

## Dealing With Dilemmas In Your Personal Life

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### Abstract

Our lives can be quite complex. We take on many roles as parents, spouses, siblings, children, friends, bosses – to name a few – each played with their own set of beliefs and needs. Every day brings unpredictable demands that can sometimes become overwhelming to manage. We are faced with making decisions and ethical choices for events that are often “gray” in nature. Furthermore, those we interact with bring their own set of beliefs into the mix. Considering the variety of factors involved in a given situation, it is inevitable that dilemmas frequently occur.

The degree to which we are able to quickly recognize dilemmatic situations and resolve them without compromising important needs can have a large impact on the quality of our lives. An effective way to consistently deal with dilemmas, would not only give us the capability to resolve serious problems, it would facilitate communication and fulfillment in our relationships.

It is, therefore, practical to provide education and training for dealing with dilemmas to improve the management of our daily lives; with that establish the importance of accountability for not compromising the important needs of all who are involved in the dilemma.

In this article we explore the nature of dilemmas and provide actionable advice that individuals and groups can use to improve their ability to recognize and resolve dilemmas in an effective manner.

### Introduction

We encounter many significant dilemmas in our everyday personal life, with our families, friends, and even within ourselves. Dilemmatic situations can happen in familiar surroundings or in other social environments.

Here are a couple of examples:

1. Work vs. family

*How can I put in the hours needed to be successful at work, while at the same time providing quality time with my family?*

Many people find themselves putting in long hours at the office to accommodate the needs of their boss, customer, and/or their own career. With the finite hours of a day, less time is spent at home with family, often putting a strain on life at home.

2. Security

*Do I give up my time / safety / comfort to help others?*

When people ask for help, we want to be able to accommodate them. Yet, there are times when we are caught in a dilemma because providing help will greatly affect our personal safety, time, comfort level, etc.

3. Personal risk

*Should I risk what I have to allow myself to grow?*

On the one hand, having a steady income that your current job provides makes it easy to live a life you are accustomed to. On the other hand, there are other areas that you would like to pursue that your job does not fulfill, but you know there will be a large risk to your livelihood if you decide to do so.

4. Our effect on others

*Am I giving the right advice?*

You want to give your friends and family guidance when warranted, but it is hard to know at times if it is the best thing to do and if it's the right advice. How much of your own beliefs and values are you entitled to impose upon them?

5. Others beliefs imposed upon you

*If my family wants me to do something that is not what I would choose for myself, how can I do both?*

If due to religious beliefs your family wants you to get married before you live together with your fiancée, but you do not want to wait. You do not want to disrespect your family and their values, but you also want to do what is right for you.

Dilemmas are prevalent throughout our daily lives and there are countless situations where and how they can occur. If others act in seemingly contradictory ways to ours, it can be seen as a challenge to our beliefs and disregard for our feelings. It will therefore be easy to react emotionally to such challenges, rather than taking the time to analyze the issue with logic and understanding – that is, if we are not provided with tools to deal effectively with dilemmas and taught how to use them, and to even believe that a solution without compromising is possible.

Even when given certain circumstances, we often are not able to predict dilemmatic events from happening. However, we can control how we choose to deal with them, and to what degree we can protect or cushion ourselves from their impact on us.

Being able to recognize problems as dilemmatic situations, and given the environment where it is safe and people are skilled at dealing with dilemmas – will more likely result in a positive outcome where both the needs of the individual and the needs of others are fully satisfied.

To broaden the complications (consequences) of dilemmas is that there is a natural human tendency to resist change – raising issues of the risks needed to bring about the change, and uncertainty of what our lives will be like after the change has been implemented. For these reasons and the fact that there are numerous dilemmas in our daily lives, it can seem like a waste of energy and time to challenge dilemmas, not to mention taking the time to analyze how to recognize and methodically resolve them.

So why find a better way to handle dilemmas? Consider what happens when two people that care for each other – for instance, a husband and wife – have an argument. In many cases frustration and anger fester, they stop listening to each other, and feelings get hurt. Often, it can end in one person compromising on their needs, the other getting and/or doing what they want, and both feeling negative about the outcome. The

relationship suffers from this – the situation became he vs. she because of the problem, rather than he and she working together against the problem. Future dilemmas will likely yield the same results, if they don't know a more effective way to resolve them.

This article was written to provide actionable, practical ways to consistently and confidently approach dilemmas that seriously affect our lives, and doing so without compromising on important personal needs of the individuals involved. It shows you how to recognize a dilemmatic situation, systematically exposing its key components to be able to freely explore solutions that can be more easily realized than during the heat of it. With any tool, the more familiar you are with it, the more proficient you will become using it.

In making the problem the issue and not each other (or yourself), not only will you obtain better control over dilemmas, but will help grow and strengthen your relationships as you work through them.

## The Nature of Dilemmas

Most people have an intuitive understanding of dilemmas. Relatively few people, however, can break it down and describe its elements, its composition or essential nature. Fewer still can go on to talk about the other issues that surround dilemmas – such as the means by which people can detect the existence of dilemmas in everyday situations.

In this section we will take a close look at dilemmas. The material here draws on work done by Goldratt and others in developing the “Theory of Constraints” (TOC).

### 1.1. Overview

Dilemmas are interconnected beliefs about a given situation. Dilemmas do not have a physical manifestation of their own. Individuals with similar beliefs will generally perceive the same set of existing dilemmas.

Lacking a physical manifestation, dilemmas cannot be sensed directly. We cannot see, touch, taste, feel or hear dilemmas. For this reason, we must be prepared to recognize the presence of a dilemma based on its impact on the environment around it.

The beliefs that make up a dilemma can be characterized as being actions, needs or objectives. These entities are linked together by other beliefs (assumptions) about reality. Once these basic components are revealed (identified), we can work systematically on breaking the dilemma.

With this overview we are now prepared to consider more carefully the nature of dilemmas.

### 1.2. Actions

When we sense a dilemma, it is usually because we have discovered that two actions seem to conflict with each other in some way.

Actions sometimes conflict by being opposite in effect:

*Tommy, 9-years old, is being teased at school by a 10-year old bully, and has come home upset. Tommy's father wants him to stand up to the bully, but his mother fears that drawing attention to himself will escalate the teasing and Tommy will become more of a target.*

In this example Tommy's father wants to advise him to "Stand up to the bully," while the mother wants to advise "Do not stand up to the bully."

These actions are opposite in effect and therefore in conflict with each other. One can easily imagine how conflicted and overwhelmed Tommy would feel when receiving these mixed signals as to what action he should take.

Consider also the effect if this dilemmatic situation is allowed to exist for many years<sup>1</sup>. The result will be a family environment that is inconsistent and confusing.

Opposite-in-effect dilemmas are dilemmas where we don't know whether doing more or less of something is the right action.

Actions can also conflict with each other by being mutually exclusive:

*Greg, a new father, wants to be able to spend time at home with his family. He also cares about his job, and is concerned that by not putting in extra hours at the office will give a clear sign to his boss that he is not serious about his career.*

In this example, Greg is torn between two actions: "Work extra hours at the office" and "Don't work extra hours at the office."

To summarize, an important part of any dilemma is that there are two<sup>2</sup> actions perceived to be in direct conflict with each other.

### 1.3. Needs

The actions present in any dilemma are always related to needs of some kind. How do these needs arise?

Often it is natural for people to try to conserve their own energy. They want to ensure that their "energy investments" will serve them in some way. Thus, when people take action, it is almost always to meet or protect one or more needs important to them.

This reality applies to groups of individuals as well. In general, groups act to ensure that the needs of the group will be met or protected.

From this we see that the actions inherent in every dilemma are connected to needs. More specifically, when a person or group is advocating that a certain action be taken or continued we can infer that they are doing so in order to meet or protect needs important to them.

Think about our example from section 1.2:

*Tommy, 9-years old, is being teased at school by a 10-year old bully, and has come home upset. Tommy's father wants him to stand up to the bully, but his mother fears that by drawing attention to himself, it will exasperate the problem and Tommy will become more of a target.*

One of the actions in this scenario is to advise, "Stand up to the bully." What need is met or protected by this course of action? A reasonable answer would be to, "Empower Tommy to protect himself."

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<sup>1</sup> And this is extremely likely. The presence of a dilemma has to be inferred from its effect on the surrounding environment. But most people have not been trained to recognize dilemmatic situations and to deal with them effectively. Thus, problems such as this one can live on for years without ever being addressed head-on.

<sup>2</sup> In mutual-exclusivity dilemmas there can be any number of possible actions. For simplicity we address only the most common (two alternative) case in this article.

The other action in this scenario is, “Don’t stand up to the bully.” What need does this meet or protect? In this case, the need could be stated as, “Keep Tommy from becoming more of a target.”

To summarize, associated with every action is a need that the action is intended to meet or protect.

#### 1.4. Common Objectives

In any true dilemma there is always a common objective that is met or protected when and only when all of the needs inherent in the dilemma are also met or protected.

For example, there’s a couple presented with the common issue of what to do with their money. The husband wants to take some action in order meet a need that is important to him, while the wife wants to take a conflicting action in order to meet a different need that is important to her.

If the situation described represents a true dilemma for them, then neither will just march ahead and implement their preferred action. Instead they will meet and try to find some acceptable compromise<sup>3</sup>.

What prevents each side from going ahead and implementing their own preferred action to do what serves them?

What blocks them from taking these destructive actions is the presence of a *common objective*. People or groups that are part of the same system always have a common objective – even if they fail to recognize it.

In a true dilemma there is always a common objective – a goal that is dependent on the needs of both “sides” of the dilemma. That is, both of the needs have to be met if the common objective is to be achieved.

For example, consider the following dilemma:

*Dan and Shawn are brothers, and their elderly father has been going through some health problems. It is to the point where discussions have taken place between the two brothers about whether to put their father into an assisted living facility.*

*Dan does not want to raise the question to their father. He feels it will threaten his sense of independence, competence, and privacy and would put a wedge between the relationships with their father. Dan fears there it will cause feelings of guilt and embarrassment, since if anyone should take care of their father, it should be him and his brother.*

*Shawn, on the other hand, believes discussing the issue with their father will be healthy and will bring up options for their father to think about. It will give him confidence to have control over his decisions, and a positive outlook associated with healthful living. Finding the right place could be seen as a good move, providing security and safety when needed, as well as extra companionship for him.*

What is the common objective in this example? What do both Dan and Shawn want to achieve?

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<sup>3</sup> This is a critical point. When the needs are legitimate and critical to the relationship, the idea that either one should be compromised is wrong. But this is the inevitable result when people don’t know how to avoid compromising.

In this example, both Dan and Shawn are trying to “Do what’s best for their father.” Dan is trying to do what he thinks is best by allowing their father to keep his independence, while Shawn is trying to do what he thinks is best by allowing their father to be well cared for.

So both Dan and Shawn are trying to ensure that two different legitimate needs are being met. Unfortunately, the actions they believe to be taken to meet these needs are in conflict<sup>4</sup>.

It is important to note that there is no conflict between the needs themselves. Both needs are legitimate and necessary. It is the actions that are in conflict. If Dan and Shawn could find an alternative action to meet their need that does not conflict with the other action, the dilemma would cease to exist.

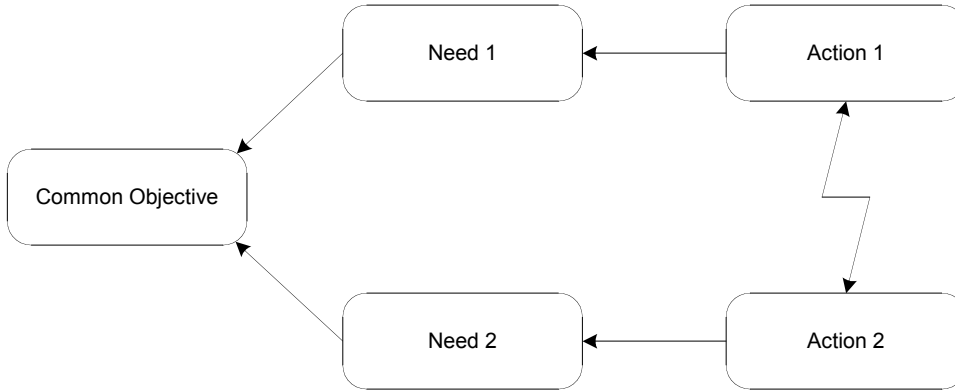
At this point we have proposed that dilemmas consist of actions, needs, and a common objective. In the following section we present a diagrammatic representation of a dilemma.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Theory of Constraints (TOC) body of knowledge, dilemmas are called “conflicts” for exactly this reason. But the choice of terminology is poor. People not intimately familiar with TOC assume that a conflict is an argument of some kind. While TOC conflicts often cause people to argue, TOC conflicts are not arguments.

### 1.5. Diagramming Dilemmas

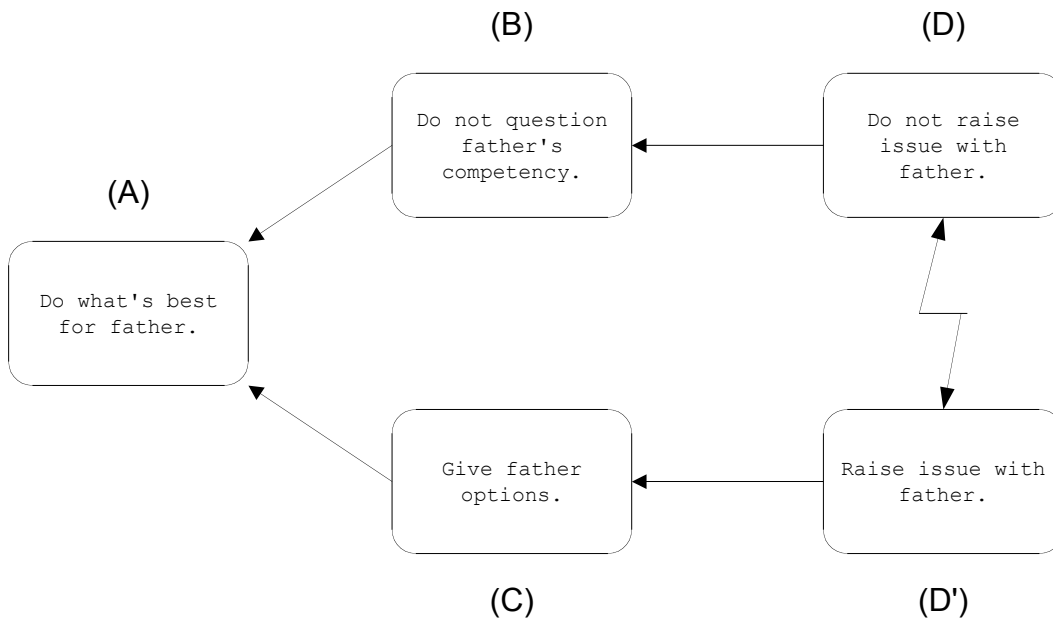
Figure 1 illustrates a graphical representation of a dilemma:



**Figure 1: General Structure of a Dilemma**

Of note in this diagram are the arrows connecting various entities. These arrows are arrows of “implied logical necessity.” That is, by drawing the arrows we are signaling our belief that the source entity must exist in order for the destination entity to also exist. The jagged arrow between the actions is meant to indicate that the actions are seen as being in conflict with each other.

Diagramming an actual dilemma includes describing the actions, needs and common objective specific to the dilemma. Figure 2 illustrates the dilemma Dan and Shawn faced regarding the issue of a care facility for their father:



**Figure 2: Care Facility Dilemma**

In this figure, the arrow connecting action (D) with need (B) indicates that Dan believes that in order to not question their father's competency they should not bring up the issue of an assisted living facility for him. In like manner, the arrow connecting action (D') with need (C) indicates that Shawn believes that in order to have their father understand his options for his future, they must raise the issue with their father.

Each arrow on a dilemma diagram represents a belief. The straight arrows represent beliefs of the form "In order to have ...We must...." The single jagged arrow (the "conflict arrow") represents the belief that "Action... is in direct conflict with action...."

The dilemma exists – in the minds of the people captured by it – only as long as they believe that these beliefs are valid. In order for them to resolve the dilemma they will need to convince themselves that at least one of their beliefs (one of the arrows) is invalid.

If we are to show that a given belief is invalid, we need to explore the assumptions behind it and find at least one that is invalid or that could be made invalid by an additional action<sup>5</sup> that we will take.

For example, if we were to ask why not raising the issue with their father is necessary in order to avoid questioning his competence, we would likely expose<sup>6</sup> several assumptions such as:

1. Raising the issue of a care facility will actually be offensive or embarrassing to their father.
2. Raising the issue will result in embarrassing Dan.
3. Their father has not already given the possibility of assisted care some thought.
4. A facility would be a negative move for him.
5. The father would not welcome an open, frank discussion of this issue.

Diagramming dilemmas and the importance of exposing and systematically exploring assumptions will be discussed in more detail when we consider what it means to resolve a dilemma in an effective manner.

## 1.6. Expressing Dilemmas in Written Form

Dilemmas can be expressed in words as well as diagrams. Consider again the dilemma represented by Figure 2. This dilemma could be written in this form:

*"Our objective is to do what is best for father.*

*In order to do what is best for father, we must not question his competency. In order to not question his competency, we must not raise the issue of an assisted living care facility.*

*On the other hand, in order to do what is best for father, we must also give father some options. In order to give him some options, we must raise the issue with him.*

<sup>5</sup> TOC refers to these actions as "injections." In this article, we generally refer to them as "ideas for resolving the dilemma" or simply as "ideas."

<sup>6</sup> In TOC this process is called "surfacing" assumptions. To surface an assumption is to make it an explicit part of the problem statement. In contrast, submerged assumptions are the assumptions that are not an explicit part of the problem statement and the ones on which, presumably, everyone agrees.

*The dilemma is clear. We need to both raise and not raise the issue, and we can't do both."*

Expressing a dilemma in written form paves the way for verbalizing it – to say it aloud. Verbalizing a dilemma is an excellent way to find any minor errors in how the dilemma is stated. In general, it is necessary to “speak it and tweak it” a few times until the dilemma “sounds right” or “rings true” for the people captured by it.

## Dealing With Dilemmas

In dealing effectively with dilemmas, individuals must be able to:

1. Recognize dilemmas.
2. Assess dilemmas.
3. Clarify dilemmas.
4. Resolve dilemmas without compromising.

We consider these issues in the following sections.

### 1.7. Recognizing Dilemmas

As stated previously, dilemmas cannot be sensed directly. They can be likened to cosmological Black Holes – we can't see them but we must infer that they are present based on what we can observe about the environment around them. In this section we discuss the “key indicators” that usually reveal the presence of a dilemma.

Training people to spot these key indicators improves their ability to recognize dilemmas in real life.

#### i. “I Have a Problem”

“Problems” are the most immediate and direct indicators of dilemmas. When someone says, “I have a problem” what s/he is really saying is, “I have a dilemma.” Problems are situations where we recognize that needs are threatened.

A small problem is a dilemma that doesn't jeopardize important needs. A large problem is a dilemma that creates great risk to our most important needs.

So one way to recognize dilemmas is to be open to receiving evidence of problems.

#### ii. Stagnation

When actions are in conflict, people often refrain from taking any action until the conflict is eliminated or out of hand.

Consider Tommy's parents dilemma when he came home upset: “In order to gain confidence, Tommy must stand up to the bully. On the other hand, in order to avoid being a target, Tommy must not stand up to the bully.” This dilemma results in stagnation for his parents until it is resolved.

#### iii. Oscillation Between Actions

Sometimes a dilemma causes people to oscillate, or flip-flop, between the two actions of the dilemma, usually the result of a change in the **relative importance of the needs**.

For example, a common ethical dilemma for individuals occurs where the need to “Be compassionate” sometimes outweighs the need to “Be lawful.” So, when you are faced with a situation where you see a person down on his luck lifting a candy bar from the

local grocery store, you may decide to refrain on saying anything. However, in a more serious situation (e.g., lives were threatened, etc.), it may be more apparent to you to speak up.

Here, the relative importance of the need changed, and the preferred actions thus changed.

#### **iv. “Compromise Speak”**

Use of the word “balance” (or “trade-off”) is a strong indicator of an underlying dilemma.

For example, whenever someone uses the word “balance” as in “We need to balance the time I spend at work and the time I spend at home,” it is virtually certain that (1) there is an underlying dilemma and (2) they have already concluded that the best way to solve it is by compromising. That is, they don’t believe there is a way to do both – to spend adequate time at both.

This is wrong. When the needs inherent in a dilemma are important the first course of action should not be to seek an acceptable compromise. The first course of action should be to recognize the situation as a dilemma and to begin the process (outlined later in this paper) for resolving it without compromising.

#### **v. Arguments Between People or Groups**

When people sense that their important needs are at risk they usually do all they can to ensure their needs will be met. Dilemmas are situations where needs are at risk. Therefore, when we recognize that people are arguing we should expect there is a dilemma causing them to argue.

For example, consider again the dilemma with Dan and Shawn about their father. Because the actions each want to take are mutually exclusive and in direct conflict of each other, it can be easy to see how this situation could result in a heated argument. The choice is to try to force or persuade the other to compromise (which could lead to long-term damage to the relationship and probably to both Dan and Shawn), or they could sit down and “work the problem” instead of attacking each other – using common sense and logic over emotion and reaction. In order to do this, however, they must have the necessary skills in recognizing and resolving dilemmas. They must also be motivated to work the problem in this manner.

#### **vi. Denigrating the Actions of Others**

“Why does Fred only talk about himself and never ask others about themselves? Didn’t his mother ever teach him any manners?”

From time to time people take actions that surprise us, inconvenience us, or perhaps cause us to question their competence. This can lead us to denigrate the actions of others.

But most often the real problem is that they are working to meet a need we either have not recognized or a need we consider unimportant.

Whenever you sense that someone is denigrating the actions of others it is a good idea to consider whether the criticism is actually warranted or whether the presence of an underlying dilemma would explain the behavior.

In this case it could be that Fred is trying to meet an important need – such as being proactive in keeping the conversation going, or his idea of courteous is to not have uncomfortable pauses, or he’s being respectful by not asking others to offer private information about themselves. On the other hand, Fred also needs to be aware of the issues raised by his peer – his actions may be misunderstood to be discourteous and self-absorbed.

Can this type of situation be resolved in such a way that ensures all needs will be fully met? Or will the individuals suffer in silence and/or try to find some sort of “acceptable compromise?”

## 1.8. Assessing Dilemmas

Not all dilemmas are serious dilemmas. The perceived importance of the need helps us distinguish the seriousness of the dilemma. Dealing with a dilemma takes time and effort and there aren't enough hours in day to be able to analyze every dilemmatic situation we encounter in this much detail. So, for many of the more clear-cut and simpler dilemmas we encounter, we can either break<sup>7</sup> them entirely in our heads or we can simply accept the consequences of not breaking them.

That being said, we should be assessing the dilemmas we encounter and judging whether they are jeopardizing important needs. In order to do this we need to be able to build dilemmas quickly in our heads and contemplate the needs that are at risk of being compromised.

This begs the question of “How do we know if a given need is important or not?” There are times when individuals can intuitively sense what needs are truly important, but more concretely, it would help to understand the cause and effect relationships that exist within the problem domain. It is then when an individual is prepared to answer the question, “What will be the likely effect of *not* meeting this need?”

## 1.9. Clarifying Dilemmas

Dilemmas must be clarified before real work can begin to resolve them. To clarify a dilemma is to identify the actions, needs, and common objective; then to express them either as a diagram or as precisely worded text.

Clarifying a dilemma is important for several reasons:

1. It allows people to focus on the whole problem instead of just the actions that are in conflict. Being able to see the whole problem instead of just a part of it allows people to search for solutions in a larger problem space.
2. It helps to “buy time” to actually think about the problem. As we ask questions like, “What need is this action intended to protect?” we are clarifying our understanding of the problem space.
3. It helps people recognize that their concerns have been accurately heard. Once they know that their needs have been heard, they are able to move on and actively contribute to the solution of the problem itself.
4. It changes the problem from “me vs. you” or “us vs. them” into “all of us against the problem.” When people recognize that they have a common objective they are more able to focus on the problem itself.

It has been said that “Define a problem precisely and you are half-way to solving it.”

## 1.10. Resolving Dilemmas Without Compromising

Compromising on important needs is always easier than ensuring they will be fully met:

1. It's always easier to agree with someone than to explain why you think otherwise.

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<sup>7</sup> To “break” a dilemma is to resolve it without compromising either need.

2. It's always easier to not act than to act.
3. It's always easier to stay in a bad situation than to try and get out of it.

And so if the goal of an individual is to follow the path of least resistance then constantly compromising on important needs seems quite logical.

But logically, if we are always compromising on important needs, can we ever be really successful?

In reality, if we want outstanding performance from any system we must ensure that important needs of the system are not constantly being compromised.

Ensuring that the important needs of the system are not compromised can be broken down into a two-step process:

1. Identify the dilemmas and determine how they should be resolved.
2. Implement the actions necessary to resolve the dilemma in reality.

A great many of the dilemmas encountered in real life can be completely resolved quite easily. For these dilemmas, implementing the actions necessary to resolve the dilemma in real life is not difficult.

For other dilemmas, however, implementing the actions is difficult. There is nothing surprising about this. We should not allow the fact that doing the right thing is difficult become a justification for doing the wrong thing because it is easy.

Resolving a dilemma that has been diagrammed and clarified is almost a mechanical process. The process is largely one of looking at each arrow (including the conflict arrow) and surfacing (exposing) the assumptions we are making about that arrow. Three to five assumptions per arrow should be surfaced if at all possible.

This will generate quite a few assumptions. These assumptions can be checked to see if any might be challenged. In a list of ten or twenty there will always be at least a few weak assumptions. There may also be some that were valid at one point in time, but which are no longer true.

Weak or invalid assumptions represent an opportunity to break the dilemma – to find a way to resolve it without having to compromise on either need. When this is done the result can be a dramatic “evaporating” of the entire dilemma.

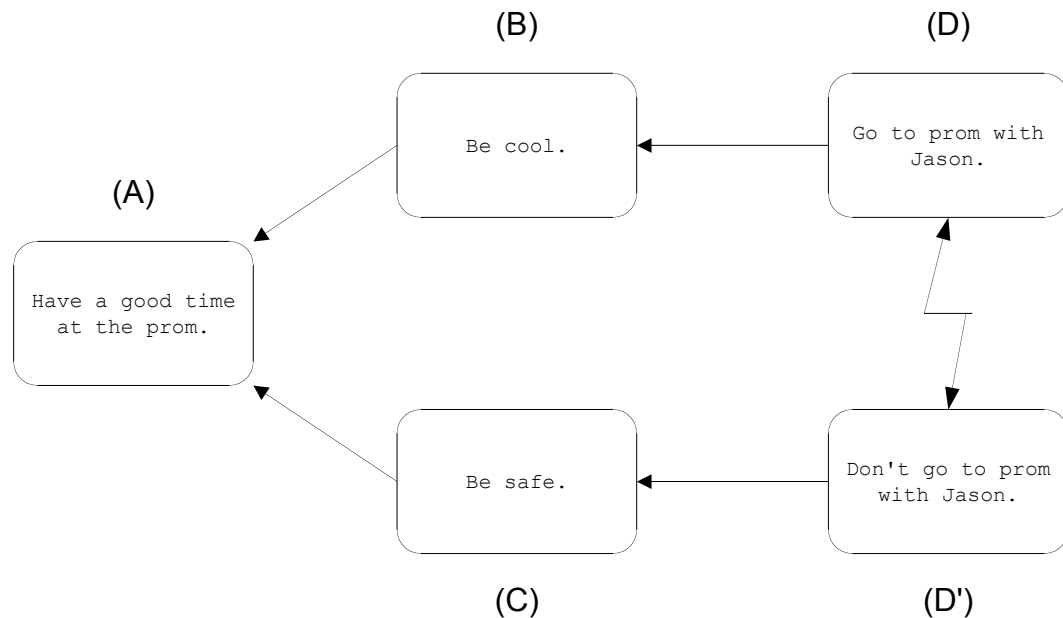
For example, consider the following scenario:

*Ashley told her parents that she wants to go to her 10<sup>th</sup> grade prom with a senior from another school, Jason. Concerned about the implications of their 16-year old going out with an older, 18-year old boy, Ashley's parents forbid that to happen.*

*Shouts, choice words, and a slammed door later, Ashley's parents discussed what had happened. This was supposed to be a happy event for their daughter. Why doesn't she just go with a nice boy her own age from her own school?*

*They realized they were in a dilemma, and that its impact on their lives was serious enough to try to use the process for resolving it.*

*They approached Ashley and asked her to help them clarify and draw out the conflict. Their diagram looked like this:*



*They were now ready to start surfacing assumptions.*

*They were able to come up with a couple for each arrow, but when it came to the C-D' arrow, Ashley's dad surfaced the following assumption: "Jason is not a responsible person."*

*Ashley spoke up, "You don't know him, Dad. He's really nice."*

*After a slight hesitation, Ashley's mom interjected. "What if we call Jason's parents and talk to them about this? We could get a better understanding of Jason, and find out if his parents are on board with this idea."*

*The phone call was made, and eased the minds of both Ashley and Jason's parents about their children's choices.*

Though this example highlighted only one of the possible assumptions this family could have surfaced and challenged, it demonstrates what can happen when people are able to systematically break down a dilemma into its components and think more clearly about the underlying assumptions. Sometimes, when we don't make the effort to understand others and our own needs, we can overlook even the most simplistic solutions. When the assumptions were challenged successfully, Ashley and her parents were able to evaporate the dilemma, without compromising, and with both needs being met.

The example cited is a common outcome when people have been trained to recognize and resolve dilemmas without compromising – and when they are sufficiently motivated to follow the process.

While we sometimes find "silver bullet" solutions to dilemmas it is more common that we find we need two or three ideas to completely resolve a dilemma. While it is satisfying to find a single-idea solution to a dilemma, we should not expect that all dilemmas could be resolved in this way. In the final analysis, what matters is that we avoid compromising on important needs.

It is also important to understand that the ideas for challenging the assumptions are just that – ideas. Ideas have to be implemented in order to actually resolve the dilemma in real life. We must never confuse ideas with solutions.

People often reject the idea that dilemmas can be resolved without compromising important needs. It can be hard to accept. Most of us have learned that there is no free lunch and this approach seems – on the surface – to go against that experience.

The reality is that creating no-compromise solutions does not amount to getting a free lunch:

1. Creating no-compromise solutions is harder than compromising. So we should not be surprised when people advocate compromising.
2. Because the work is mentally challenging and dilemmas are common, there are not enough hours in the day to solve them all. Personal and group energy should be conserved for use on the really important dilemmas.
3. When the ways in which a dilemma could be resolved are identified we still face the challenge of implementing them.

## More on Resolving Dilemmas

The first step in resolving a dilemma is to diagram it. If the dilemma involves more than one person then try to ensure that both sides of the dilemma are represented.

One way to begin is to be clear on the actions that are being taken or proposed. Write each action as a full sentence and check to see if they conflict with each other:

1. Are they opposite in effect?  
For example, is side saying to “Work more hours” and the other arguing to “Work less hours”?
2. Are they mutually exclusive?  
For example, is one action, “Be loyal to your friend” while the other action is, “Be lawful” where it is believed that you cannot be both?

It is important to not try to solve the dilemma at this stage – just work to get clarity on the actions and write them on the diagram.

The next step is to determine the needs that the actions are intended to satisfy or protect. If someone or yourself cannot easily state what need is met or protected by the preferred action, ask them why they want to take that action.

In the relatively rare case where someone cannot give a reason as to why a particular action is needed, it’s best to give him or her some time to think about it. Move on to the other action and try to make progress on eliciting the need that action meets or protects. Then return to the first action and see if progress can be made.

If progress is still difficult, it may be the case that there is no good reason for taking the action. People sometimes get caught in situations where they are unable to back away from a proposed course of action or position, even when they recognize that they can’t defend it logically.

For example, people usually oppose actions that would diminish their power or status in a situation. But it is not acceptable for them to argue against the action simply because of their personal need for status and power. As a result they may get into situations where they have “invented” a seemingly logical reason for not taking the action in question.

If you sense that this may be the case while you are working on a particular dilemma, it is best to perhaps wait and try again a day or two later. The conflict may resolve itself during this time. If it does not and the problem persists then you should consider whether solutions that protect the power and status of the individual(s) in question would be required.

When you have collected the needs, ensure that they are expressed as full sentences and written on the diagram.

Finally, elicit the common objective. Express it as a full sentence and write it on the diagram.

Eliciting the common objective is not difficult. You can ask “Why is meeting both of these needs critical for us? What does meeting these needs do for us?”

When the actions, needs and common objective have been gathered and written on the diagram, read the diagram aloud (verbalize it) and see if it “sounds right.”

Rework the wording as necessary until there is genuine agreement that the diagram really captures the dilemma.

As you read the dilemma people will begin to see new possibilities. This is the time to leverage their creative energies by exposing the assumptions associated with each arrow on the diagram.

Surface assumptions by asking people to focus on a specific arrow and exposing 3 – 5 of the assumptions on which it depends.

The use of “outrageous” language is of great help in exposing assumptions.

For example, one “outrageous” assumption from our prom situation cited earlier might be:

*It is absolutely necessary to be cool to have a good time at the prom.*

This assumption, is just begging to be challenged. The use of outrageous language exploits the very human tendency to want to prove other people wrong.

For many people the most difficult assumptions will be the ones associated with the conflict arrow. But the most powerful solutions to dilemmas are often found by challenging the assumptions associated with this arrow.

For example, let’s assume we are considering a dilemma where the actions are to either “Work more hours” or “Not work more hours.”

People usually see this as a binary decision – either we work more hours or we do not.

But if we explore this in more detail, there are many assumptions behind it:

1. “Hours” are only certain times of the workday.
2. Work would actually take place in those extra work hours.
3. It is important to the company that you work more hours.

And so on. The point here is that even “very clearly binary” decisions always have assumptions associated with them.

When the assumptions associated with each arrow have been exposed the team is asked to identify the assumptions that will need to be overcome in order to resolve the dilemma.

It is sometimes the case that there is one assumption that, when overcome, completely resolves the dilemma. But it is more often the case that two or three assumptions have to be challenged together to completely resolve the dilemma.

At this point the direction in which to go to resolve the dilemma is clear. In most cases there will be significant work required in order to actually implement the solution. We must be careful not to confuse “ideas” with “solutions.”

Doing the process outlined above is not difficult – if people are willing to invest some time and effort. People do this work if we provide them with the necessary information and training, and then hold them responsible for using the process when it is needed. We discuss this further in the next section.

## Summary

Most of us have been taught from an early age that the right way to deal with serious problems is to seek some acceptable compromise. However, constantly compromising important needs does not create quality relationships. Rather, they are created by refusing to compromise on the important needs of yourself and the people around you.

The reality is that we can avoid compromising when the needs are important. To do this people need to be able to recognize dilemmatic situations and then to deal with them effectively.

The following conditions must be established if people are to routinely recognize dilemmatic situations and resolve them effectively:

1. Awareness

The first requirement is that people have a basic understanding of what a dilemma is and that dilemmas can be resolved without compromising when important needs are threatened.

When people lack this understanding they go with what they know – which is to always seek some “acceptable” compromise.

2. Willingness to Act

Resolving dilemmas without compromising is more work than simply compromising. As a result there must be an incentive to induce people to do the necessary work to protect the needs inherent in the dilemma they are facing.

If the willingness to act is not established then people will work to conserve their own energy and will continue compromising the needs of others and themselves.

3. Competence

In order to carry out the process of recognizing and resolving dilemmas people need to be competent in the techniques.

Without competence even the best-intended efforts will not yield results.

All of these conditions can be created in our personal lives.

Education and training provides the necessary awareness and competence.

Providing a willingness to act is also possible. The best course of action is to ensure that people are held accountable for recognizing and resolving dilemmas and that this behavior is rewarded when it occurs. There is no substitute for setting the expectation that serious dilemmas will be identified and resolved according to the methods outlined here and then helping people meet that expectation. With that, we are able to achieve and sustain happiness and fulfillment in our relationships.



## Getting Experienced Help

This article is intended to provide you with an understanding of how dilemmas affect your personal life and relationships and to provide an explanation of what is going on “under the surface.” It is not intended as a complete course on recognizing and resolving dilemmas.

At Common Sense Systems we provide products and services that help individuals and organizations significantly improve their problem-solving abilities.

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