

# *The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness*

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## **Contemplative Dialogue: Human Responses to Social Challenges - The Nondefended Learning Stance**

*The following guide is part three of a series of processes that accompany the Contemplative Dialogue Manual, **The Path of Contemplative Dialogue: Engaging Collective Awareness** developed by Steven Wirth, Founder of the Centre for Contemplative Dialogue.*

### **Part Three: The Nondefended Learning Stance**

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*Part Two of this Contemplative Dialogue Series explored how we humans process our experiences. Building on the work of Chris Argyris, the process focused on assumptions. Assumptions are the stories we tell ourselves about a situation. They are habitual and instinctual. The focus of part three is human responses to social challenges. Here we learn what it means to embrace the life stance of being nondefended learners.*

### **Human Responses to Social Challenges**

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Chris Argyris, longtime Harvard University social and organization psychologist, studied organizations around the world. He wondered how is it that incredibly intelligent people with significant resources failed miserably when they needed to work well together. He observed that often well-intended people have trouble in attaining the good outcomes they seek together, experience conflict between themselves, and perceive factions within their communities. He came to believe that we humans have a certain characteristic responses when we feel our goals are endangered, experience conflict, and fear embarrassment or outright failure.

Argyris identified four motivations or 'guiding values' that he assumed influence most human interactions. Following these motivations or 'guiding values' often causes us to relate in ways that ultimately lead to failure, disempowerment, and an inability to collaborate well.

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**These motivations or guiding values are:**

- **Seek to win or assure the outcome I want (fear of failure)**
- **To control or unilaterally (on my own) influence the situation (take charge, direct, fix or change another)**
- **Attempt to hide my doubts and fears lest others lose confidence in my plan (not to let others see my frustration or anger lest they over-react)**
- **Appear rational and reasonable throughout**

**Pause for a second and consider:**

1. Are there situations where these motivations are strong in you?
2. Focus on a recent situation and ask yourself which value dominated?
  - What was the situation?
  - What was triggered in you?
  - How did you engage/react in the situation?
  - What was the outcome?
  - What do you wish would have happened?

**Argyris described two patterns or ways in which these motivations tend to show up in relationship. He describes each of these as ‘defended stances’ because they attempt to ‘defend’ or ‘protect’ outcomes or relationships we care about. The intention is not necessarily ‘bad’ or ‘selfish,’ but the problem is they are unilateral or solo choices. ‘I’ or ‘my group’ decides and then we work to assure that outcome.**

### **The Dominant Model or Strong Defended Stance**

This dominant or strong unilateral stance may reveal itself along a continuum from ‘dictatorial’ to ‘persistently helpful.’ It can be authoritarian, ‘Do it my way. I make the decisions here. My way or the highway.’ But it can also be benign, like a persistent friend who won’t take no for an answer. It can hide beneath good intentions and gentleness that nonetheless has decided what the outcome will or should be and will not allow another.

### **Characteristics of the Dominant or Strong Defended Stance**

- Seeks to define and direct toward one’s preferred outcomes
- Works to change others to create those preferred outcomes
- Doesn’t want to reveal doubt or uncertainty about ‘the goal’ or ‘my leadership’
- Often uses ‘reasonable explanations’ to point to (or worst case, justify) my position and goal

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Arygris further identified characteristics of people who project a persona of cooperation, inclusion, and collaboration, who may not be at all dominant, but who nonetheless act out of unilateral goals or intentions. He calls this the **'Nice' Defended Stance**.

### Characteristics of the 'Nice' Defended Stance:

- Seeks to avoid offending others
- Wants others to feel included or considered
- Emphasizes the language of feelings and values
- Wants not to be perceived as hierarchical or 'powerful'

In themselves, these desires are all good, but problems arise when they are applied to situations where there are differences or limiting circumstances so that not everyone can get what they want. When we live together, we have to resolve situations that can't always be win-win. The problem arising from the 'Nice' Defended Stance is it can lead us to avoid directly engaging and lead us to 'secretly' work toward our unilateral or individual goals.

Some signal comments that a Nice Defended behavior is operative are, "I know how she feels so let's not go there." "They aren't ready to talk about that so we'll avoid that conversation." "We don't want to upset the group." At times, the fear of naming the difference but wanting to influence the other can cause us to attempt to 'lead the other' with questions. As though if I asked the right question, surely she'd see what needs to be changed. Part of the question asking is often an implicit denial that I want the other to change. Most often, the signal is silence. If I avoid letting you know what I think or feel, it can seem like the safest course, though it dooms you to guessing what and where I really am. **These 'signal comments' shut down conversations and instead cause mistrust and defenses in the group to escalate.**

## Nondefended Learning Stance

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A counter-cultural approach to relating with one another is the Nondefended Learning Stance. The Nondefended Learning Stance helps us see that the reality that we are in is about the 'we'. I need you, the community, and/or the organization. I need your knowledge, insight, and wisdom. The Nondefended Learning Stance practices transparency in sharing assumptions, in revealing one's thoughts and position. It leads us to be genuinely curious about other's opinions and assumptions. It values expose our own thinking to the review of the other even to the point of finding out that we view might be wrong. It holds oneself and the other with compassion, and values shared learning and free choice making most highly.

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This can feel like a very vulnerable place to be, but in fact it makes possible higher degrees of shared and individual safety.

When I practice Nondefended Learning, I make it safe to look at different viewpoints. I invite people with diverse opinions to articulate them. And in doing this we come to know one another more as we truly are, and our situation more accurately as it is.

It helps to share one's own assumptions and together to notice and uncover shared beliefs and assumptions (our 'Socially Constructed Realities,' SCR's are shared or group values and beliefs). It is this place of transparency that creates the ground for others to be safe to share.

A nondefended conversation might start like the following:

- "I know we are short of cash and the economy is in the tank; however, I believe we need an infusion of cash in this ministry...can we those assumptions together?"
- "Last week when we discussed this issue I couldn't listen with an open mind and wasn't listening deeply to you. Could we please revisit that conversation?"
- "Could you help me understand your thinking? I'm not yet seeing your perspective and I don't want to miss your part of the whole picture."

Practicing the Nondefended Learning Stance, a person:

- Reveals where they are starting from regarding an issue or situation
- Shares assumptions and checks them out respectfully
- Works to make meaning with the other person
- Strives to be curious
- Trusts in the other person's capacity to take care of themselves
- Works toward a collectively free and wise decision, whether we agree or not

## Learning Experience

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A good example of Nondefended Learning in a leader is Nelson Mandela. Take time to watch the movie **Invictus** with Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon. In the film, Mandela shows us in many diverse situations what a nondefended stance looks like. Throughout the movie different characters: political leaders, bodyguards, parents, and staff illustrate what we are like when we are defended. You also will see how transformation takes place through the modeling and conviction of a leader.

If time is limited, another option is to watch a video clip of the movie from YouTube.

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Pause for a few minutes. If you have access to a computer:

- Go to the internet
- Google: YouTube
- Search: Invictus
- Click on: Invictus Trailer (HD) (3 minutes)

### Deliberate Steps toward a Nondefended Learning Conversation

Steven Wirth, Executive Director, of the Centre for Contemplative Dialogue developed the following material for assisting those who want to engage in nondefended conversations. He notes that recognizing the need for a nondefended learning conversation and then appropriately planning and initiating it may seem like a confusing process at first; however, there are some clear and deliberate steps that can be taken.

#### 1. Noticing defended situations and energy

The first step is to recognize situations in which defended behaviors or energies are affecting us. I may recognize that a situation or interaction is uncomfortable. The way in which something is happening may make me hesitant to speak, or even fearful about talking with another person involved. This strong or even subtle hesitancy is usually a clue to a nice or pastoral defended response. Alternately, I may notice a desire to correct or straighten the other person out. The felt clues of this may range from any angry response, a felt intent to protect the 'right' outcome, all the way to a benign felt desire to help. Noticing this energy within me can be a clue that strong defended energy is at work. Noticing these energies or temptations in both others and myself is a vital first step.

#### 2. Taking a long compassionate look

The next step is to notice my feelings or situation in a compassionate and unhurried way. 'Unhurried' here does not have to mean I take the day off and go stroll in the garden. In practice, it may simply mean that I draw a deep breath and notice before responding. Yet the sense of being unhurried is vital. If my inner sense of urgency gets going, I will be unable to notice contemplatively what is happening in the moment.

"In the moment," this noticing may simply be nonjudgmentally observing what I observe. For example, "Joan, I'm aware that the issue you've just raised is both important and complex, and

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that nine minutes left in the meeting doesn't feel like an appropriate amount of time to begin to deal with it." This is the mindfulness skill of being able to 'describe the weather' or to observe without judgment what is most apparent. Doing this openly, compassionately and without judgment hidden within allows us to take real time contemplative looks.

After the fact or when more time is available, looking compassionately at all parties involved and at what they may or may not know is a part of this contemplative look. Choosing to look without being biased by my own hoped-for or feared outcomes may allow me to see more of what is happening. This is where the ladder of inference (Part II Assumptions) can be a powerful contemplative tool. Recognizing my own assumptions about the situation, my role and the roles of others in it may help me better recognize what is happening.

### 3. Holding all parties nonviolently

Taking time intentionally to hold each person involved nonviolently, can feel like a challenging step. Sometimes we imagine this means we can't be angry at another's behavior and choices. In fact it doesn't. Honoring and acknowledging the anger we feel is sometimes a part of hold ourselves nonviolently. What nonviolence means is that we cannot allow our words and choices to be blindly driven by our anger.

Pausing to look nonviolently, may require me to take time to look at my strong emotion, listen to its message, and step back enough from it to respond freely. This free nonviolent response must consider what the common good in the situation is. Common good here may not refer specifically to an outcome, but may point to the way in which we engage one another. We may be a long way from solving a problem, yet the qualities with which we engage one another may be very important. Reflecting on this common good may help inform what nonviolent engagement looks like at this moment in the situation.

### 4. Preparing to engage in nondefended fashion

Taking time to reflect on what you may or may not know in common, and what your assumptions are is a way to prepare to engage another. Considering what the good of the relationship and the organization or community requires is a way to approach the conversation from a learning stance.

This may be where you practice revealing your assumptions (not conclusions) and checking them out for the common good you each share. This common good may be the organization being successful, resolving something as fairly as possible, or something else of this sort.

This may be a place to script out your opening comments, or to practice what you want to say with a friend. This practice is in the service of effective engagement. It is also a moment in which to check out your motives as you approach the other.

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Are you attempting to change, fix, or otherwise manipulate the other? It is not that you cannot hope

Someone makes different choices or behaves differently, but you must be transparent about it. Let them know what you assume would be more effective and why you assume it. Check to see if they share that assumption.

### 5. Dying to outcomes

A last moment of preparation involves 'dying' to the outcomes of the conversation. It is mindfully recognizing what you hope to have happen and what you fear could happen, and making your peace with both of them so that they do not unconsciously distract or control you. This allows you to engage the other with less defended energy or anxiety. It also often helps to bring anxieties to a great level of reality. When they move in us unchecked, we often heap more importance and danger on conversations than they usually warrant.

### Creating a Practice

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During the next week, observe the various conversations in which you were engaged. Notice your participation in the conversation. What were you feeling? Did you sense yourself experiencing defended energy? Ask yourself "What did I need to defend?" or "What was I afraid of?" Journal your insights.

During week two, repeat the same process that you did during week one but this time take a compassionate look at the situation and at the participants. Spend quiet time holding each person's viewpoints nonviolently. Stay with your feelings holding both the light and dark feelings. See if you can come to an alternative perspective that respects those involved and your own integrity. Journal your insights.

During week three, ask yourself if there is any conversation from the previous two weeks that you would like to revisit. Call that situation to mind. Do the processes from week one and two. Script out what you would like to say to the person or persons. Practice alone or with a friend what you would like to say. Test to be sure that you do not have a hidden agenda that distorts your effort. Take time to notice your hopes and your fears. Sit with these and consciously make your peace with them. Allow yourself to make your peace with both failure and success, so that those hopes and fears do not distort your effort. Journal your experience and your insights.

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### Conclusion:

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As the close of your gathering end with Dana Fauld's poem, One Soul, as a reminder of what Contemplative Dialogue is all about.

When we sit in a circle and grow still.  
The energy of Spirit fills us.  
Until we surrender to silence,  
we stay on the choppy surface of the mind.  
As the breath grows quiet, we go behind thought, beneath confusion, fear and doubt.  
When we sit here in a circle and share truth, the mystery of speech  
and listening transforms our separate energies into one being  
-present and fulfilled