

Left-Hand Column Case

Summary: This tool allows you to reflect on difficult conversations by charting what was said versus what someone was thinking or feeling. Based on an excerpt from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.

Materials:

- Paper
- Pen

Instructions:

- 1. Choose a problem.**
 - Have everyone in your group select a difficult problem you've been involved with in the last month or so, the kind of tough, interpersonal difficulty that many of us try to ignore. Someone might feel frustrated that they can't reach an agreement with close associates, or that someone else on a team isn't pulling their weight.
 - Give everyone 5 minutes to sketch out a description of the problem.
- 2. Right-hand column (what was said).**
 - Have everyone recall a frustrating conversation they had over this situation. If you can't immediately think of a specific conversation, try to imagine the conversation that you would have if you brought the problem up.
 - Then have everyone take several pieces of paper and draw a line down the center.
 - In the right-hand column, everyone should write out the dialogue that actually occurred or write the dialogue you're pretty sure would occur if you were to raise this issue. The dialogue may go on for several pages. Leave the left-hand column blank until you're finished.
- 3. Left-hand column (what you were thinking).**
 - Now in the left-hand column, write out what you were thinking and feeling, but not saying.
- 4. Paired Reflection: Using your left-hand column as a resource.**
 - Put participants in pairs, and have them talk through the scenario with someone else. For the person who described the case, take a step back, and look at your left-hand column case as if you were someone else. For the coach, consider some of the following questions:
 - What has really led me to think and feel this way?
 - What was your intention? What were you trying to accomplish?
 - Did you achieve the results you intended?
 - How might your comments have contributed to the difficulties?
 - Why didn't you say what was in your left-hand column?
 - What assumptions are you making about the other person or people?

- What were the costs of operating this way? What were the payoffs?
- What prevented you from acting differently?
- How can you use your left-hand column as a resource to improve your communications?
- Start rewriting the previous conversation as you might have held it. How could your right-hand column (what you said) bring some of your important left-hand column thinking to the surface? How could you have revealed your thoughts in a way that would contribute to the situation turning out the way you wanted? What could you have said that would effectively inquire into the other person's left-hand column?
- Have the coach and discussant switch roles.

5. Share with others.

- Have people in your group pair up and talk about what they've learned together. No one is required to use specifics, name names, or share anything that they feel is too private. Share what you learned by doing this exercise.