Interpersonal Tensions within Organizations
A Systemic Approach for Personal Development

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ABSTRACT[1]

This paper aims to contribute to the design of a new conceptual model for coping with obtrusive interpersonal tensions in the context of a systemic organizational development process. The model integrates notions of the Value and Development Square (VDS) into a structured process, with ideas from the hypnosystemic work and solution-focused questions. This results in an approach that can be taught to and applied by those seeking solutions for interpersonal tensions within an organization. For the model's educational applicability, we developed a conceptual bridge: we split the attentiveness process—which occurs during the search for solutions for an unpleasant tension—into interrelated dimensions. In doing so, the process using the VDS can be observed in "small steps," and, if necessary, suitable interventions can be developed.

This paper provides ideas for using this augmented version of the square, including specific questions for those involved in adverse interpersonal tensions that induce reflection and/or inspire a perspective change. With this adaption of the original VDS, we aim to offer a valuable tool for leaders, coaches, mediators, and employees. It aids in rapidly structuring complex situations where stressful tensions persist and assists those engaged in interpersonal tensions to transform those tensions into useful levers for collective goals.

Keywords: Value and Development Square, Tensions in Organization, Syntactical Work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of tensions within companies may differ depending on how they are handled, either serving as beneficial mechanisms for the company's target achievement or resulting in higher costs and inefficient work. Organizational development processes are, therefore, often used to positively counteract these tension dynamics. In comparative-systemic organizational development, this topic is usually treated in a solution-focused way. The VDS has established itself in the comparative-systemic work as a validated model for addressing interpersonal tensions. This model is also used in adult education to help students understand the dynamics of interpersonal tensions.

Internal tensions may sometimes be useful as a regulation entity or as a booster for innovation for businesses operating in a free market. The division of an organization into different departments can essentially become a strategy for organizing essential internal processes. But different departments usually also have different ideas and perspectives. Salespeople, for example, generally have another understanding of the market than employees in the production department. Both may serve distinct roles in a company, but their differing perspectives on the market and the company's stakeholders may benefit the whole organization. These differences in awareness produce not only internal conflicts but also beneficial ideas. Organizations that must deal with a high level of internal diversity, for example, are also more innovative. Businesses with a higher-than-average diversity have 19% higher innovation revenues and are able to market a wider range of products to consumers, according to a Harvard Business Review report published in 2018 [1].

However, tensions can equally bring processes to a standstill and also cause considerable costs for organizations. Unsolved conflicts cost businesses a significant amount of money, according to a "conflict cost study" from KPMG (2009). The research looks at 111 industrial companies with 100 to 50,000 workers in total with alarming results. Largely, conflicts between employees lead to joint projects being poorly handled or delayed. Project failures cost at least €50,000 a year in one out of every two businesses. In addition, employees often get sick as a result of stressful conditions at work. The study reported that the cost caused by employee absenteeism due to conflicts can rise to as much as 500,000 euros even in companies with fewer than 1,000 employees. One in ten businesses had high levels of stress [2].

Organizations invest in conflict management in an effort to prevent existing interpersonal tensions from escalating. Conflict management is expected to help companies prevent

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costly consequences. The results of a 2009 study on team conflict in organizations collecting data from 53 teams indicate that conflict management "[…] has a direct, positive effect on team cohesion and moderates the relationship between […] conflict and team cohesion" [3]. The study also found "team cohesion to be positively related to perceived performance, satisfaction with the team, and team viability" [4] by adopting conflict management measures.

This present paper integrates different approaches, that is, the VDS model developed by Schultz von Thun, the solution-focused approach established by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, and Gunther Schmidt's hypnosystemic concepts of focusing attention, that can all be used to de-escalate conflicts and create a tool for utilizing interpersonal tensions in organizations. In parallel to this conceptual model, a survey is being conducted to further understand the method's effect.

Section 7 of this paper will introduce the final model that we call "Seven Steps to Useful Tensions" (steps, which we developed in the context of the solution-focused work in the case of interpersonal tensions within organizations). First, we will have a short overview of the model's theoretical background.

2. TENSIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS

The term "interpersonal tension within organizations" in this paper refers to situations where (at least) two sides or parties have a tense situation in their relations with each other. At least one is looking for a way out—similar to how we describe conflicts. There is usually a lot of energy required and invested by one or both parties involved in a tense situation. Organizations can benefit from tensions if they are properly handled (as shown in the diversity study mentioned previously). But if the tension escalates to a conflict level, there could be significant consequences for the companies and their employees.[5]

3. SOLUTION-FOCUSED APPROACH

Developed by Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and other colleagues in Milwaukee/Wisconsin, the solution-focused approach (originally known as "brief consulting") has its origin in a psychotherapeutic context. Today, it comprises a broad range of principles, methods, and tools [6]. Techniques including the miracle question, well-formed goals, and the question on exceptions have been successfully evaluated in business practice [7]. The core of the method is based on resources, strengths, and people's resilience. The main tools for achieving this resourceful state are solution-focused questions, including scaling, hypothetical, resource-oriented questions, and the famous miracle question [8].

It is an approach oriented on relevant differences that outline and guide the client to a "state of better." The solution-focused consultant and his client deliberately work on subjectively perceived improvements rather than relying on

analyzes or definitions to guide their next steps ("One can know what is better without knowing what is good" [9]).

4. HYPNOSYSTEMIC TOOLS IN THE WORK WITH TENSIONS

One hypnosystemic work principle consists of considering individual experiences as the expression and result of attentional focusing processes. Gunther Schmidt developed this method based on Milton Erickson's work and the systemic-constructivist perspectives. According to Schmidt, the hypnosystemic approach was developed for competence-activation and solution development in therapy, counseling, coaching, and team and organizational development [10].

Some of the fundamental concepts of hypnosystemic interventions have their roots as follows [11]:

- Promote a distinct perception of previous attentional patterns—those differences guide the individual's attention (conscious and unconscious, voluntary and especially involuntary) to helpful areas of their experience and competencies—and
- to reduce or interrupt the involuntary influence of previously dominant unfavorable patterns.

The hypnosystemic work aims to enable the client to have more options and possibilities by exploring their consciousness.

5. THE VALUE AND DEVELOPMENT SQUARE (VDS)

The VDS is a common tool used to define the target direction of interventions in communication psychology [12]. The origin of its structure is linked to Aristotle's virtue doctrine. Aristotle described virtue as the equidistant quality spot between a "too much" and a "too little"—for example, *bravery* would be positioned in the middle of two extremes: Cowardice and foolhardiness. However, this initial model appears to be more akin to foolhardiness than cowardice. Nicolai Hartmann noticed that positive values/virtues could also be found on less exaggerated versions of the "too much" and "too little" values, for example, caution and courage [13]. Friedemann Schulz von Thun was inspired by this discovery to improve the VDS.

But, what is a "value"? A value is what is important to us. A value is what motivates and stands behind our actions. For the Value Square, a value can also be a character trait, a virtue, or a principle. When a value is expressed in an exaggerated or understated manner, it devalues the value itself. There is a fair possibility that cleanliness will be viewed as primarily a pleasant value if someone keeps his room clean to a healthy degree, adjusted to the present context and/or environment. But if this same someone exaggerates his cleanliness and spends his whole day keeping order, others will likely become irritated by his pedantic behavior. The opposite form of being excessively

neat could be being someone that lives in disorder. Living close to disorderly people can be upsetting for people who need order. But if the so-called "chaos" stays on the level of flexibility or creativity, it can also represent a pleasant value. Deviations from a "healthy measure" rather devalue values.
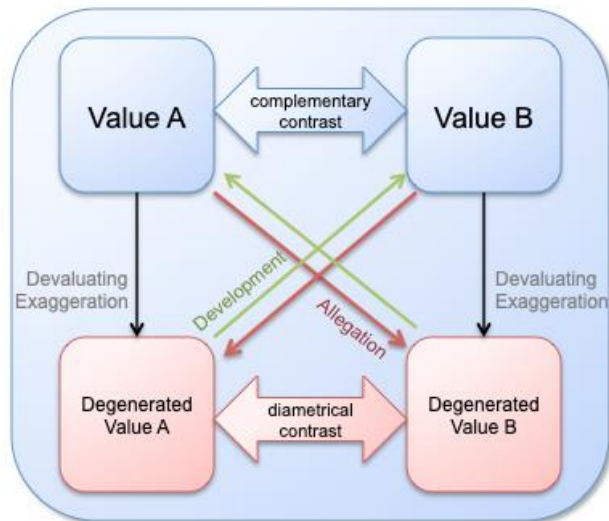

Figure 1: The Value and Development Square

A value becomes noticeable when it is considered in contrast to another value [14]. In the context of "organizing and planning," for example, the value "order" becomes observable if the value flexibility (in the sense of improvising) is in tension with it. They offer a complementary contrast that can be more or less a constructive tension. Both of the two values causing tension may also behave exaggeratedly, resulting in a diametrical contrast. Exaggerated forms of values provide rich soil for conflicts. An individual who sees himself in a value position A (see Figure 1) tends to take an accusatory stance against the degenerated value of B (e.g., "You are a chaotic person!").

But how can an involved person find a way to return from an exaggerated form value to a well-balanced or healthy form of this value? By telling himself that there is also the other value (the counter-value—also known as "sister virtue") that is in tension with its own (exaggerated) value. The value and counter-value can then both be stably balanced with each other.

6. WORK ON INTERPERTIONAL TENSIONS WITH THE VDS

At first glance, the VDS is a simple tool. However, the coach must consider the philosophy underlying this model and the structure that supports it to enjoy its benefits when used as a coaching intervention. Most of the related literature and training, though, explain the VDS based on theory or hypothetical examples.[15] When it comes to applications, the explanations are also often focused on the communication process as a whole rather than on specific

issues. In our consultancy practice, colleagues have given up using the VDS owing to the subjectively perceived complexity of the tool's multiple applications.

Thus, our goal is to make this tool accessible and available to all organization members looking for effective ways to cope with tensions and coaches, consultants or trainers looking to expand their toolbox. We followed the steps and accurate work of Matthias Varga von Kibéd, Insa Sparrer, and Elisabeth Ferrari[16], whose efforts on integrating the VDS in the systemic work and making the model more accessible to interested students lay the groundwork for our ideas to achieve our goal.

As a result, we developed a guide for a brief coaching procedure using the VDS, allowing for a seamless individual application of the technique in a complex situation with undesirable tensions.

Throughout our experience with the VDS, we observed how clients undergo different attention levels during the process with VDS and how we can use these different states of the client's focus to help them find their solutions. Working with the VDS helps generate a shift of the help-seeker's attention towards other perspectives and, if necessary, reframe the situation described.

We divided the client's attentional process during the work with the VDS into five core stages in our model, serving as a guideline for possible interventions according to each stage. We also include two attentional stages before and after the process (wider sense). Stage one and seven before and after the process, respectively, form the context for the five core steps. The final stage, seven, provides an insight into the possibilities and opportunities that this method may have for individuals and organizations.

The result of our efforts is a description of a syntactic structure for dealing with conflict issues in the organizational context. This model can also be useful outside of the coaching setting, for example, as a reference for self-reflection since the model represents a syntactical structure.

Please note that the model's focus is on the attention process of the individual who, through preference, seeks solutions to his interpersonal tension issue.

For the pictures representing the coachee's attentional behaviors, we would like to explain that we separated the VDS into the left side (A) and the right side (B). Each of these two sides is representing one party of the tension. The person who issues instructions to the coach is (A). The right side (B) represents the side of the other (absent) tension party (see, e.g., Figure 2).

7. SEVEN STEPS TO USEFUL TENSIONS

Comparative-systemic consulting includes the VDS in connection with approaches from solution-focused work. On

the other hand, VDS assists the comparative-systemic work by offering a structure for creating (useful) differences. Such differences are worked out together with the client primarily through changes of perspective and self-reflection triggered by solution-focused questions.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, to understand the procedure and effect of working with the VDS, we will employ insights from hypnosystemic practice to this model. From the hypnosystemic point of view, working with the VDS generates a shift of the help-seeker's attention towards other perspectives and, if necessary, also an opportunity to reframe the situation described by the client.

Step 1: Confirmation of one's own point of view (Downloading)

The term "downloading," as it is used in the Theory-U work of Otto Scharmer [17], expresses what this phase indicates: here, the attention of the person (future A) is focused on information that confirms his own view of the world. (A) can understand and filter information in a way that endorses or even completes his own ideas. In this stage, the subjectively perceived freedom of action of (A) is not limited. He seeks and finds confirmation for his own explanation of the situation. This stage takes place before the coachee can consciously perceive tensions. It shapes a contrast to the stages described below in which the coachee perceives a tension and moves out of his comfort zone.

Step 2: Outside the Comfort Zone

(A)'s attention shifts from agreement to differences and tensions. In this stage, (A) perceives the differences from their own perspective and the other opinion. Being out of their own comfort zone bears potential energy that can be a favorable prerequisite for new ideas, learning, and subsequent change.

The typical situation in this stage is: person (A), experiencing interpersonal tension within his work environment, comes to a coaching session to find help. At this stage, person (A) can be assisted to express the situation by reflecting on the following questions:

What does the other person (B) do?
What would you like to have/achieve?

The first question drives the coachee's attention to the side (B) of the VDS, giving him the opportunity to describe his perspective on (B)'s behavior. The second question clarifies (A)'s own contribution to the tension. In this way, both sides of the tension can be identified. The difference between these two sides exposes the double bind situation.

However, in practical coaching situations, we formulate these questions in a more accessible language, e.g.:

a)   Please explain the situation briefly: what is (B)

doing (or not doing)?

b)   What is important to you that I hear from your side/position or understand concerning the situation? (*Pause*) And what is the value behind this for you?

At this point, the client (A) usually accuses the other party (B) of his actions, and there is already a diametrical contrast between their perceived and possibly exaggerated values (see Figure 2, Stage 2).

Step 3: In-Sight

At this third stage, the first new insights (or "in sight"— standing in another's "sight") are possible. (A)'s attention shifts to B's perspective through reflection (see Figure 2. Stage 3).

As an intervention to induce this stage, we suggest the following key question:

c)   Suppose the other party (B) is here and can hear all your statements about him on question a), would (B) nod to what you have just said?

Most of the time, the answer to this question is "no."[2]

By answering this question, the client has already made a useful distinction: this question can only be answered if the client (A) has taken the other party's (B) perspective (at least for a short time).
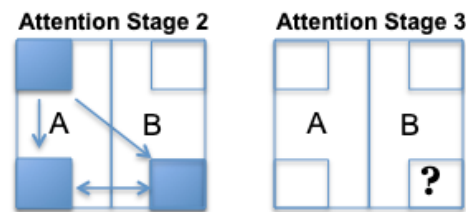

Figure 2: Attention stages at steps 2 and 3

Step 4: Context Replaces Content

Attention shift from differences (in content) to the value (that stand behind B's actions—see Figure 3, stage 4).

The key questions in this phase are:

d)   What would (B) nod to? What would he say why he

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[2] In the rare event that the client gives a response other than a negation to this query, this would suggest that there is no conflict, but rather a constraint. In this case it is possible to work with the client on how he intends to interact with this restriction in this situation.

is doing what he is doing?

By answering this question, (A) discovers that he can empathize with the value behind the other party's actions. The reflection on this question could be a first step that makes it possible for the client to see that the other party is acting out of a justified intention.

Step 5: Under-Standing

Attention shift to empathizing with the concrete value of the other party (see Figure 3, stage 5). (A) has the opportunity to "understand" the (supposed) value of (B).

By asking the following question, the perspective of the other party (B) can be further explored, and more differences can be perceived:

    e)   Suppose I ask the conflict partner (B) what is important to him: What would he say is the value behind what he does?

(A) discovers that he can even specify and name the (complementary) value that drives the other party (B) to his actions. This favors the next learning step.
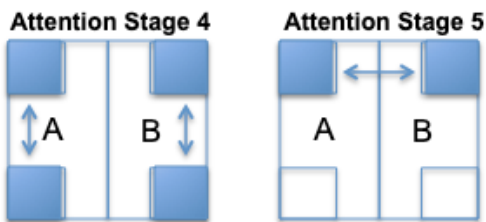

Figure 3: Attention stages at steps 3 and 4

Step 6: Re-Entry

To support the client to find a well-balanced intercourse with the tension, the coach can remind the client (A) that in the given situation, there is also this complementary value of the conflict partner (B). This can be a reminder to own limits in a constructive sense. It can be the reminder of a larger context than the client's own perspective. And it is also a reminder that in addition to one's own justified value and good intention—there is another, just as justified, other party's value and good intention. Therefore both are justified values and can stand next to each other in their entire difference.

(A)'s attention in this stage is directed towards a bigger picture and balancing the two involved values (constructive relation). Once again, answering the suggested questions to this stage is hardly possible without at least some empathy for the other party.

(A)'s attention shift allows (A) to experience a moderating effect of noticing the other value (of B) behind the tension. In perceiving and taking into account this other value, (A)

moderates his view and has the opportunity to adapt his demands to the situation (see Figure 4, stage 6).

In this phase, the differences (= lessons learned) that have been recognized in the past phases are introduced into (A)'s own point of view.

Ideally, (A)'s scope of understanding has expanded throughout the process, and new approaches to solutions for the concern that has been brought along have been shaped.

After this process, the following question may be useful for the client:

    f)   What could be the next small, concrete step for you to take now, to advance one step further towards the desired direction?

Step 7: Co-Creation

It cannot be predicted to what extent a tension originally experienced as a conflict can unfold into a phase of conscious conjoined use of new understanding and knowledge—a co-creation (see Figure 4, Co-Creation). Depending on the will and maturity of the interlocutors, more can emerge from their shared tension than the sum of their different views ("The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" [18]).
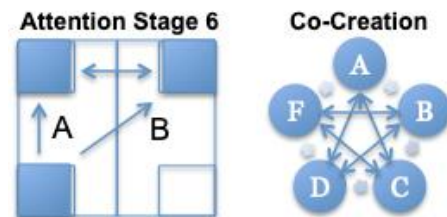

Figure 4: Attention stages at steps 6 and 7

8.   A GUIDE TO WORKING WITH THE VDS BY INTERPERSONAL TENSIONS

In our efforts to make organizational development processes easier and more structured, we have been working on models and tools that help people in organizations:

- To work more independently on their solutions and
- To make their solutions more effective.

The "Seven Steps to Useful Tensions" presented in this paper is a result of such efforts. Having this background in mind, we developed a guideline that can be used as a step-by-step "formula" for seeking a constructive solution to interpersonal tensions.

The guide for a coaching session on interpersonal tensions starts by encouraging the coachee to consider the interpersonal tension he is currently experiencing within his organization and what he would like to work on. In the next

step, he is asked to briefly describe the situation (question a) and estimate on a scale from 0 to 10 how far/near this current situation is from an ideal state (number 10). Then the client is asked to declare where on the scale is a good next step towards the desired state of "better" when considering the issue.

After that, the questions mentioned above (questions b-f) as described in steps two to six are asked. To clarify if the client allows us to work with him on his issue (that he commits us to the task), we have added the following questions right next to question b:

I. What would you like to achieve in this situation? What is / would be a good next step in the desired direction for you with regard to this concern?
II. How can you tell whether this step has taken place? How will you know that things are better? (*Pause*) What else will be different?

The guide finalizes by asking the coachee to describe the insights he has experienced during the answering of the questions and to reflect on possible measures that enable him to take the next step towards the state of better.

A survey is also carried out to verify the applicability and effectiveness of the guide.

9. THE SURVEY'S INTERMEDIATE RESULTS

The preliminary results of the survey being conducted to verify the guide's applicability and effectiveness are presented in this section.

This survey has been carried out in Austria (the guide and the survey are currently written in German) with the collaboration of aspiring coaches, who are on the final phase of their training and are volunteers for this survey. All of them have already had a short introduction to the VDS via a Zoom meeting. They were then asked to find their own coachees for this study. The only condition for coachees: they should be those with an issue related to a conflict in their work environment. The coaching process itself should be carried out following the guide as accurately as possible. By the time we finished this paper, we had received the results of five coaching processes performed following our guidelines. We surveyed the feedback of the coaching sessions' results anonymously. The feedback form did not have questions about the content of the coaching sessions. The survey's main goal is to verify the applicability and effectiveness of the guideline. Therefore, the questions to the study participants (coaches) were mostly directed to the effects of the work with the guide and to possible improvement to its format. The survey's feedback form consists of two single choice questions, seven multiple-choice questions, two scale questions, and one open-ended question. And now for the intermediate results:

- The last scale question on the guide was about how useful the coachee perceived the coaching process. The value 0 represents "This coaching was a waste of time for me." and 10 represents "This coaching was certainly the most useful aid I have ever had for solving my issue," the average coachee's answer was 7.4. We understand this value combined with the coaches' positive feedback on that issue (all volunteers testified that their coachee reported great satisfaction with the coaching process) as a positive sign showing the guide's effectiveness.

- To the question if there was something during the coaching session the coaches needed to change or have as a complement to the guide, 80% of them replied they needed to give a short extra explanation of the VDS concept to the coachee. However, we suspect that this demand happened because the participants (coaches) still had little coaching experience and, therefore, when talking to the coachees, related the exercise to the theory they have just learned in their group. We believe that for this coaching process, the explanation of the VDS is unnecessary. To verify this assumption, though, we will need further studies.

- To the question, whether the guideline was a helpful tool for the coach (0 not helpful at all, 10 very helpful), the average answer resulted in the value 7.4. When questioned whether the coach would consider using the guide in further coaching concerning conflicts, the average answer was 7 (0 = never again, 10 = always). Both results show a positive trend for the acceptance of the guide.

- The average duration of the coaching sessions was 40 minutes – which is about half the time of a typical single coaching session.

- All participants answered the open question. Here we will present only some of the statements representing similar testimonials (such that we found in more than 50% of the feedbacks): (a) "At the beginning, the goal and task clarification would still have to be defined." (b) "I had to make a short digression to the VDS." (c) "[The guide] is a helpful tool for coaching because the process is very efficient. I have received only positive feedback. Taking the perspective on the values was very helpful." (d) "[The guide offers a] clearly structured instruction, worked well, it was very efficient."

- Intermediate conclusions: the guide increased the support for the coaches regarding their work with the client on his issue and enhanced the efficiency of their coaching process (this result is especially evident in the answers to the open question). With this guideline, the time for the coaching session could be shortened significantly (at least 50% of the time – considering only one single usual coaching session in the organizational context). We are confident that combining a short training on the VDS model and this guideline can help coaches guide and moderate effective coaching on conflict issues.

10. CONCLUSION

With this extension of the original VDS—adding ideas from the solution-focused and the hypnosystemic work—we intend to offer leaders, coaches, mediators, and employees a valuable tool to make conflicts become constructive tensions for the company and themselves.

Our aim with this model is to:

- assist in quickly structuring complex situations and
- support those involved in interpersonal tensions to transform these tensions into useful levers for common goals.

The intermediate results of our survey encourage us to continue on our path and give us the confidence that the structure we are considering here can significantly contribute to enhance and accelerate the conflict resolution processes in organizations.

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