

The Theory and Practice of Cooperation: **Contracting for Cooperative Outcomes**

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I. Theory

Premise of Competition

Most of us grew up in some form of a competitive system called a family, where, in times of duress, we learned, decided upon and cultivated strategies of a competitive nature to get our basic human needs met. We then “honed” these strategies in other systems called institutions or organizations and then most of us, along the way, co-created our own primary system called a partnership or family.

This powerful, creative, dynamic and most useful material on cooperation was developed in response to the consistently hurtful, harmful and even damaging outcomes derived from people attempting to get their basic human needs met, often out of awareness, through competition.

The fundamental premise of all competition is *scarcity*. If a person perceives there is not enough of the basic life ingredients through relationship, i.e. energy, affection, attention, etc., then a natural response is to believe she must compete in order to get her fair share...whatever fair may be. In human relationship there is not, nor has there ever been, a scarcity of those basic ingredients we want and need from each other towards experiencing value, worth, dignity and being loved.

In competition the operative question is some version of, “*Will I get mine?*” In cooperation this question is not one of “if,” but rather, “when.” *The fundamental belief is that people can get their basic human needs met far more efficiently, effectively and sustainably through cooperation.*

Premises of Cooperation

While the basic premise of competition is *scarcity*, the basic premises of cooperation are: *abundance, equality and responsibility*.

Abundance means that in human relationships there exists enough time, energy, love, attention, etc. to go around. In terms of problem-solving, the question then becomes one of “how” or “when” instead of “if.” In terms of time, for example, where all of us have 24 hours, the emphasis can be on quality vs. quantity.

Equality means that each person and what each person wants or wishes is of equal value. One does not have to be a certain sex, age, race, size, accrued length of service, etc. to get hers. Each person counts equally.

Responsibility means that each person asks for 100% of what he wants 100% of the time. When someone does not ask or ask for all of what he wants, there exists the possibility he lives either in scarcity or grandiosity. *Scarcity* is defined here as believing either he is not entitled to what he wants or if entitled, probably won’t get “it” anyway. Therefore he doesn’t make a request. *Grandiosity* is defined as secretly expecting that whatever is desired (and not directly requested), will somehow be magically bestowed.

In a *competitive* system people often “learned” that hearing “no” felt like it was forever. So when we heard a “yes,” we wanted it to be forever. Requests made inside of a competitive structure are often made with an accompanying “out of awareness” expectation that the only acceptable response is some form of “yes.” In a *cooperative* system requests are made knowing the respondent has the privilege of answering “yes” or “no.” Within a cooperative framework, “yes” and “no” do not mean forever, they mean for right now.

Secrets, Lies, Power Plays and Rescues

The foundational structure of competition is fraught with secrets, lies, power plays and rescues. In cooperation, these mechanisms are either ideally absent or realistically minimally operational.

To be *secret* does not mean that you do not have a right to your privacy. You have a right to your privacy and you are expected to be forthcoming with information (including points of view and feelings) about another person that could get in the way of your relationship with that person, i.e.: emotional closeness and effective problem-solving.

To not *lie* simply means that you are truthful about yourself with others and level with them when they check things out with you (additional information in section on Practice)

The intention of *rescuing* is to be “helpful.” However, the actual effect is to discount the person initiating the rescue, the person (s) who is the object of the rescue and the other’s capabilities. The person being rescued is perceived, generally out of awareness by the rescuer, as though she were inadequate.

Rescuing occurs in three distinct forms:

1. To say “yes” when you mean “no.” Agreeing to do things you really don’t want to do because of whatever, i.e., not wanting to hurt the others feelings or not want to deal with the other’s anticipated disappointment, etc.
2. To do what you think is more than your share. When we begin a pattern of doing what we think is more than our share, we feel resentful.
3. To do something for another, who possesses the ability to do for herself, without first asking her whether she is willing to accept what is being offered.

Power Plays are defined as either an attempt by someone to get someone to do something they do not want to do, or an attempt to get someone to give up something they do not wish to relinquish. Power plays are a blatant disregard for another’s right to say “no.” Power plays can be executed from a one-up (overt) or one-down (covert) position.

From a one-up position I attempt to use some form of leverage: physical strength, organizational position, money, authority, sex, prestige, etc., to attempt to get what I want. From a one-down position I attempt to play upon another’s sympathy, good will or guilt in order to manipulate them into doing what I want. The object is to get them to feel more uncomfortable and even more responsible about my problem, than I am.

Another covert version is to minimize myself and my capabilities by appearing helpless in order to keep the attention of another. For example, I don’t take direct action to solve my problem, but keep people engaged by eliciting their concern. From a one-down position there is often operating a belief that someone or something from the outside should be more responsible than myself for solving my problem.

Contracting for Change

The following agreements can made with one’s self and between an individual and significant others. The operative belief is that the degree to which contacts are made and kept serves as the foundation of integrity, trust and leads to cooperative outcomes. Of the many dimensions of “intimacy,” keeping contracts is indeed one of them.

Often the question is asked, “What’s the sense of doing this if my partner or business associate doesn’t want to?” The answer is that each of us is responsible, individually for living cooperatively. To begin, I simply need to be in integrity and congruent with myself, focusing, thinking and acting cooperatively.

The Four Agreements

1. **I do not keep secrets.** I disclose what I am thinking and feeling from a caring position when I am bothered or experiencing problems in my relationships. I will offer, from a caring position, my thoughts and feelings when I believe another might use what I am offering for their own growth.
2. **I do not lie.** I say what is truthful for me when another is checking something out. I am willing to deal with any discomfort I might experience in saying what is true for me.
3. **I do not rescue.** I don't do what I don't want to do, speak up when I think I am doing more than my share and when I want to do something for another, especially if I am not sure, ask beforehand.
4. **I am not aggressive or passive in attempting to get what I want.** I am reactive to my own and other's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. When I don't get what I want, I acknowledge that whatever I am wanting remains my problem for me to solve without expense to another.

II. Practice and Process

Sharing Resentments

When two or more people spend enough time together it is inevitable, since we are "emotional" human beings, that someone is going to say or do something where we feel resentment. If we hold onto the resentment and do not share it, we bind our energy internally, often building a wall between ourselves and the other person. Binding our energy also deters from sustainable, effective problem-solving.

The purpose of sharing the resentment is to release the negative energy we are experiencing, give the person with whom we have held the resentment information regarding the impact of their words or actions and to once again, create open space in being with the other.

The process of sharing resentments is not "constructive criticism," nor is it a methodology to attack, denigrate or "make" the other feel badly. It is to create a clearing where once there was constricted energy and perhaps where the other was being held as not ok.

How are resentments shared?

Since it is far more pleasurable for the person sharing the resentment than the one listening, the first step is to ask if the other if she will listen to a resentment. It is important to be respectful of the other's boundaries as she might not be in a place to hear

it. If the person who will be listening to the resentment declines to hear it at that time, then it is important to ask the person when and where will they listen.

What is accomplished at that moment is to contract for when and where the person will listen. It is then the accountability of the person holding the resentment to compartmentalize it until the agreed upon time. Respecting the other's boundaries is imperative in cooperation, knowing that "No" is for now, not forever.

All resentments are shared behaviorally. For example:

(1) Person A: Will you hear a resentment?

Person B: Yes, I will.

(2) Person A: When you showed up for our lunch appointment 30 minutes late and didn't call, I felt resentment.

Person B: I hear you.

Person A: Thanks for listening.

The person expressing the resentment is to stay with the *specific behavior*, not an interpretation of the behavior such as, "I resent that you don't value my friendship."

The person listening to the resentment is expected to create a place of neutral listening...attending to the information only. The acceptable responses are either, "I hear you," or "Thanks for telling me."

Hearing a resentment is not a catalyst to justify, defend or explain by giving additional information at that moment, because the resentment expressed is not an indictment or put down. A key point to remember is that the resentment expressed is a statement about how the other person reacted emotionally to the specific behavior.

Also, another critical point is that part of the healing is for the person sharing the resentment to be **heard**. In being heard, the person lets go of the wall or block which had been constructed. For the person hearing the resentment (information) she can decide what to do in the future, if anything, about the particular behavior identified.

Requests

Behind every resentment is a request. In terms of being accountable and reactive, there is a useful component to be followed after sharing a resentment and that is **making a request**.

(1) Person A: In addition, I have a request. Will you hear it?

Person B: Yes, I will.

(2) Person A: My request is that you be on time for our lunch meetings. Will you agree to showing up at our agreed upon time?

Person B: I won't agree to that. I need more flexibility in my schedule and I would like it if you were a little more flexible with me. I will, however, agree to showing up within 10 minutes of the agreed upon time.

(3) Person A: I can live with that and I am therefore amending my request. Will you agree to call me on my cell phone if you know you are going to be later than 10 minutes? That would help me in adjusting my schedule.

Person B: Yes, I agree to calling you if I am going to be later than 10 minutes.

Person A: Thanks so much for being willing to do this. Your friendship is important to me, I look forward to our lunches together and I am glad we are working this out to our mutual satisfactions.

Strokes and Recognition

A stroke is defined as any act of recognition or source of stimulation. All of us need unconditional positive strokes for WHO we are, as well as both positive and negative strokes for what we DO. Strokes can be offered, received, rejected, we can self-stroke and, contrary to popular belief, we can ask for the kind of recognition we want.

Offering Strokes

To the degree we willingly acknowledge others, we live in abundance. To the degree we withhold strokes by virtue of some judgment, we not only withhold from another, we limit ourselves. For that which is not given, is lost. In cooperation you are asked to become aware of internal conversations of how you may refrain from offering strokes. For example, what do I tell myself about myself or another, deciding not to tell a friend I am glad they are so excited about getting married?

In competitive systems there are unwritten beliefs that if we are too free with our acknowledgments, the other's ego might get too big; as kids we heard that the other might get a swell head if lavished with too much praise. Another is that someone will think you want something from them when you stroke them.

Receiving Strokes

You are encouraged to become fully aware of the degree to which you are willing to accept and fully take in an acknowledgment you are offered and which you want. In competitive systems we often feel we have to give the same acknowledgment right back to the person. "You look very attractive today, Susan." "Why you do, too, Alice." When given an acknowledgment we like and want, simply practice saying, "Thank you."

Refusing Strokes

It is imperative to set limits with others and not allow them to say to us or do to us whatever things we don't want said or done. A basic and fundamental way of exercising self-care is to register and say, "No," when we want or need to. Versions of saying "No" are: "I don't agree with you," "I have a different opinion" or "It's not okay for you to talk to me this way."

In refusing to take in a negative stroke about us or our performance which we find unacceptable, not useful or unfitting, we protect ourselves by maintaining our integrity and emotional well being. Part of being congruent is having our vote count most!

Self-stroking

In cooperation you are encouraged to both develop an internal dialogue of praise as well as external brags! There is an unwritten "rule" in competitive systems that brags are similar to flatulence – they should not occur in public.

Asking for Strokes

In competition there is the belief that if you have to ask for something, it doesn't mean as much as if it had been offered spontaneously. The belief that another knows exactly what you want and when you want it is called, "magical thinking." As an infant and a toddler it is our birthright to expect that our needs will be anticipated. As a grown up that kind of thinking can be a source of a lot of watching and waiting, simply going without and even suffering. As a grown up, suffering is optional.

If you have done something special for your partner and haven't heard the acknowledgment you want to hear, you are encouraged to *ask* for it. For example, "John, will you tell me that you appreciate me cooking dinner tonight?" In competitive systems the person being asked for the recognition often responds emotionally in one of two ways. First, feeling some guilt, like they should have already given the acknowledgment, or second, a sense of irritation, like whatever praise they may have already given should be sufficient or that they don't *owe* anything extra for what they have just received.

In cooperation it is just fine to ask to hear what you want, when you want to hear it, as often as you want to hear it, knowing that a response of either "yes" or "no" from the other is for this very moment only. In the above example, if John were willing to give the acknowledgment requested he could simply say, "I do appreciate you cooking dinner tonight."

In working with couples I frequently ask if there is a target stroke they enjoy hearing from their partner, which they have not heard lately. It is not uncommon that I hear, “She hasn’t told me that she loves me in weeks.” In cooperation you are encouraged to ask for even the target strokes you want. “Jim, I have missed hearing you tell me you love me in what seems like ages. Will you tell me right now that you love me?” It is not acceptable for the person responding to say something like, “Well, you know I do.” What is acceptable is for the partner to respond *with the exact words*. “Yes, I love you.”

Remember, if there is some acknowledgment you are wanting or expecting to hear and you are waiting...you are probably operating out of some form of competition – especially if you are waiting with irritation. Also, any time we make a request with the expectation the other “has to” say “yes,” we are operating out of competition. In cooperation it is expected to grant the other the privilege of declining a request and it is quite okay for the requester to be disappointed when the other declines; disappointed, but not resentful.

Checking Out Fantasies

All of us are highly intuitive and we are constantly imagining or forming fantasies about what others might be thinking or feeling about us. To be in a mode of giving life to these fantasies, we bind our energy internally, blocking ourselves from being present with another, all of this on what we have independently based on fantasy.

At such times it is quite useful, productive and freeing to “check out” our fantasy with the other person. The following is the procedure to do this:

The first step is to ask the person’s permission to make contact with them in this way – “John, can I check something out with you?”

If John is willing, then say something like, “John, I am telling myself that because you have been late for our last two lunch appointments and seem irritated, you are angry at me because I am dating your old girlfriend. Is this true?”

If John says, “yes,” your intuition is confirmed. If he says, “no,” you then have the option of examining a smaller portion of the fantasy by asking, “Is there a grain of truth to what I am imagining?” John might reply, “Well, actually I have been angry, not because you are dating Susan, but because you got your promotion and I didn’t get mine. I know it might seem childish, but I thought I worked just as hard as you.”

For the person responding it is important to first say a clear “yes or “no” to the fantasy depending on whether it is true or not. If there is an element or grain of truth, then that is true can be specified. It is important to be clear about what is, as well as, what is not true.

For the person checking out the fantasy, if the other says there is not even a grain of truth, it doesn’t mean your intuition is wrong, misguided, etc. It simply means you have not yet identified the accurate interpretation of what you are intuiting.

To be willing to check out fantasies allows us to keep our intuition juices flowing, determining what is real and accurate at the same time. It also contributes towards keeping ourselves grounded and in solid contact with both ourselves and others.

Accounting

Accounting simply means communicating with other people what I am experiencing or dealing with when it might have an effect on how I am relating to them. Accounting is a valuable entity of providing others information pertaining to what is occurring with me so that others are less likely to personalize my behavior with resentments or fantasies.

I show up for lunch with some friends and I initiate by saying something like, “I want you to know that I had an argument with my colleague before I left the office. If I seem a little on edge or quiet, it has nothing to do with any of you.”

It is wonderful when a parent accounts and says something like, “I had a horrible day at work today and I have a short fuse right now, but that doesn’t mean if you need something you should keep your distance from and not ask.”

In cooperation and within awareness, accounting is not a maneuver to get attention from folks. In competition and outside of awareness, an expression that looks like accounting might a form of manipulation called, “poor me.”

Cooperation Not Perfect

The theory of cooperation and the process of cooperative contracting is not a “perfect” system. If the material presented is abused, it can be construed as a power play.

Cooperation requires courage, forthrightness, vigilance and commitment. It also requires a willingness to be an adventurer or even a pioneer, creating and maintaining a system of vitality where individuals can maintain their full, socially appropriate, expression.

Cooperation should be used in the spirit for which it was designed: a *tool* to promote caring and well-being among and between people to get their needs met while keeping their process clear.

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