# Introducing the Pinch Theory: Building Relationships at Work

Business is based on relationships. Relationships are based on trust. This is true in America; it is true all over the world. People work best with those they know and trust. The anthropologist Angeles Arrien offers the following cross-cultural definition of trust: "If you say what you mean, and do what you say, I will trust you". Note the two key components in her definition:

1. I will trust you if you "say what you mean". If, over time, I come to expect that I can count on you to tell me the truth about what you think and feel then I will trust what you say. Authentic communication builds relationships.

2. I will trust you if you "do what you say". It is one thing to count on your words; it is another to be able to rely on your actions. This is another form of authenticity: following through on commitments. Being accountable for commitments improves relationships.

One example of the key role of trust in business relationships can be found in the world of commercial real estate in Northern California. A small group of individuals and partnerships control the lion's share of large commercial real estate transactions each year. The key players all know one another. Competitors in one deal will likely become joint venture partners in the next deal. These shifting roles are possible because people have experience in working with each other over many years and have had ample opportunity to learn who is true to their word, and who follows up on commitments. In this network reputation is everything. Failure to perform with one party can well effect one's position in the entire network. No network, no "deal flow". No deal flow, no profit. The Sand Hill Road venture capital community works in much the same way.

Because leaders understand the value of long-term relationships in business, they are wary of conflict. No one wants to make an enemy, or alienate a key client, colleague, or supplier. But conflict is obviously an inevitable part of any relationship. Conflict can't be avoided.

If handled well conflict can serve to build trust. Issues are sharpened, more creative solutions emerge, the interaction is energizing, and both parties show commitment to implementing their joint solution to the issues at hand. If conflict is avoided or handled poorly it can violate trust and cause irreparable harm to relationships. Disputants get locked into positions, become stuck in unproductive fighting, and have increasing difficulty maintaining a clear or objective view of one another. Decisions are delayed. Time and energy are wasted. Reputations are damaged as others witness the unfolding of the dispute and often take a step back from both parties.

We are well served, then, to understand how conflict arises, and how to manage it constructively.

The "Pinch Theory" (exhibit attached) attempts to explain how conflicts begin, how conflicts worsen, and highlights several key choice points for constructive intervention. The key points of the "Pinch Theory" are outlined in the following, along with helpful additions from the work of Bradford and Cohen (1998),.

In the beginning of any relationship we build expectations of how each other will behave. Bradford and Cohen explain that expectations at work are centered in two key areas. The first is *task* – expectations about what should be done. The second is *role-related behavior* – assumptions and agreements about how people carry out their jobs.

Once people think that they have clarity on both what is to be done, and how each will carry out their jobs, an implicit commitment is made to working together. A period of relative stability, productivity, and confidence ensues.

Inevitably, over time, one party or the other will come to feel discomfort about their working relationship. This is because an expectation they hold has not be met. It may be a spoken or unspoken expectation. This discomfort is called a "pinch". This "pinch" is a warning sign. It is a choice point to either avoid or address a potential conflict area.

Most of us choose to avoid the early warning signs of conflict most of the time. It is relatively rare in American business to hear a direct expression of a dispute about what work should be done (*task*), or how to do it (*role-related*). We avoid controversial topics, skirt hot issues, and effect politeness. Our greatest fear is that conflict might degenerate into personal attack. A *personal attack* is a derogatory comments made about another's character or motives. Questioning how people carry out work responsibilities is far less damaging than conflict that attacks the other's character. Bradford and Cohen insist that personal conflict is not necessary at work, and should not be tolerated. Disputes about tasks and role-related behavior, however, are both inevitable and necessary for high performance. It is important for leaders to legitimize and support constructive disputes about how what work is to be done and how to do it. Interpersonal conflict about these issues is not to be avoided.

If a potential dispute is temporarily sidestepped uncertainty, anxiety, and anger build up. If a potential dispute is confronted constructively further damage can be avoided, unexamined expectations and assumptions sorted out, and the relationship improved.

It is important to notice how one form of conflict can follow the other in sequence. If conflicts over tasks remain unresolved over time they can lead to interpersonal (role-related) conflicts between people. If these interpersonal conflicts are not resolved they can descend rapidly into personal attacks. What may begin as legitimate differences or concerns over business matters can become a personal attack. It is precisely this sequence that must be interrupted by tough but fair confrontation and discussion.

Bradford and Cohen point out that differences over tasks generate three kinds of interpersonal, role-related conflicts:

1. Following a heated argument, two or more people see things differently and each fight for their convictions. The toughest decisions are those where results will be known only in the distant future – requiring faith, and giving ample room for smart people to become convinced they are right and others are wrong. Although gratifying at the time, being convinced you are right is a dangerous position. It can and does lead to biased perceptions of others.

2. The second source of interpersonal conflict is a connection between task effectiveness and the person assigned to carry out the task. Doubts about another person's ability to implement a task are often expressed indirectly, if at all.

3. The third source is different work styles. Those who plan carefully before acting may question those who rely on intuition. Those who like to explore ideas may become annoyed with those driving for closure around a quick decision. The complex and every changing work of today require the contributions of people with various working styles. This need for collaboration doesn't make it easier, however, to deal gracefully with others who act differently than we would in the same circumstance.

"Pinch" points, left unresolved, or resolved unsuccessfully, can built to the point where damage to the relationship is possible, or even inevitable. The Pinch model calls this a "crunch". This "crunch" is another, second, choice point. Unfortunately, conflicts are much more difficult to reconcile at this point. Discussions are now occurring under duress. Faced with this difficulty some might attempt to smooth over differences, or give up.

The lesson? Unfortunately, it is "pay now or pay latter". Personal attacks at work are unacceptable at any time. Disputes over task and how the work is to be done are inevitable, and must be legitimized and actively explored, if people are to perform well at work. Leaders need to lean into these disputes, not back away from them. Avoidance only makes matters worse.

While one is certainly not justified in having a hair-trigger sensitivity to every imagined dispute or slight, a pattern of avoiding confrontation over task and interpersonal differences makes resolving differences much more difficult in the long run. Trust is damaged in the process. When trust is diminished, so is influence, and the relationship is eventually threatened.

Successful leaders say what they mean and do what they say. They build a reputation of trust by avoiding personal attacks and by constructively confronting work-related conflict and in so doing strengthen key business relationships over time.

Leadership is expressed by having the skill, emotional maturity, and regular practice of confronting conflict early and often.

Reference: Bradford and Cohen, <u>Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership</u>, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1998.

Pinch Model courtesy of Jack Sherwood.

# "THE PINCH THEORY"
## A model for Role Clarification and Negotiation