

The Circle Chart: A Tool for Organized Thinking*

One problem-solving tool that has proven to be particularly effective for the preparation and conduct of negotiations and facilitations is the “Circle Chart” (see diagram). This tool divides the task of problem-solving into four modes of thinking:

I. **The Problem: Identify the gap between *disliked symptoms* and a *preferred situation*.**

We begin by defining the problem as the gap between “what is” and “what might be” that we would prefer. We can create two columns in Quadrant I of the Circle Chart. On the left, we can list aspects of the current situation that trouble us. Opposite each entry, we can list in the right-hand column elements of a possible situation we would prefer.

As a simple example, our disliked symptoms might be “I have a headache, it’s becoming more frequent, it’s getting more severe, and it’s not responding to treatment.” Our preferred situation might be “My headaches are rare, not too bad, and go away promptly, at least with treatment.” The purpose of the Circle Chart can be seen as helping us invent ways to close the gap between these two lists.

As a more complex example, imagine we are concerned about nuclear weapons. The “disliked symptoms” might include too many warheads, an escalating race for new technology, proliferation to other countries and terrorists, uncertainty over first use policies, and so on. The “preferred situation” might be fewer warheads, a controlled or reduced pace of technological development, reduced risk of proliferation, and greater certainty over first use policies.

II. **Diagnoses: Consider alternative possible *causal explanations*.** Next we consider what

may be the causes underlying or creating the disliked symptoms. Rather than trying to decide on a single, most important cause, we should try to list all possible causes or contributing factors about which we might conceivably be able to do something. For example, “past history” and “geography” are often cited as causes of a conflict, but they are causes we have no power to change.

If we are concerned about a headache, possible diagnoses might include: stress, high blood pressure, brain tumor, allergies, or a paradoxical reaction to the medication we’ve tried.

Some diagnoses are more abstract than others. Our goal is to develop more specific diagnoses that suggest more specific prescriptive approaches. In this quest, a more abstract diagnosis can be broken down into more specific sub-diagnoses that may prove more helpful. For example, suppose we are working on “uncertainty over first use policies for nuclear weapons.” One possible diagnosis is, “The U.S. does not trust Russian or Chinese pledges of ‘no first use.’” Although possibly valid, this diagnosis leaves open the question why there is a lack of trust. Here we can dig further for sub-diagnoses, such as, “Russia seems increasingly to be rejecting the notion of international norms or restraints based on principle”; “Neither American citizens or government officials now have extensive personal relationships with

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Russian officials”; “Chinese leaders seem to assume and desire eventual Chinese world dominance rather than a stable regime of coexistence based on the creative power of ‘coopetition’”; etc. Keep searching for a variety of causes, at a level of specificity that begins to suggest what might be done.

- III. General Prescriptions: Devise *general prescriptive approaches*.** We can now invent a wide variety of possible approaches that might solve or help solve our problem by dealing effectively with one or more of the causes and diagnoses we have identified. These approaches should be general, that is capable of being implemented in several different ways. For example, to deal with the possible headache diagnosis of high blood pressure, one approach would be to reduce our stress. Another might be to use medications that lower blood pressure.

In the nuclear weapons example, to deal with the diagnosis of Russia seeming to reject the value of international norms and restraints based on principle, one approach might be “Offer more respect by creating opportunities for inclusion of the Russian leader and soliciting the leader’s advice in areas where norms might be beneficial to Russia, then raising the need for reciprocity in other areas to make that workable.”

- IV. Specific Action Ideas: Invent alternative specific *plans to implement the general approaches*.** Finally, we can take each of the general prescriptive approaches in turn and invent several alternative specific action plans for implementation. For example, to reduce our stress, one might plan more vacations, time away from the kids or spouse (or more time with them), more regular exercise, or a program of yoga and meditation. The value brainstorming alternative ways to implement a single general strategy is that we will often find that some implementation plans are much more attractive and feasible than others.

In our nuclear weapons example, one approach to engaging the Russian leader might be to propose a G9 meeting of leaders (Canada, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the U.K., and the U.S.) to discuss a basket of global issues, such as avoiding collapse of the Gulf Stream/North Atlantic Drift currents, maintaining global fish stocks, and the proliferation of nuclear technology. Or one might envision an bilateral approach to brainstorm possible strategies for de-escalation of tensions around NATO, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Ukraine.

- V. Final Notes:** The Circle Chart can be used by one individual or a group preparing for a negotiation, and can also be used by negotiators from both sides working together as joint problem-solvers.

Although these four steps are the logical order in which a problem could be analyzed and solved, the human mind often makes intuitive, non-linear leaps from one mode of thinking to another. The Circle Chart can help us keep track of those ideas: place them in the quadrant where they seem most appropriate, and then move backwards or forwards from that idea around the Circle Chart to generate other ideas.

Occasionally, users of the Circle Chart may be uncertain about which Quadrant an idea should be placed. For example, “lack of trust” may be seen as a problem (Quadrant I), or a diagnosis (Quadrant II). The idea should be placed on the chart where it will be most useful: that is, where it stimulates other thoughts that help address the problem.

CIRCLE CHART

The Four Basic Steps in Inventing Options

