



Meetings of Understanding using the ©Tri-Question Approach/Three Way Shuffle

One of the most effective processes, I and a growing number of Social Care Workers use when conflict arises between two parties is the Meeting of Understanding. This simple process allows two people to hear what the other is truly saying rather than what is perceived to have been said. The following section will explain the practice and experience of using this approach.

What we hear!

If you asked people attending a conference, workshop or team meeting what was it they heard the main speaker say, the chances are that everyone will give you a different version of the same speech. That is because we are tuned to hear what we want to hear depending on our own personal agenda. This becomes more pronounced when people are in conflict leading to misunderstanding and increased conflict. People hear, what is often a negative message even though no negativity has been expressed in that message, this is often referred to as **defensive listening**.

Defensive listening is to hear a general statement and to personalise it. An ex-partner might say, "The children were very tired after staying over with you last week". The 'other' may hear, "You're letting the children stay up too late!" Personalising impersonal statements is a very common form of defensive listening.

A separated couple, where one or both are still carrying the hurt from the actions of the other, will continue to battle against each other, in some cases for many years after and even when both parties have 'moved on' to have established strong relationships with other people. Social Workers are often engaged because the children of the original relationship have been caught in the middle and are exposed to their parent's dislike of each other. Attempts to negotiate, even the smallest of concessions, are met with resistance. Accusations and counter accusations are levelled about the other person further deepening the conflict and mistrust. This results in hurt being piled upon hurt. By the time we become involved, the communication channels have completely deteriorated with the hurt now turned to anger and in extreme cases, hate.

Social Workers in many of these cases become the 'go between'. We act as message carriers, negotiators, arbiters. We are the ones that are expected to 'fix' the problem for the sake of the child. Our assessment and subsequent 'ruling' is often seen by one or both as being unfair. We are accused of bias, ineptitude, naivety. The plan that we have suggested often fails because, quite simply, it is our plan and not the parents. We have taken it upon ourselves to problem solve.

I used the example of separated parents, however the same can be said about any situation when we find ourselves in a position where we have been asked to resolve a conflict between two or more parties, be that of a parent and teenager, siblings, two

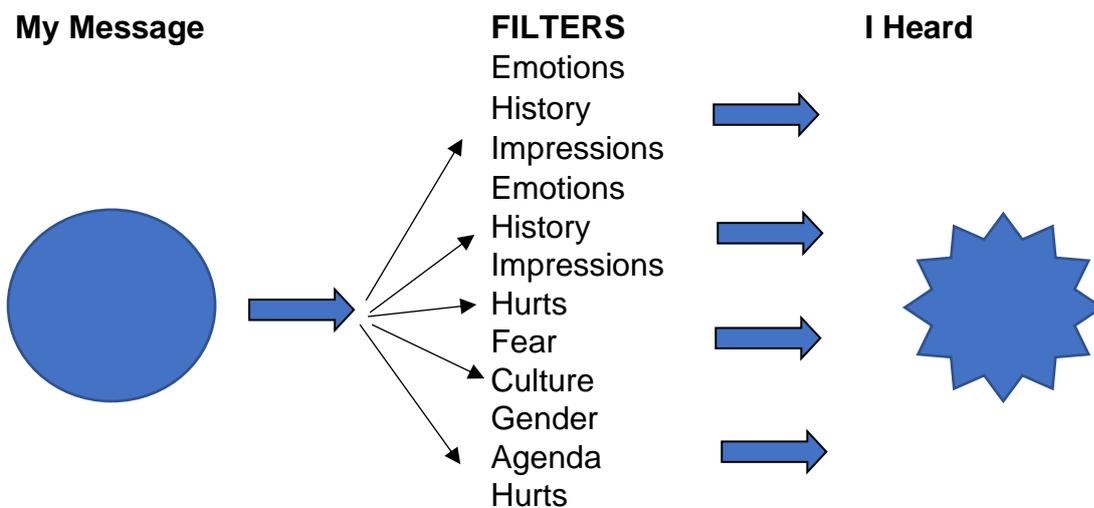


residents of a residential home, Parent and Grandparent or people in our family network or workplace.

A restorative approach is one of the most effective ways of dealing with parties who have stopped hearing each other in a way that is constructive and meaningful. A most effective approach is the use of the Tri-Question Approach or Three-Way Shuffle. This is a simple set of restorative questions to help parties in conflict to hear each other and when appropriate find solutions to the problem.

Before I describe the approach it important to understand the filters that stop us from hearing what the other person wants and needs us to hear.

When a message or statement is made by party A it passes through a series of filters before being interpreted by party B. Party B will delete, distort and generalise the message. They will receive it differently to what the original message was meant to be. These filters can include; history, experience, defensiveness, preconceived ideas, gender, race, age etc and can a long way to understanding why some long term Service Users are often resistant to our intervention.



Example: A mother expresses to her daughter about being worried because she came in late and she was unable to contact her. The daughter hears this message as; “You don’t trust me, you don’t like my friends, you think I’m drinking and taking drugs”. The mother responds with incredulity and frustration. She is being blamed for something she did not say and becomes defensive. She might add that her daughter is trying to shift the blame and that she, ‘always does this’ when she is guilty. Within five minutes the tension has risen, voices are raised, accusation and counter retaliatory statements are made, doors are slammed and feelings run high. Listening has stopped with both parties now generalising and bringing up past incidents and hurts.



In most cases both the mother and her daughter will move on and most likely laugh at these incidents when they look back at them. In some cases, however, the damaged relationship is much harder to repair. The arguments become more frequent and intense. The result can lead to family breakdown with the young person wanting to leave the family home or is being forced out.

The Meeting of Understanding using the Tri Question Approach/Three-Way Shuffle has been one of the most effective tools I have used in situations like this. It uses the elements of mediation and restorative approaches to effect change through listening. Put simply, it assists both parties to hear the message/statement made by eliminating or reducing the filters they carry with them into the room.

Tri Questions

As the title suggests, there are three main questions. Question One is directed to Party A, question Two to Party B and question Three to Party A.

The questions are:

- 1) What do you **need** (Party B) to hear?
- 2) What did you hear (Party A) say?
- 3) Is that what you wanted (Party B) to hear?

It is very common (and you almost want it to happen) that the answer to question three is no. This is because the second party has filtered the statement, listened with defensiveness. If the answer is no, the facilitator repeats the questions until the message has been heard in a way that it was originally meant to be heard.

The process is repeated with Party B being asked and again, until the message has been delivered to Party A with clarity. Both parties are then asked if there is anything else they need the other to hear. If they need to add anything else, the facilitator must use the same process. When all parties are satisfied that they have been heard, they are then asked; "What needs to happen now to move things forward?"

There are some important elements to this process which must always be adhered to if it is to have maximum impact.

1. **Separate preparation meetings** with both parties beforehand is preferential however this is not always necessary. I have often walked into a situation or been to a home visit where I used the approach because of the need to resolve a misunderstanding quickly.
2. **Rules for Success** or Ground Rules must be established before the meeting takes place. The key rules are; One person speaks at any one time,



no interrupting the other, Respectful language is used at all times, confidentiality. The parties may want to add their own specific rules and should be given the opportunity.

3. Unless the facilitator has decided who would be best to go first. The participants are asked to decide.
4. The questions should be asked in the order they are laid out in and the wording used. **The first question** for instance is; ‘*What do you **NEED** () to hear?*’. The use of the word need in this question is important as it focuses the person’s statement to what is essential for them to say and be heard. The third question; ‘*Is that what you **WANTED** () to hear?*’. A want is the desire that will be met when the other person hears what was needed to be heard.
5. The facilitator should only ask the questions and should not be tempted to paraphrase or summarise what they heard. By doing this the facilitator will prevent the other person from fully listening.
6. The facilitator must ensure that the person responding to question one does not seek to justify, minimise or argue their case in response but instead repeats what they had heard.
7. The facilitator must not take a view or attempt to coerce one or other person to ‘understand’ by commenting or asking other questions. This is common when a participant is struggling to grasp the message (they will get there).
8. The facilitator must remain impartial at all times. Statements from the facilitator such as; “*Don’t you think John has a point?*” or “*Can’t you see how hurt your mum is?*” denote a lack of impartiality.
9. Trust the process – it works!

The following is an abbreviated version of a meeting held between a mother, Sarah, and her son John aged 16 years following a disagreement when John had arrived home late the night before. This had been an ongoing source of disagreement between the two for over a year and had now come to crisis point. John is now considering moving out of the family home.

The meeting took place in the family home around the kitchen table. It was decided that the mother would go first.

Facilitator: “*Thank you for agreeing to meet up. As discussed prior to the meeting there are some **rules for success** I’d like to introduce. It is important that*



everyone has their say and I will be asking both a set of questions, when one person is speaking it is important that the other doesn't interrupt, you will have an opportunity to respond when it is your turn. It is important that respectful language is used when making your statements and that this process is considered confidential – what I mean by that is that whatever is said is not shared with anyone else unless agreed by both and should not be used against the other at a later stage. Does everyone understand?

This process is not about blame but rather a chance to understand the other the issues or concerns each has in relation to the current situation”.

Facilitator: *“I am going to start with Sarah. Sarah, ‘What do you need John to hear?’*

Sarah: *“I need John to hear that I get worried when he is out and doesn't come in when he should. I didn't know where he was last night, just that he was out with his friends and when I tried ring him his phone was turned off and he knows he has to keep it on at all times in case there is an emergency!”*

Facilitator: *“Thank you Sarah. Thankyou John for listening. John, I'd like to ask you, ‘What did you hear your mum say?’*

John: *“I heard her say she doesn't trust me and she thinks I am taking drugs and she doesn't like my friends. I'm not a child anymore and all my friends don't get this hassle.....”.*

Facilitator: *“Thank you John. I'll just stop you there”.
“Sarah, Is that what you wanted John to hear?”*

Sarah: *“No, I wanted him.....”*

Facilitator: *“Sarah, ‘What do you need John to hear?’*

Sarah: *“I need John to hear that I get nervous when he doesn't come home on time. I'm afraid that he has been attacked or worse and I don't care about what his friends get up to I'm just worried about him”.*

Facilitator: *“John, ‘What did you hear your mum say?’*

John: *“I heard my mum say, that she's afraid I'll get attacked or something and that and that she doesn't care about my friends but I'm fine, I keep telling her that we just go into town and I always get the bus home”.*

Facilitator: *“Thank you John. Sarah, ‘Is that what you wanted John to hear?’*



Sarah: *“Some of it but he got some of it wrong?”*

Facilitator: *“What do you need John to hear?”*

Sarah: *“I do care about your friends. They’ve been in this house and I like and trust all of them but I don’t worry about them, I worry about you because you’re my son, not them. I worry that you won’t come home, or I’ll get a knock on the door or a call from the hospital because of Stephen.....”*

The conversation continued and for the first time Sarah was able to put into context her anxiety when John left the house and was late. Seven years previous, her oldest son Stephen was knocked down by a car and killed. She had become very protective of John and when he began to venture out with his friends at 14yrs of age she became increasingly anxious about his safety and whereabouts. Her anxiety would rise prior to his expected arrival time back home and if he was even five minutes late, she would challenge him, leading to an argument between the two which would often spill out to the other members of the family.

When John took his turn to speak, he recognised his mother’s fears and was able to articulate his frustration in a balanced and respectful way. He was able to explain why he often turned his phone off if he knew he was running late. Sarah was able to hear this and instead of expressing ‘her need’ to be able to contact him at all times, she recognised John’s need to show independence and responsibility.

The pair were then able to devise a plan that would allay Sarah’s anxieties which included John keeping his phone on and ringing his mother if he thought he was going to be late. Sarah agreed that she would not text or call John constantly when he was out.

**Webster’s dictionary defines a need as “something that a person must have: something that is needed in order to live, or succeed, or be happy.” A need is something that is essential and very important to live a healthy and satisfied life. **

Webster’s definition of want as a desire or a wish for something. A want is something we might like to have rather than a requirement for healthy living.

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Jim McGrath