

# Transforming Conflict to Collaboration



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## A Scenario

We used the following scenario to envisage a complex situation where tension has escalated. Although your own situation doesn't fit this story exactly, you may recognise some of the elements that it describes.

*You need to collaborate with your neighbours (landowners).*

*Previously positive **relations are souring**. You know that two landowners are deeply dissatisfied, and **resistance is spreading** to other landowners.*

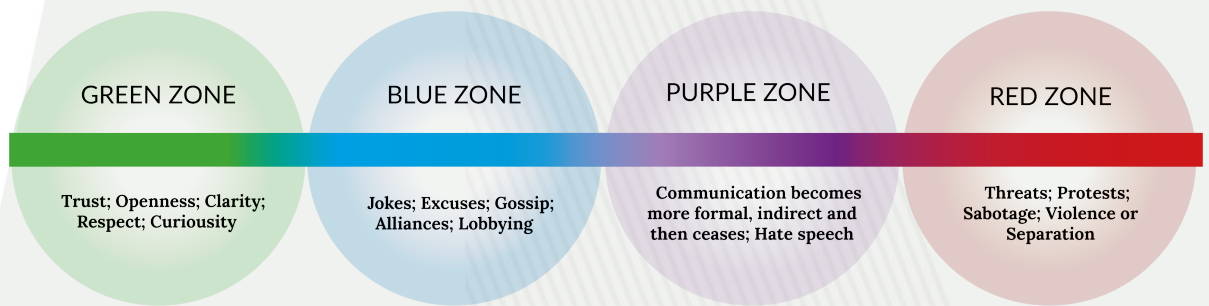
*Instigators have **stopped communicating** with the park management. Key actors no longer want to attend meetings because they are afraid of being ostracised or even targeted by the dominant landowners. Recently an email was sent to one sheep farmer with a picture of dead sheep and the word "**TRAITOR!**". **Nails** were found on the road used by the park managers.*

The pages that follow are one way of analysing any situation in order to determine how you need to deal with it. We emphasise two variables that are often interlinked:

- The degree of complexity
- The level of conflict escalation

Both of these variables require you to consider whether you are adequately equipped to handle the situation on your own or whether you need either to ask for support or inform yourself of both the mindset and skillset required to handle its complexity and to decrease the tension.

# The Resistance Line



Inspired by Myrna Lewis

This analytical tool is an adaptation of the insights of Myrna Lewis. It describes some of the elements you will notice in a given situation. We have divided it into “zones” that signify shifts in the level of conflict.

When using this simple tool, you can consider which examples noted in each zone are present. It is worth noting changes in the level of conflict. It may have moved to the right recently, become more infected, and move towards the red zone. Observing changes is essential in formulating the strategy you chose.

A question that arose in the workshop was whether one could influence the level of conflict. The answer is definitely “yes”. One of the effects of a good dialogue is the decrease of tension – a movement from the right to the left. For example, it may involve parties that have stopped talking to each other to engage in some form of exchange.

Here is a link where you can read more about the resistance line:

<https://lift.dialogues.se/the-resistance-line/>

## Marginalisation as a cause of conflict



Something is being ignored or avoided ...



... or someone is excluded

Marginalisation implies something or someone being excluded or disregarded. It may involve an idea being ignored in a process or a perspective being regarded as meaningless, wrong or dangerous. A person or group may also feel themselves marginalised. Not being invited to a meeting, being excluded from a group or a conversation or being discriminated against in some way are all examples of marginalisation.

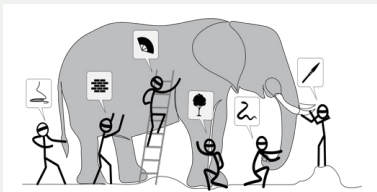
It is important to note that this is not an objective fact but rather a subjective sense. It is not a question of whether or not somebody or something is being excluded but the subjected sense of that exclusion, whether it is “true” or not.

Marginalisation often leads to an increase in frustration and tension. The Resistance Line is simply a way of illustrating this growing tension – or escalating conflict.

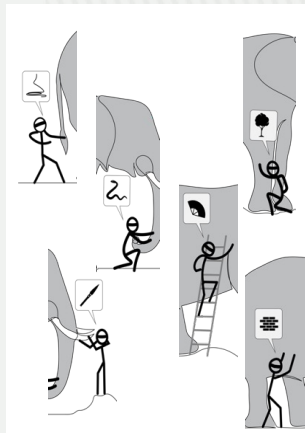
# Fragmentation and conflict

Another way of thinking about the reason for tension and conflict was formulated by the physicist, David Bohm. He observed that we often become so attached to our perspective that we regard other ways of viewing a situation as incorrect or inferior. As soon as we claim that we are right, somebody else is either less so or simply wrong.

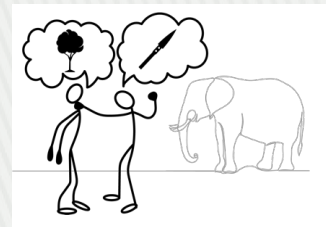
The old Indian story of the Six Blind Men and the Elephant illustrates this point elegantly.



WE ALWAYS SEE ONLY PARTS OF THE WHOLE AT A GIVEN TIME



WHAT WE OBSERVE BECOMES OUR "TRUTH"



PEOPLE BECOME OPPONENTS AND EVEN GO TO WAR

# Levels of complexity

Some issues are fairly straightforward and can be resolved by following proven methods, by consulting a manual or watching a YouTube clip. Others are more complicated and require the help of experts. These are often of a technical nature but can be resolved in a rational way using linear reasoning.

Complex issues are very different. They are dynamic and unpredictable. They often contain many parts and involve a large number of people, each with their own view of what the issue is about and how to “solve” it. They are often affected by other issues and by historical events. They may involve strongly felt emotions or deeply held values and even be linked to people’s identity.

Here is a simple evaluation tool that helps us make a quick assessment of the complexity of a particular issue. **Make a X on the scale for each statement.**

1. **Stakeholders.** Many stakeholders involved



2. **Parts and levels.** The conflict consists of or is affected by a variety of issues or is dealt with on different levels.



3. **Dynamic and unpredictable.** The issue can change often and without warning.



4. **History.** The issue has a long history that affects events today.



5. **Values and emotions.** Strongly held values drive the conflict and affects emotional responses.



6. **Culture and Identity.** The conflict involves aspects related to culture and identity

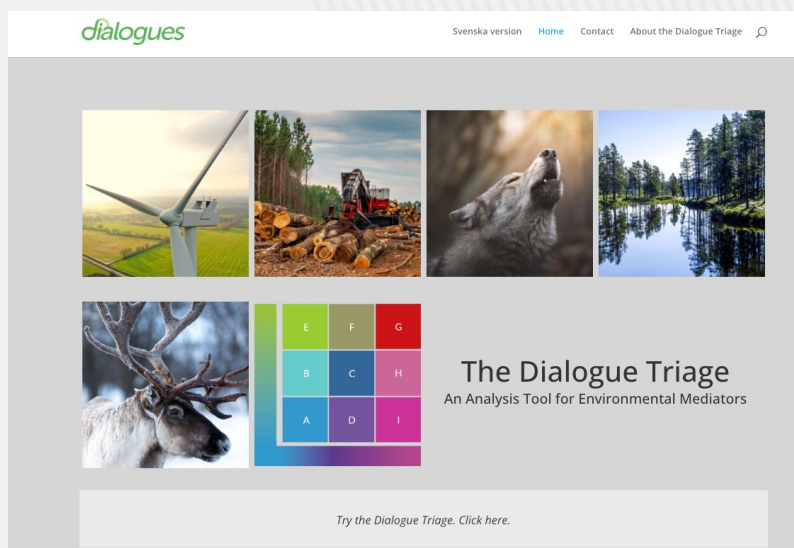


If the crosses you made are towards the right hand side the issue is probably complex.

# The Dialogue Triage

Dialogues has produced a digital tool for more accurately making the assessment of a situation's levels of complexity and conflict escalation. After answering a number of questions, you will be given a result. On the matrix you choose the letter that corresponds with the result and there you will be able to read more about the nature of the problem and ways to approach it. Below is the link to the Dialogue Triage for Environmental issues.

<https://trriage.dialogues.se/natural-resource-conflicts/>



This Triage was developed during our work with several municipalities in Colombia. You can read more about its origin on the website.

# Complexity, conflict and dialogue

## ***Here are some key principles for dealing with complex issues where there is some degree of tension and conflict***

- 1. When the issue is complex, don't try to simplify it.**  
*Simplifying a complex issue risks creating a sense of marginalisation and resulting frustration amongst stakeholders. Remember that, as an observer or participant, you seldom have a complete understanding of a complex problem*
- 2. Complex issues are best dealt with by including all stakeholders.**  
*The way to gain a better understanding of the issue is to include the views of those who are involved and affected by it.*
- 3. When there is tension, seek to involve all concerned stakeholders**  
*It is not wise to exclude stakeholders when trying to resolve a conflict that involves them. One-sided action seldom turns out well. You do not have to gather all at the same time, but make sure that nobody feels disregarded.*
- 4. Conflicts are often more than what appears on the surface. Take time to explore.**  
*Many conflicts appear to be related to issues while involving deeper emotional, value or identity-related issues. It takes both time and trust to get to these underlying issues. The triage will help you discover how best to make this assessment.*
- 5. Create a safe space for people to say what they need to say.**  
*Much can be said about what makes the space in which dialogue occurs safe. Openness and clarity build trust that contributes to this safety. Again, in the triage you find tips that will help you create such a space.*
- 6. There is wisdom in the critical, resistant voice. Seek to integrate it.**  
*We speak of the wisdom inside the "NO". On the next page you can read more about this principle.*
- 7. Serious complex conflicts require independent expert facilitation or mediation.**  
*It is very hard (though not impossible) for somebody who is involved in a conflict to create a space for dialogue that feels safe enough for everybody to express themselves freely. An independent facilitator or mediator is often helpful in such situations.*
- 8. The more serious the conflict, the more preparation is needed.**  
*It is never a good idea to simply invite conflicting parties to a meeting. Preparatory conversations goes a long way towards planning the right kind of dialogue, preparing parties in advance and being prepared to deal with issues that arise.*



## The Wisdom inside the No

When a minority within a group says “no” to the wishes or decisions of the majority, we need to prick up our ears. We often check to see whether there is a “no” that is not being expressed and then make it visible to the group. Even though it seems counter-intuitive, we do this because of our experience of the “no” containing important wisdom for the majority.

The “no” is not only the critical, oppositional voice that loudly says no when many say “yes”. It is also the voice dubious about the decision or the quiet voice that doesn’t feel comfortable expressing itself.

We seek to make the “no” visible to reduce tension and avoid destructive conflicts. If we suppress or marginalise a particular perspective, we risk adding to the tension and escalating conflict.

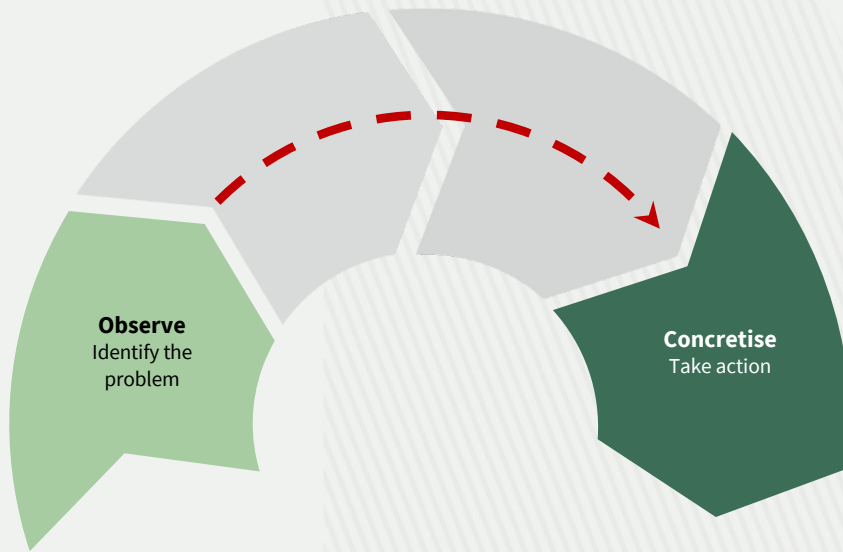
It is essential to create safety for the group around the expression of the “no” – this applies both with respect to the person or group expressing it and to those in the majority. We will address this process under the heading tools and methods.

You can read more about this principle in Myrna Lewis’s book: *Inside the No*

## We are wired to find solutions to problems

It is very common to respond to a problem by looking for solutions. The more stressed we are, the more likely it is that this will be how we deal with our challenges.

Making rushed or simplified decisions is never wise if these challenges are complex or involve tension.

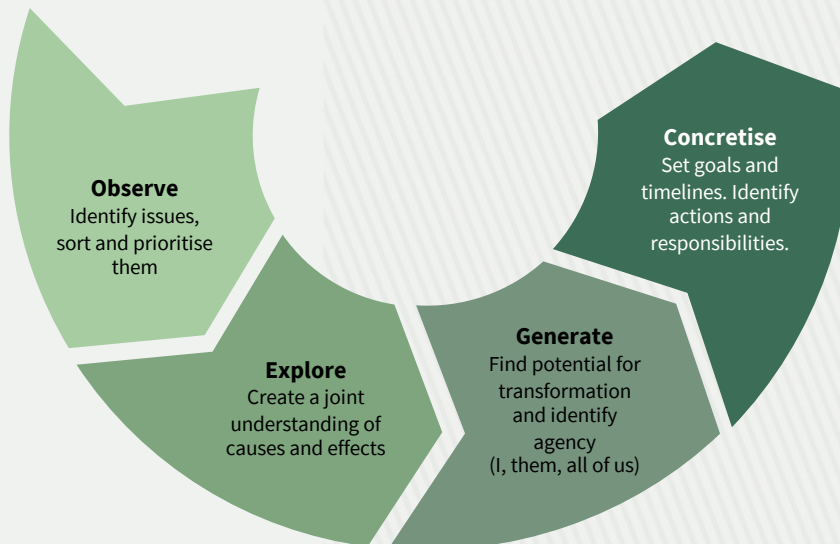


Our advice in such situations is to pause one's reaction. On the next page, we suggest a way of thinking and acting as an alternative to jumping straight to concrete action.

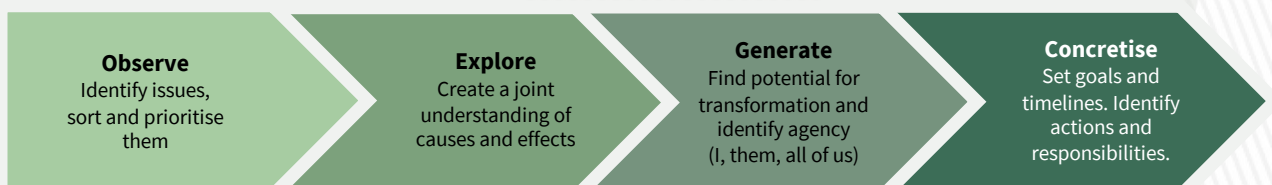
## A dialogic way of dealing with conflicts

Instead of quickly moving from what we observe to making decisions, we propose taking time to explore the causes and effects of what we see and from that understanding, consider the options for improving the situation.

In our experience, this “dialogic” way of thinking produces results that are more sustainable, whether dealing with a complex or conflictual issue. This way of thinking can be used in single conversations, as a guide to have a dialogue with several people or as a way of designing a longer process.



For those who prefer straight lines, here is an alternative. You may however have to keep in mind that the process might loop several times during a conversation or process.



## Local Dialogue Forums

Dialogues is responsible for an ongoing project to establish Local Dialogue Forums for dealing with the conflict surrounding large carnivores in Sweden. This is both a complex and conflictual issue, particularly when it involves wolves. Two of these forums will be focused on national parks where wolves occur. It also involves farmers and local inhabitants who are neighbours to these protected areas.

We use the dialogic process described on the previous page to plan and conduct local stakeholders' meetings.

<https://www.cnrd.se/rovdjursdialog/> (Swedish language)



# Exploring the issue of Trust

*Using the logic described, we explored the issue of trust between park managers and farmers.*

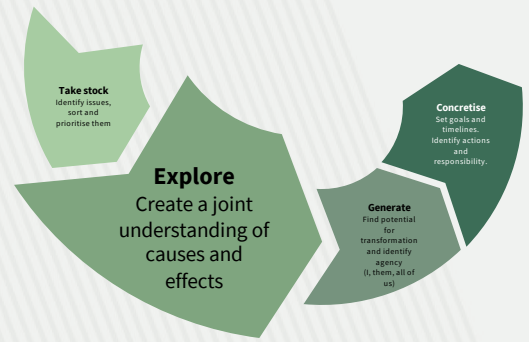
## Step 1: What do we observe?

- What is happening? What do you notice?
- How does mistrust manifest?
- What does each side say about the other?



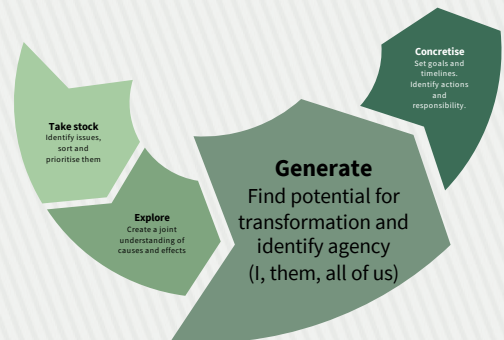
## Step 2: Causes and effects

- What are the causes of the lack of trust?
- What are the causes of the causes?
- How does this affect relationships?
- How does it affect our goals?
- How does it affect us?



## Step 3: Potential for change

- What is possible, given the causes and effects we have identified?
- Are there any synergies or common interests?
- What is needed to restore the trust?



## Step 4: Action and Responsibility

What responsibility can I take?

What does somebody else (who?) need to do?

What can we do together?



Some references you might want to explore.

- *Elements of Transformative Dialogue: A website we created as part of the LiFT project): <https://lift.dialogues.se/>*
- *The Centre for Natural Resource Dialogue: An initiative to create an independent organisation for the facilitation and mediation of environmental conflicts (still in its infancy): <https://www.cnrds.se/home/>*
- *Toolkit: Supporting establishment of regional/local platforms on large carnivores: <https://www.cnrds.se/lcp-toolkit/>*
- *The Environmental Mediation Initiative. Some materials you may find interesting. <https://dialogues.se/emi/>*

Thank you!

*Thank you for your active and enthusiastic participation.*

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