

Interpersonal Conflict Advisor

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author proposes an expert system embedded in a mobile application to help individuals to resolve interpersonal conflicts at work and so to avoid the debilitating stress that can accompany such issues. The author discusses the design of an initial prototype implemented using a survey tool and the potential for future work to build off of his initial efforts.

Author Keywords

Interpersonal conflict; conflict resolution; conflict management; difficult conversation; negotiation; stress; wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

Humans are social animals. We depend on other humans to survive, and we thrive - both individually and as a species - because we work together and exchange resources.

We are so well conditioned to this behavior that we often forget how complex human interaction can be. But, every now and then, an issue comes up, and the path forward isn't so clear. Often, the stakes are high, emotions are running hot, and we know that anything we say or do will have consequences - both intended and unintended.

These are stressful situations. They keep us up at night. They tug at our minds and distract us from our responsibilities and our other relationships. In extreme cases, they spill over into more general symptoms of ill health. But even though the situation is causing us real problems now, we often wait to act - or don't act at all - because we're not sure what to do.

There is actually reason to believe that these situations are quite common in the workplace. According to the American Psychological Association, 69% percent of employees report that work is a significant source of stress, and 41%

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say they typically feel tense or stressed out during the workday.

Data from ComPsych's semiannual Stress Pulse survey show that 32% of individuals experiencing stress due to work cite "people issues" as the primary cause of their problems. We can only guess at what is creating this level of conflict, but it is important to recognize the magnitude of the suffering that workplace conflict is responsible for. And it is important to note that the problem is not showing any signs of abating: the number of people with stress derived from work is increasing while the portion pointing to interpersonal issues as the proximate cause is holding steady.

CURRENT SOLUTIONS

Conflict resolution is the topic of a tremendous amount of interest, and a huge industry has grown up around helping people to acquire the skills to work through interpersonal issues. Forward-thinking organizations identified dysfunctional teams as a major drag on productivity decades ago, and made significant investments in management systems and human resources to combat these problems. One could fill an entire library with "self-help" books on conflict management; a smaller library could hold the more serious efforts by legal scholars, such as Roger Fisher and Bob Mnookin. Mediation, arbitration, conflict resolution consulting, and even psychology -- all of these are names for professions devoted - to one degree or another - to resolving conflicts. Finally, it seems as if there are as many blog posts and Harvard Business Review articles laying out tips and tricks for dealing with conflict as there are people actually trying to manage conflict.

It would seem that there is relatively little room for a new tool to help with this process. However, an investigation of the potential solutions reveals an important gap. Individuals dealing with interpersonal issues at work actually have no easy option to get expert advice that will be meaningfully helpful in resolving their issues. The current solutions are either too "heavy" in terms of the burden they put on the user to acquire the advice, or they are too "light" in terms of the value that they offer to the person who is struggling. Many of us have friends who can fill this gap and provide consistently great advice, but if that person doesn't exist for an individual or if the problem is not appropriate to discuss

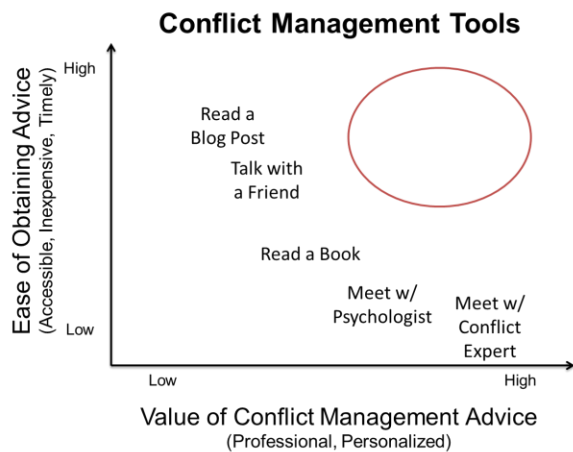


Figure 1 There is a gap in the toolset available to those struggling with interpersonal conflict

PROPOSED SOLUTION

To fill that gap, I propose a personalized tool that could guide users through the process of analyzing their own situation and preparing to address their issue. The idea is that most users already have all of the knowledge that is necessary to understand the difficult situation they are in and to develop a successful plan for addressing it. The value that they get from a good conflict management coach – or a good friend – is that person’s ability to ask the probing questions that change the user’s perspective in a way that drives new insights and better overall preparation.

My hypothesis is that it is possible, without artificial intelligence, to embed that probing ability into an expert system that uses questions and carefully placed tips to assist the user in self-reflection, analysis, and role-taking that can result in similar insights. My hypothesis is also that designing the system for a mobile platform would make it a practical solution for users in contrast to the other options discussed above.

Design Inspiration

The conflict management framework presented in *Difficult Conversations* by Sheila Heen, Bruce Patton, and Douglas Stone sparked the idea to create the advisor tool. When I used their system to prepare for a negotiation exercise as part of a class at Harvard Law School, I was exceedingly impressed with the results. Their framework was logical and practical, and it really brought clarity to the issues that I confronted in the exercise. I soon found myself using the system to think through my own problems and recommending the same to friends and family. However, I thought it was unfortunate that there wasn’t an easier, more intuitive way to put their ideas into practice.

Inspiration for the expert system design came from the tax preparation software, TurboTax. TurboTax embeds the expertise of a talented accountant with many years of experience into an interactive system that guides tax

novices of all stripes through the process of completing most tax returns. The analogy of preparing for a difficult conversation to preparing a tax return is not obvious, but in both cases, there are a set of key outputs that the system guides a user to produce in a robust way solely by asking questions. In the same way that TurboTax produces an individualized tax return with different entries in the same key fields, the proposed tool will produce an individualized Situation Profile that covers the same key topics for each issue. From TurboTax, I also took cues from the soft, helpful “we’re in this together” tone and from the way that the software consistently provides context throughout the process so that users always know where they have been and where they are going.

Interim Prototype

An initial prototype was developed in the Qualtrics survey tool to prove the value of the expert system model in this use case before tackling the difficult work of designing the tool for a mobile format.

The survey closely follows the *Difficult Conversations* framework in terms of the topics that are addressed. However, a few key design decisions influenced how the exercises recommended in the book were incorporated into the survey.

First, I was concerned about the amount of time and mental effort that is needed to complete the full set of exercises prescribed. Thinking in terms of BJ Fogg’s behavior change model, I knew that my tool was focused on people who are already highly motivated to work through their interpersonal issues, but I also wanted to make sure that it was as easy as possible for them to use. My best guess was that the entire process would take 30-45 minutes to complete. Very few people have the ability to focus intently for an extended period of time like that – it just seemed like too much to ask. And I questioned whether anyone would be willing to invest so much time into using a tool without getting a taste of a tangible benefit. So, I decided that I would break it up into multiple parts and provide tips and feedback to the user after each part.

The natural follow-on question was how to break it up? *Difficult Conversation* asks readers to consider their situation from the perspective of three separate issues that contribute to break-downs between the parties: disagreements over “what happened,” how and whether “feelings” are expressed, and issues of “identity” – what the disagreement says about the people involved. It was natural to consider dividing the survey along these lines, but I did not believe that would be intuitive for the user, who is just learning the meaning of that classification system. I turned instead to the other dimension along which the program stretches: the perspective that the user is taking, whether she is telling her story or whether she is being asked to look at the situation from the perspective of her counterpart. To me, it made sense to ask the user to reflect on her own story

and how she came to her views, then take a break and come back to analyze the situation from the perspective of the other player.

The final consequential design decision was how to incorporate tips and guidance into the system. I wanted the user to get most of the benefits of the book without having to read it. That meant not only explaining the purpose for each exercise, but also highlighting some particular traps or problems to look for as the user was working through each section of the program. On the other hand, I wanted to avoid making the user scroll through pages of text, especially as I try to keep one eye on the eventual transition to a mobile format. In the end, I landed on the side of more complete explanations for now, while planning to make some of the reading optional in the future via drill-downs.

Please take the survey to see how these design decisions played out: <http://bit.ly/wellbeingtio>. Subsequent rounds are available upon completion of round 1 or upon request.

EVALUATION

The prototype has been distributed to classmates, friends and family of the author, but feedback to date has been limited. I am planning more extensive usability tests with individual users during the summer, seeking both interface design suggestions and better understanding of the value proposition in specific usage scenarios.

LEARNING

This class has been an incredible learning experience, both in terms of procedural and propositional knowledge. Learning how to design and participating in a design cycle was one of my goals coming into the course, and I certainly made progress along that dimension. In developing the prototype, I learned that I have an opinion on how something should work. I learned that the process is slow for me, so I need to start making things earlier. I learned that I like to abstract problems and develop analogies and mental models to give a specific problem context; I am torn as to whether I should encourage or discourage this tendency. I learned that trying to design something is hard, but it is also fun. I learned that my fear of showing off what I've built scales in proportion to the amount of effort and ownership I have over the project.

I also learned a great deal about well-being. I changed habits and tried to take on a broader view of my own well-being and how my actions contribute to it. I learned that sleep is the most important contributor to health. Besides exercise. I learned that loneliness is very bad for you. Unless your friends are causing you stress because stress is bad. Stress can also be good. And it can be contagious.

FUTURE WORK

I plan to continue to iterate the survey by observing users, collecting feedback, and refining the design. Refinements

could include slight modifications to questions, or perhaps involve incorporating elements of other conflict management models. Eventually, assuming I have found a design that helps users, I plan to translate survey into mobile form factor – reducing the amount of text input and capturing data in other ways. If the program scales, I will make available data on whether program reduces reported stress.

A number of other directions could be explored with users. There is potential to involve the user's counterpart in the exercise – either by sharing a completed profile or by sharing information during the preparation process. Or instead of the user engaging only with the application, the application could assist the friend in guiding the user's preparation, potentially turning the friend into an expert. We could also explore a model similar to HealthTap (www.healthtap.com) and build a platform to engage negotiation experts in public, but anonymous preparation.

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