes are high, you may need to look outside the organization for professional help to have a safe, facilitated discussion.

When Do We Talk?

Find the right time to talk, allowing enough time to say what needs to be said, to hear what the other person has to say, to ask questions and clarify, and to reach an acceptable solution. Set up a time when both of you can give the conversation sufficient focused, dedicated attention. You need time to question assumptions and clarify intent, rather than leaping to conclusions and snapping back responses.

If someone catches you in the hall as you are headed into an important meeting, the person is likely to get a curt response. If someone comes into your office at 2 P.M., and you are working on three deadlines that are due before you leave for the day, the person is not going to get a fair hearing. If an employee is about to walk out the door for his long

anticipated vacation, don't hand him his annual performance review. In short, before you can talk things through, both of you must be in a place where you can take information in and process it.

To find the right time, suggest something like, "I really want to hear what you have to say, but I simply can't right now. When is a time that works for you and for me so we can talk this over?" Acknowledging the other person's concern says a lot to that person about your interest and intention. Promising dedicated, focused time makes the other feel his or her views are respected and worthy of consideration. Note: This approach works only if *you* are reliably responsive; if each time you make this proposal to have a conversation, you return to it later. You have to keep your word.

How Can I Make it Safe?

People need clear expectations about how they will talk—and listen—to one another. We need the safety of guidelines; we need explicit expectations for behavior.

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Near my home, the county built a water park. Depending on how you look at it, it's great fun for a hot summer afternoon or a large hole in the ground filled with hazards. First, there is the water. Then, there are four slides of various heights, a couple of goofy water toys—a twenty-foot plastic snake, a bobbing donkey—two obstacle courses, various fountains, and some inner tubes and floats. Now, add hundreds of human bodies. We are talking about real danger from the other bodies and from the equipment to anyone daring to jump in. Before the county public works department trucked in bulldozers and earthmovers to begin digging this hole, they started making plans for how to keep the facility safe.

All around the grounds are signs posting the rules. Circling the edges of the pool are lifeguards wearing whistles and carrying buoys and floats. On a crowded afternoon, those whistles are blasting every minute or so. Every two hours, all the whistles blow, the splashing stops, everyone climbs out of the pool and sits on the edge for five minutes. It's in the rules. We all play by the

rules because they keep us safe. That means we can keep swim-
ming and no one drowns.

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How did they get started on that project? First, they identified
what the hazards and risks were, and what made them dangerous.
Then, they set up systems and plans to manage and minimize those
risks, and handed out whistles. When I describe my work as a media-
tor, this is what I often tell people that I do: I create a safe place for a
difficult conversation.

Understanding what fears and concerns the parties of a dispute may
have about working with one another—that is, that their words will be
twisted or used against them, that they will be insulted or threatened,
that one or another will lose their temper or shut down—I help them
establish a few guidelines to reduce their fears. Frequently, the tone of
the discussion then shifts dramatically because they have these guide-
lines. They begin to trust the guidelines. By the end of the meeting, they
are wondering why they needed my help at all—which I think is a real-
ly good thing.

These guidelines can be brief. If the discussion involves only two or
three people, the rules need to be stated out loud and agreed to by every-
one involved; then they can hold themselves and are each accountable
to the others. Consider these steps for setting guidelines:

1. Identify the issues to be discussed.
2. Decide the time frame for the meeting.
3. Clarify how the discussion will be shared or not with others.
4. Clarify how decisions will be handled at the end. (Will they be
   written down? Will they be used as a recommendation for others
   to ratify?)
5. Suggest that one person speak at a time, that the emphasis be on
   listening.
6. State a positive intention to work together to find a solution.
7. State a positive intention to respect differing views, allowing each
   person to complete his or her thoughts without interruption.
8. Set an expectation that each person speak from his or her own
   perspective.

9. Suggest that each person trust that the other is telling the truth from his or her point of view.

Who Needs to Be Included?

Give conscious thought to *who* should be involved. This includes people who will be affected by your decisions, by your agreement or lack of agreement, and who may need to ratify decisions. There may be people you need to get additional information from—upper-level management, co-workers—or others who will implement any decisions arising from this agreement. But be careful with these conversations; you do not want to draw others into the conflict, making your case so they will take your side. That can be a sure trust wrecker.

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Suppose my boss wants to talk to me about my performance on that project. I am wondering: Who else will he talk to about this? Has he talked to anyone in HR, or to his boss? Is he going to talk to other people on the team about what he thinks I should have done?

Maybe the project, the scope of work, and the task assignment need to be addressed through a full team discussion. I want a one-on-one conversation about *my* part in it, separate from the rest of the group. Maybe the boss needs to keep HR informed. Are there others who will need to implement our decisions? This may be as simple as asking someone to reserve a room for our next meeting. Let me know that—and how that will be discussed.

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To create a safe place for a productive discussion, clarify who is involved and how they are involved, who will need to be informed, and how each of us will communicate with others outside of the discussion.

What About a Crisis?

Sometimes supervisors and managers find themselves in a crisis situation, in which they do not have the luxury of time to think through all of these aspects of planning and

Art resides in the quality of doing, process is not magic.
—CHARLES EAMES

preparation. Holding these concepts in mind, calming yourself as you enter the discussion, may be all that you can do. Even in those times, these ideas can be helpful. For instance, remembering to pull an individual off to the side for a quick conversation can help turn the exchange into a more positive one.

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Recently I witnessed the solution-seeking model put into action at the spur of the moment. We arrived early one morning at a local hotel for a meeting. Following the signs to the meeting room, we discovered we had been assigned to a space barely larger than a closet. There would be twelve people in this room, for *three days*. Clearly, there had been a serious miscommunication between the hotel conference staff and the person on our side responsible for room arrangements.

I watched Kenneth approach the front desk, identify the person with authority (the *who* question) to make room assignments, and conduct an interest-based discussion to find a possible, though not ideal, solution. He described the matter to be resolved: adequate space for the number of people attending the meeting, not digressing into who was at fault or how the mix-up had occurred (the *what* question). The *where* and *when* questions were already answered: here and now. His own behavior and tone of voice established the model for everyone to follow, demonstrating by example the answer to the *how* question.

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Consider This

For a conflict you have recently been involved in:

☑ Was the discussion in a private, neutral space? If not, where could you have met instead?

☑ Was adequate dedicated time allotted to resolve the issue? Or was it done on the run?

☑ What guidelines could have helped make the discussion more productive?

Discover

People often begin a conversation about some disagreement by stating their positions—that is, they give their answers or solutions to their perceptions of the situation. For the earlier example of the missing report, that would be Serena's "Jack, bring that report to me right now." Or in the Camaro story, "Co-sign a loan for that 1979 Camaro." As a mediator, my response is "Well, that is one solution. Before we get there, let's understand the situation better."

In the Discover stage, each person is learning, gathering new information, and understanding the other's perceptions and perspectives. Now, it is time to listen, listen, listen first, and then talk, talk, talk.

DISCOVER

- ➤ Share perceptions.
- ➤ Explore the issues.
- ➤ Identify interests.
- ➤ Consider criteria.
- ➤ Avoid talking about solutions.

Share Perceptions

Begin with sharing perceptions. Explain what you have observed or experienced. Ask the other person to describe his or her own observations or experience of the situation. For example, in the scenario between Serena and Jack, the replay had Serena open the discussion with, "I have to have the information from your report and I have not received it." That was a simple description of what had happened from her point of view. Then she asked for Jack's perspective: "I'd like to listen to your perspective."

Explore the Issue

Use this time to "peel the onion," to remove each layer and consider it, to explore the complexity of the issue. In virtually every disagreement, each person involved has had some part in creating the difficulty. Listening and exploring, and explaining, enables each of you to recognize

what the conflict is about and the ways in which it is important to each of you. Focus your attention first on understanding these elements. Digging deeper into this discussion allows you to define the problem more appropriately. After you both thoroughly understand the issue, only then can you begin to talk about possible solutions. If you move to suggesting solutions too quickly, you may miss important points that will inform acceptable solutions, and you may limit the possibility of solutions not yet considered.

For example, digging deeper into the problem of the late report from Jack, Serena may discover that the issue to be solved is: (1) Jack's lack of understanding of the importance of his report; or (2) a glitch in the e-mail system (I sent the report at 4:30 yesterday. I don't know why you didn't receive it); or (3) Jack has to get the numbers from Cathy, and she doesn't respond to Jack's voicemails; or (4) there was a medical emergency at home yesterday afternoon; or (5) Jack's interest in and motivation for his job is flagging; or (6) Jack was confused about the deadline; or (7) any variety of other possibilities. Each of these reasons will lead in a different direction for finding an appropriate solution.

Identify Interests

The phrase "interest-based negotiation" was made popular in Roger Fisher and Bill Ury's book *Getting to Yes*.[1] Over the years, the concept and the language have been adopted across the field of negotiation and conflict resolution. Identifying and understanding interests can open the conflict to more possibilities for resolution. The term "interests" refers to what is important to each person in the conflict—what are each person's underlying concerns, desires, and motivations that relate to the conflict and its resolution.

In a conflict, a person often has several interests in play. The more each knows about the various interests the other has, the more tools each party has to find an acceptable solution. Some of these interests may be readily apparent, while others require deeper exploration to discover. Across a dispute, two people may have mutual or complementary interests in finding a solution. Or they may discover that they have mutually exclusive or competing interests that will need to be addressed. For example, if each person wants the same week off—one to attend a family reunion, the

other to take advantage of a special offer on a cruise, their interests are competing. Another way will need to be found to arrive at an acceptable solution.

There is a difference between a party's interests and its position, as shown in Table 13-1.

Table 13-1

POSITION	INTERESTS
A proposed solution to an issue, a demand	*Concerns, desires, underlying needs, or motivations*
➤ Focuses on a particular solution	➤ Focuses on problems, questions
➤ Makes a demand	➤ Articulates one of a range of needs
➤ Sets up confrontation before the problem has been clearly defined	➤ Establishes a climate and a common language for discussion so that the real issue or problem can be understood, discussed, and resolved
➤ Designed for bargaining, compromise	

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Consider a simple real estate transaction. Sammy wants to buy the house, Sara wants to sell it. One of Sammy's interests is the price—he wants to purchase the house for the lowest possible cost, keeping his mortgage payments as low as possible. One of Sara's interests is also the price—she wants to sell it for the most money she can, to maximize the investment she has made. There are other interests that can play a significant role: Sara's house has already met several of Sammy's interests: it has enough bedrooms and bathrooms and a backyard for the dog.

Digging deeper into their interests, the agent discovers more. Sammy has two children and this house is in a good school district; that is important to him. It is mid-July and he wants to complete the transaction before the next school year starts. Sara has begun a new job in another city, and is now paying two mortgages while she looks for a buyer. Carrying two mortgages has drained

> Sara's finances. She has a strong interest in not picking up additional costs. Sammy is on firm financial footing and is less concerned about the upfront costs than in having a prompt settlement. Each of these interests can help shape a position for the negotiation, eventually building a solution acceptable to both: agreement on a price, closing costs, and closing date.

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Sometimes we assume to know what the other person's interests are, and we act on what we think, avoiding doing the work of actually checking it out. Even if you guessed right, the exercise of asking and listening will ensure the other person that you know and understand his or her interests.

Consider

After a thorough exploration of the issue and the interests of each person involved in the conflict, you can then begin to consider possible solutions. Sometimes, through the Discover stage, obvious solutions emerge and at this stage, then, considering the options is not necessary or can be shortened.

CONSIDER
- ► Brainstorm options.
- ► Establish criteria.
- ► Evaluate options.

Brainstorm the Options

An open mind is particularly useful here. Brainstorm all of the options first. My colleague, Pete Swanson, told me once that his mother had a rule: There are always at least seven options. It seems that, growing up, he was pretty stubborn—at least his mother thought so. She gave him this advice: "Any time you feel stuck, consider what the Sufis said: in any

situation there are always seven ways to look at it." He presses those he is working with to generate at least seven options before they begin to evaluate them. Relax and remember that they do not all have to be good or viable options. The intention here is to open up your thinking to a wide variety of possibilities.

When only one option exists, the situation feels hopeless—it's a take-it-or-leave-it solution. When there are two options, you are likely to get caught in a dilemma, back to arguing over which one of you will win and which one will lose. Often, when people develop a list of options, they can see that the first option is not the best choice—a prime motivator in moving past the first solution someone proposes, to see what else might be just around the corner in people's thinking.

Establish the Criteria

Criteria are standards by which decisions can be made. They are used to test or judge the options that have been brainstormed. Consider the interests of everyone involved, and from those interests, as well as any external constraints, identify the key criteria for judging or testing possible options. Establishing clear criteria based on interests can provide an open route to decision making and help to ensure the sustainability of the decision.

For example, in my conversation with Eric about a car, the criteria for an acceptable solution included providing Eric with independence in picking out a car, which for him meant one that met a certain "coolness" factor, as well as one that he could work on himself; and for me, it meant choosing a car that met my concerns for safety and reliability, and was within the financial limits that I had set.

Evaluate the Options

Once you have a healthy list of options and clear criteria for guiding your selection, evaluating those choices can become a pretty straightforward assignment.

The example below, applying the solution-seeking model, is a twist on a familiar complaint. In most instances I am familiar with, both people complain of being overworked. In this situation, that wasn't the case.

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Jose was fed up. It was time to tell his boss, Sabrina, how badly things were going. Sitting in the staff meeting, he explained, "It just isn't fair. Every new project that comes along gets put on my desk. And when Howard had trouble completing that report on time, you gave it to me to do."

Howard turned to Jose: "*You* think it's not fair. What about me? I used to be responsible for a lot. Every time I turn around, I've had another duty pulled away."

In the meeting, Sabrina did nothing. After it was over, she sent two e-mails. One to Jose said, "Make a list of projects you will hand over to Howard." And one to Howard said, "Make a list of projects you will take from Jose."

She seemed confused when the two men came back into her office, still complaining. Her "decision" had not decided anything. With her proclamation, she had avoided the issue instead of finding a solution. How could she use the Solution-Seeking Model to arrive at a more satisfactory answer?

First, prepare. They agreed on a time and a place to meet, with adequate time on everyone's calendar to be able to talk through the problem, to listen, and to find solutions. Sabrina reminded Jose and Howard to bring with them their lists of the projects they were currently working on.

Second, discover. Sitting down together, the three of them discussed the problem to be solved: how to balance the workload fairly between the two employees. Then they created a joint list of the projects each was working on. They talked through additional relevant information: What were the time frames for completion of these projects? Which were ongoing? Which were one-time assignments? How were projects interrelated? How much work remained to be done on each one?

Then, the three considered the interests of everyone involved: Jose was concerned about developmental opportunities. He also had strong computer skills and enjoyed the opportunity to use them. Howard wanted to see that the work was fairly distributed, and he really appreciated direct interaction with clients. What were Sabrina's interests? Getting projects completed on time,

knowing that the work would be done at a level of quality that she did not have to revisit, responding to fewer complaints from customers, and being kept informed of progress and alerted when problems arise. The group also discussed the needs of external and internal customers.

Third, consider. The three generated several options for developing a fairly balanced workload:

- ► Identify specific skills needed for each project and assigning tasks according to skill sets.
- ► Divide one project for Jose, one for Howard, one for Jose, one for Howard.
- ► Divide the projects by client—these for Howard, those for Jose.
- ► Group the projects by the amount of time each will take, and then divide the short-term and long-term projects.
- ► Allow each to choose his own projects, taking turns.
- ► Turn the list over to Sabrina for her to make assignments.
- ► Put each project title on a separate piece of paper and draw assignments randomly (remember, they were brainstorming, even bad ideas are good).

Based on their earlier conversation, they revisited the interests they identified and discussed which were key criteria for an acceptable solution. Then they evaluated the brainstormed list against their criteria.

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Commit

The final step in the solution-seeking model is commitment.

COMMIT

- ► Make commitments.
- ► Implement.
- ► Evaluate.

Make Commitments

After considering alternatives and evaluating options, both parties decide what the solution will be. At this point, what everyone has is an agreement. Giving it value depends on the willingness and desire of the parties to the conflict to follow through on the solution. Often, commitments that are written down. The more specific and clear they are, the easier they are to remember—and the more likely to be kept. Writing down the agreements provides a road map; it gives everyone an opportunity to focus on the details and realities of implementation.

Implement

Before ending the discussion, look over the decisions that have been made and clearly identify the next steps. Then assign responsibility for each of those steps, with deadlines. Establish a date to evaluate the decision and implementation plan.

Evaluate

Come back together to assess the decision, and revise those elements that may not be working as well as you had hoped.

I have found that the steps in this solution-seeking model are logical and easy to follow. You might discuss them with the people you manage, making the decision-making process more transparent. This can create a common language for everyone and set a tone that makes seeking solutions part of the culture of the workplace.

Note

1. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).