Conflict the Compassionate Way: Techniques for Managing Emotions and Conflict

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Abstract

This paper discusses emotions and their place as fundamental components of our lives as human beings. Hence, the needs emotions drive, the need to share and the need to make meaning (i.e. the need to resolve existential and spiritual angst) are also fundamental. Based on this intrinsic aspect of emotions and the equally intrinsic nature of these needs, and the impact emotions have on workplace performance through goal focus and goal achievement, this paper advocates that techniques for managing emotions are crucial workplace behaviours. The paper then proposes models of technical skills that can be utilised for managing emotions which are also relevant to conflict management on the basis that conflict is an emotions triggering event.

These techniques are crucial in terms of workplace performance alone. They are moral imperatives in a society that values human health and well-being and demonstrate compassion and caring when used as conflict management tools.

Human Beings and Emotions

Human beings are complex mixtures of affect, cognition and physiology (Härtel, C.E.J., Kibby, L. & Pizer, M. 2003), arguably as complex as the complex mixture of emotions and feelings they experience (Izard, 1977, 1993). Refuting this is to deny what, and who, we are as human beings (Härtel, C.E.J., Kibby, L. & Pizer, M. 2003). Furthermore, to maintain health and well-being, human beings need to express their emotions (Spiegel, 1999) a proposition well supported by research such as the identified reduction in health problems from emotion sharing (Pennebaker, 1988 & 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker et al., 1988) and the other benefits that can be attained by sharing emotions (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead & Rimé, 2000; Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker, Zeck & Rimé, 2003; Rimé et al., 1998). Likewise, "Well-functioning people generally are good at reality testing yet manage at the same time to minimise emotional distress and maximise positive outlook" (Lazarus (1991, p.168). Hence, emotions are inseparable, inexorable enactments of our human nature and, as such, cannot be separated from our workplace lives.

Emotions and the Workplace

Abraham (1999), Williams et al. (1999), Mumby and Putnam (1992), Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998) clearly argue that emotions are inextricable from organisational life. This contention is supported by research into Affective Events

Theory (Fisher, Ashkanasy & Härtel, 2001; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and evidence that emotional dissonance increases intentions to turnover (Abraham, 1999). Likewise, the intention to undertake acts of corporate citizenship reduces with a reduction in positive affect (Williams & Shiaw, 1999).

Emotions also have a direct effect on performance through goal associated action Kahn (1992, 1995, 1998). Emotions also directly impact the ability to conduct rational thinking because, "..the intensity of an emotion reaction restricts the amount of attention that can be given to subsequent thinking activities" (Stein & Devine, 1991, p.320). Hence, if thinking is important in the workplace, then also is the management of emotions that can diminish that thinking capability.

The low level of competency around managing emotions dictates that techniques for managing emotions ought provided so that emotions are not driven underground in organisational life (Härtel, C.E.J., Kibby, L. & Pizer, M. 2003). On the contrary, by actively engaging with emotions as proposed above, we can build health and well-being whilst also building organisational social cohesion through the social function that emotions perform (Härtel, C.E.J., Kibby, L. & Pizer, M. 2003; Luminet et al., 2000; Pennebaker et al., 2003; Rimé et al., 1998).

To attain the benefits proposed, and diminish the harm that can result when emotions are not managed, workplaces need specific emotions management tools. These tools evolve from the nature of emotions themselves.
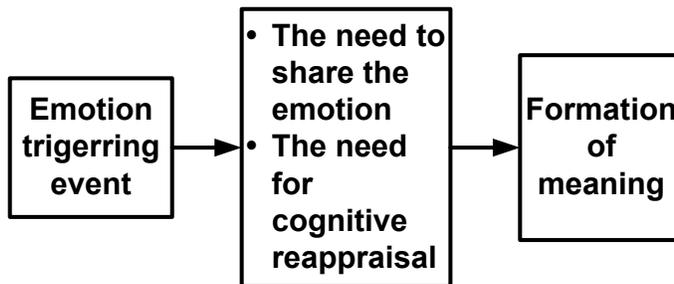

Emotions

Emotions are "...complex, structured phenomena…They are affective responses to what happens in the environment and cognitive representations of the event's meaning for the individual" (Frijda and Mesquita's (1994, p.51). Hence, emotions are

responses to events. These responses drive a need to find others (Schachter, 1959) and share information (Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot & Boca, 1991; Rimé, Noël & Philippot, 1991; Rimé, Philippot, Mesquita & Boca, 1992; Rimé & Zech, 2001) so that there is cognitive processing (Luminet et al., 2000, Martin & Tesser, 1989) that can facilitate the formation of meaning (Rimé et al., 1998). This need exists across cultures (Rimé & Zech, 2001) and is therefore relevant to all workplaces and peoples.

Figure 1 below depicts the emotion triggering event and the need to share.

Figure 1. Emotion Triggering Event, the need to Share and the Formation of Meaning

By incorporating Brown's (1976) proposition of a relationship between affect and cognition, the following model evolves.

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Figure 2 – Depiction of Emotions Triggering event, Need to share, Affect, Cognition and Making Meaning
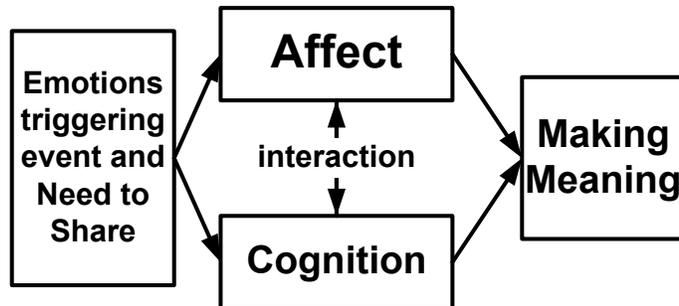
The model proposed in Figure 2 above incorporates emotions and the cognitive activity they generate (Luminet et al., 2000; Martin & Tesser, 1989; Rimè, 1999) and the notion that sharing "...should elicit a mental 'working through' process aimed at either the restoration of beliefs or at finding meaning in the event" (Rimè et al., 1998, p.177) as does the need to share (Rimé et al 1998). In summary, emotions generate a need to share that enables cognitive review (Luminet et al 2000) which, in the best case, facilitates the making of meaning (Rimé et al 1998).

According to Frankl (Frankl, 1955, 1963, 1969, 1992) meaning is fundamental to human life and at the crux of our humanity. Failure to resolve meaning results in existential angst. Thus, emotions, which trigger existential angst. must be managed so that meaning is formed. To do less is, at best, to prevent the development of well-being and, at worst, to collude with harm.

How does conflict fit into this picture? The answer is simple. This paper contends that conflict is an emotions triggering event and that negative emotions surrounding conflict need to be managed to avoid the development of a negative emotional environment that is associated with negative emotions (Hatfield, Cacioppo

and Rapson, 1994 and Joiner, 1994). Managing the emotions associated with conflict will, through effective emotions management, diminish the harm and enable the health associated with emotions management as described above. Effective techniques that will achieve these aims are now addressed in this paper.

Techniques for Responding to Emotions

Yeoman's (1976) contends that Perls' (1969a, 1969b, 1971) and Assiogoli (1971, 1973) offer sound models for integrating affect and cognition but fails to provide specific techniques of methods for such. So, where is the answer to be found? This paper proposes the a synthesis of the humanistic techniques of Rogers (1961, 1966, 1969), Ellis (1973, 1977, 1996) and Frankl (1963, 1967). These techniques, as described below, grew from many years of counseling practice and are consistent with Language and Thought associates proposed by Vygotsky (1971) and Freire (1972 & 1985) and the Langauage, Emotion, Thought (LET) framework espoused in Kibby, L. & Härtel, C. E. J. (2002). The response models are:

- Empathic-Reflective-Action Based (ERA, see also Kibby, L. 2002; Kibby, L. & Härtel, C. E. J. 2002; Kibby, L. & Härtel, C. E. J. 2003; Kibby, L., Härtel, C.E.J. & Hsu, A. 2004a & Kibby, L. & Härtel, C.E.J. 2004b)

- Emotions, Belief, Behavior (EBB)

- Affect, Perception, Testing (APT)

- Emotion, Thought, Action (ETA)

- Emotion, Values, Action (EVA).

The first Rogerian type stage (see Rogers 1961, 1966) means labeling the emotion being expressed thus enabling the affect-cognition association through language

according to the LET Model (Kibby, L. & Härtel, C. E. J. (2002). The second stage akin to Ellis's (see Ellis 1973, 1977, 1996) approach of challenging belief systems, enables belief review. The third stage links cognitive review and goals to values which accords with Frankl's (1955, 1963 & 1969) contention that meaning is attained through values exploration.

"In each phase of the interaction, word selection utilized by the person responding to the emotional expression of another, is based on the notion that language contained affective and cognitive components and therefore should be kept to a minimum to avoid applying any affective or cognitive connotations external to that of the speaker. In this regard, word usage in the response techniques was deemed as:

- the minimum needed in order to facilitate the relevant phase of the narrative

- the minimum needed in order to ensure that the narrative continued

- the maximum that ought be used in order to avoid affective or cognitive connotations external to the speaker

- the maximum that ought to be used in order to ensure that the speaker controlled the narrative." (Kibby 2004, p 156).

The following word structures evolved:

- "Empathic-Reflective-Action Based (ERA) using the words "You feel.....because you want to...."

- Emotions, Belief, Behavior (EBB) using the words "You feel.....because you believe that...."

- Affect, Perception, Testing (APT) using the words "You feel.....because you perceive that...."

- Emotion, Thought, Action (ETA) using the words "You feel.....because you believe that you should..."

- Emotion, Values, Action (EVA) using the words "You feel.....because you value...." (Kiby, 2004, pp 157)

These interaction techniques are depicted in the figures below modified from Kibby (Kibby 2004, pp159-164).

Figure 3a: The ERA model depicting the Affective-Cognitive- Values Phases

Affective Phase called Empathic

Cognitive Phase called Reflective
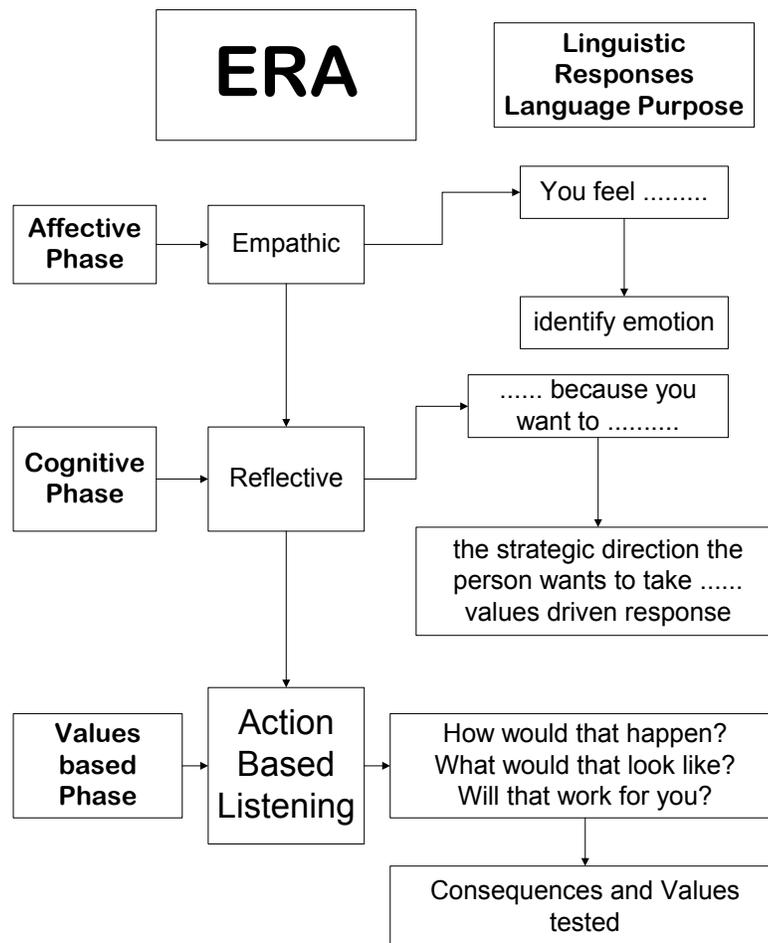
Values based Phase called Action Based Listening

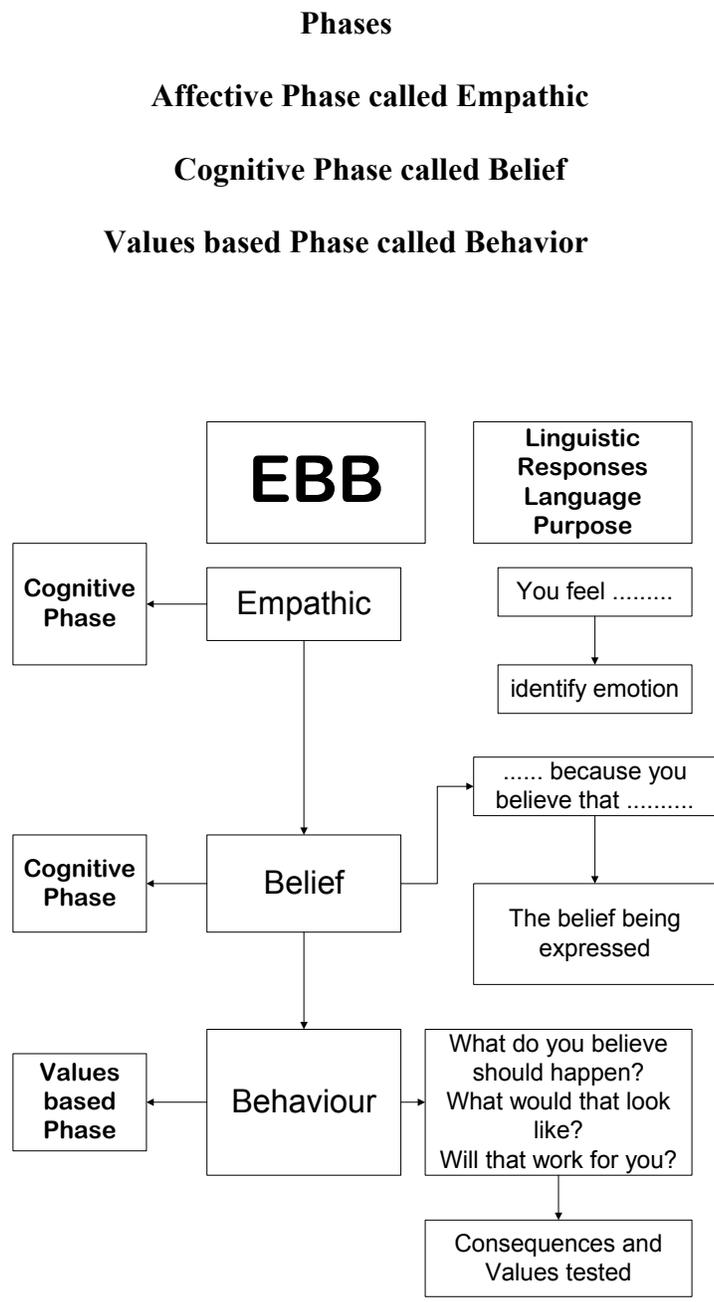**Figure 3b: The EBB model depicting the Affective-Cognitive-Values based**

Phases

Affective Phase called Empathic

Cognitive Phase called Belief

Values based Phase called Behavior

Figure 3c: The APT model depicting the Affective-Cognitive-Values based

Phases

Affective Phase called Affect State

Cognitive Phase called Perception

Values based Phase called Testing

Figure 3d: The ETA model depicting the Affective-Cognitive-Values based

Phases

Affective Phase called Empathic

Cognitive Phase called Thoughts

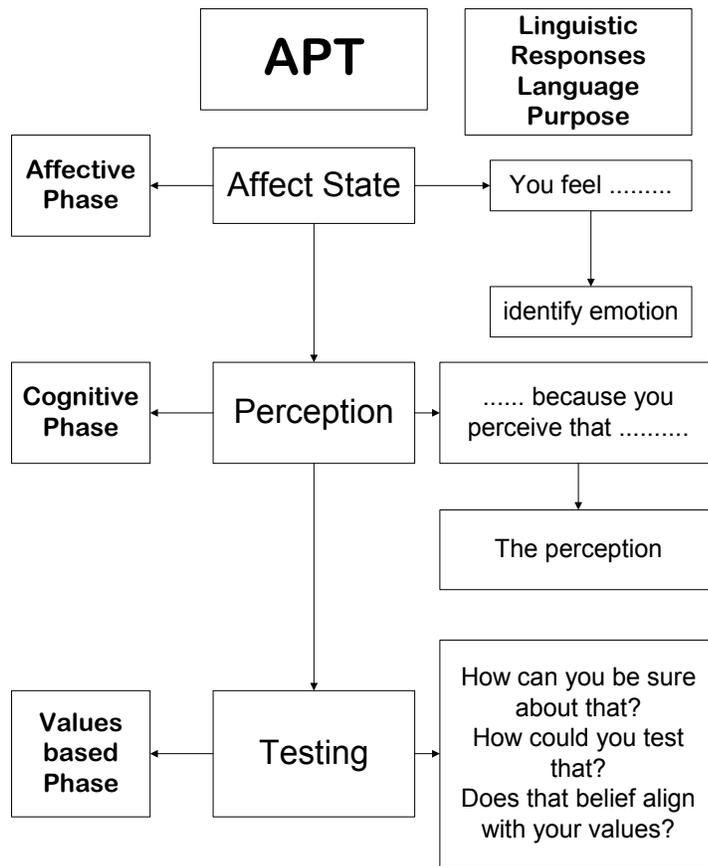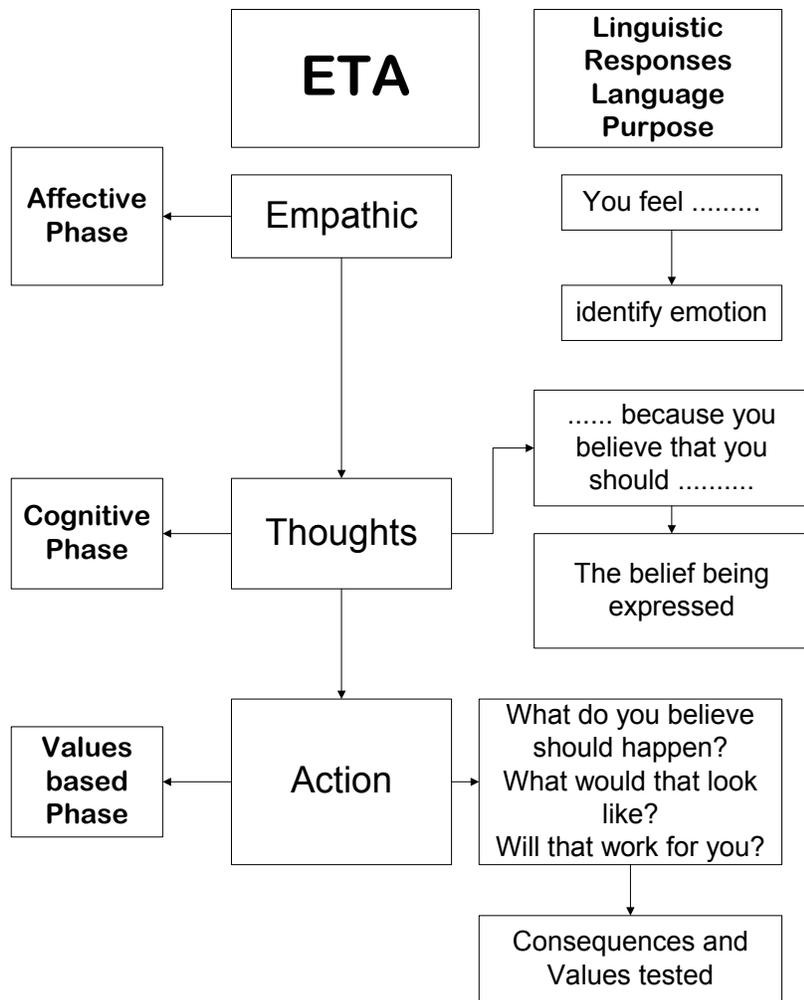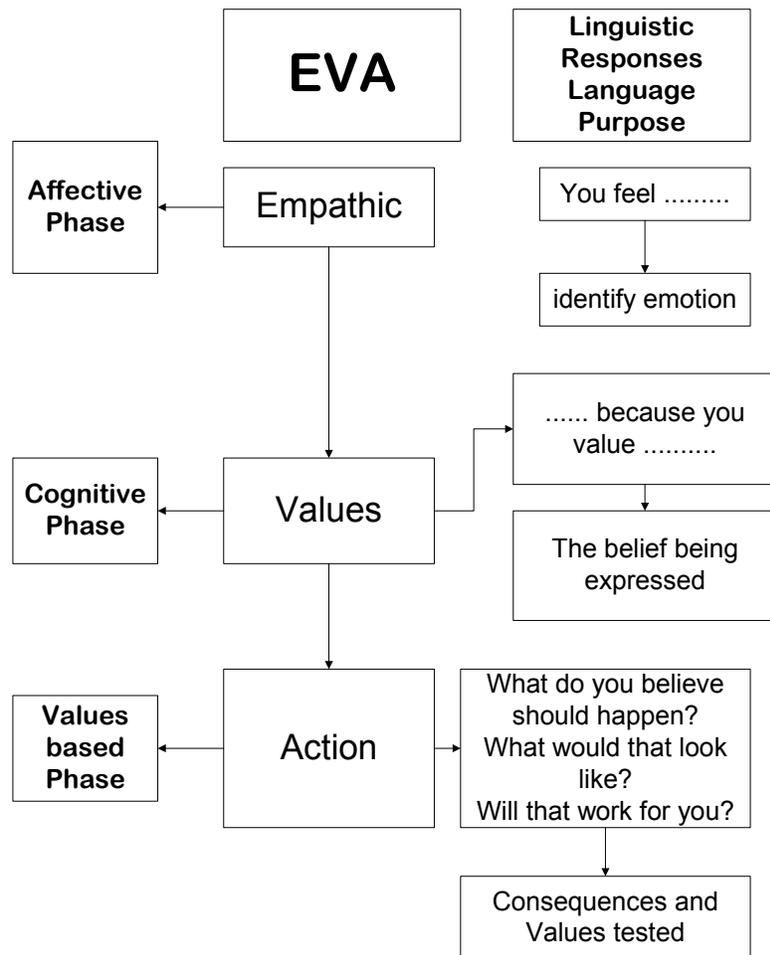**Values based Phase called Action**

Figure 3e: **The EVA model depicting the Affective-Cognitive-Values based Phases**

Affective Phase called Empathic

Cognitive Phase called Values

Values based Phase called Action

	EVA	Linguistic Responses Language Purpose
Affective Phase	Empathic	You feel .... → identify emotion
Cognitive Phase	Values	...... because you value .... → The belief being expressed
Values based Phase	Action	What do you believe should happen? What would that look like? Will that work for you? → Consequences and Values tested

Summary – Coping with Emotions the Compassionate Way

It is contended that the techniques above fulfill two fundamental human needs associated with the emotions of conflict, the need to share and the need to make meaning. At a purely business level, fulfillment of these needs can enable social cohesion, reduce the impact of negative emotions and diminish cognitive distraction in the workplace which is associated with emotions. This in turn can enable better performance and goal focus. More importantly though, managing emotions using these techniques can improve workplace health, an industrial health and safety imperative. Finally, existential angst is a human call for help which is associated with addictive behaviours (see Crumbagh, J.C. 1968 and Crumbagh, J.C. & Carr, G.L. 1979) and so responding to emotions as described above is an act of human compassion and so a moral obligation.

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