

# SOLVING CIRCLES

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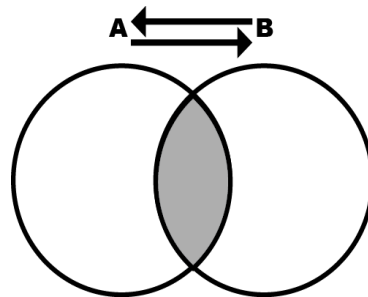
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Since people are not changed by other people, the question arises, “What can be done when a conflict arises between two people and the conflict must be resolved?”

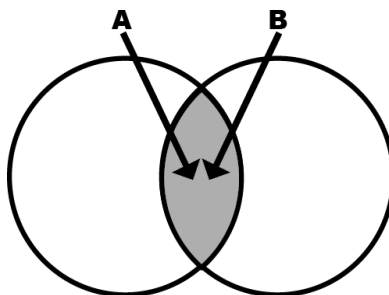
The answer lies in using *Solving Circles*. The realization that a person can only change her/himself is the theory behind this technique.

Here is how this conflict resolution approach works. Two interlocking circles are envisioned or drawn as in a Venn diagram. The first circle represents person A; the second circle represents person B. The overlapping area between the circles represents the conflict between the two participants.

In a disagreement, the usual approach is for each person to tell the other person what the other person needs to do or stop doing—basically, how the *other* person must change.



Solving circles uses a different strategy. With the realization that no one can change another person—that a person can only change her/himself—person A describes what he himself or she herself will do to resolve the problem. Because of this noncoercive approach, and because person A has demonstrated a desire to resolve the issue, along with the inclination to maintain good relationships, Person B is naturally drawn in, following the same procedure to state what he or she is willing do to resolve the problem.



By discussing one's own behavior, *instead of the behavior of the person*, even difficult conflicts are resolved because each person reflects and takes responsibility for one's own action. *Solving Circles* is eminently successful for the reason that it is not accusatory or coercive. The process allows participants to retain dignity, resolve situations quickly, and immediately improve the relationship.

The principle is simple. As soon as the discussion centers on what each is willing to do—in contrast to what is expected from the other person— both people start to focus on resolving the situation. As long as people psychologically stay in the circle and accept the fact that they can change only their own behavior, they can negotiate almost anything. Each is sending the message, "I want to improve the situation, and here is what I am willing to do."

When the parties are angry, a cooling-off period is necessary first. The focus is rarely on a solution when two people are experiencing anger. When tempers cool, *Solving Circles* can be very productive.

I employed this technique with two four-year-old boys. Using words they could understand, I simply explained that neither could change the other. I then challenged the two youngsters to come up with a solution to their conflict within four minutes. They resolved their dispute in two.