

oasis

Human
Relations



STAGE MODEL

For Effective Relationships

Foreword

We all want to do a good job, we all hope to get on well with our colleagues, in a context that supports and enables all of us to perform to the best of our ability and, gives us a sense of satisfaction and forward motion.

Sometimes, though in our relationships, whether they be at work or in our personal life, things can get tricky, become unclear or go wrong.

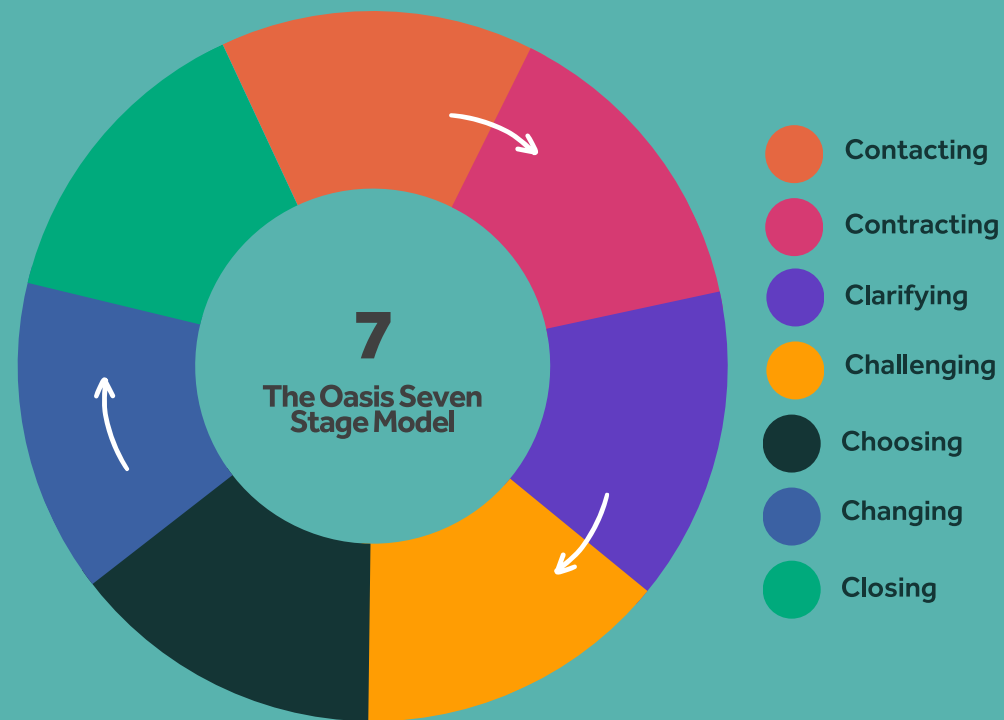
The Oasis Seven Stage Model for effective relationships provides some guiderails that are easy to understand and use in our daily lives. They can help us work out where we are and potentially what to do next. They can be used both when we are stuck or when we want to maximise our successes.

In simple language, the model represents the seven stages of an effective relationship, each stage overlapping with the next. Whilst it's not linear, it is usually ineffective to 'jump' a stage as each stage builds on a previous one. It's designed to be easily understood, and easy to use, not only when working with people, but also with projects, systems, and processes, in fact, any situation where it is important to bring more of yourself to create change.

In our work over the last forty years, we have observed the skills, behaviours and beliefs that help relationships to work well, even when there are differing agendas and views. This model simplifies what we have learnt and presents it in bite sized pieces as a guide to what you might do at different points in working relationships.

Since its launch in the 1980s the model has been introduced to thousands of people and has proved robust across a wide range of sectors and within a variety of contexts and cultures across the Globe. The model has been informed by the experiences of hundreds of coaches, facilitators, consultants, clients, teams, and leaders and has been tried and tested to deliver multiple tangible benefits.

It's designed to free you, not limit you. It is a description of what many highly effective people do in real life, rather than a rule book of what you should do. Many encountering the model for the first time are delighted to discover that they are already doing it; they simply have not framed it in this way. We hope you find it inspiring and useful.



The Model and how to use it

Introduction

The Oasis Seven Stage Model arose from the need to provide people from a wide variety of backgrounds with a simple overview of the stages of an effective interpersonal relationship. As well as offering a complete model, each stage outlines specific skills that can be applied according to the needs and priorities of a relationship.

The model can be applied in any setting where greater self-awareness and working better with others would be helpful.

The model works so long as there is:

- sufficient commitment to the relationship and the work
- sufficient willingness to be engaged in doing the work together
- sufficient capacity in those involved to do the work.

It also requires that we believe that people:

- are worthy of dignity and respect
- can resolve their own predicaments, given the right support
- can work together positively
- have an inherent capacity to work, learn, develop, and mature.

Applying the Model

Although the Seven Stage Model can be understood in a linear form, it is better practiced as a cyclical, dynamic model. In many situations, this means that certain stages need to be revisited several times, albeit at different levels or depth, before moving forward.

The model can be applied to any situation where an effective relationship is critical.

Conditions for Effective Relationship

Authenticity – the successful avoidance of posturing, playing a role, or creating a facade or barrier. Allowing oneself to be known and real to the other person. It calls for courage and honesty.

Empathy – to comprehend the other person’s world, and to communicate that understanding. It calls for a willingness to be internally agile and open.

Warmth – communicating a willingness to accept and respect the other person as a fellow human being. It should be distinguished from simply being ‘nice’ – it is realistic not sentimental.

Collaboration – a genuine recognition that working with another is better than having power over another. The capacity to act as a peer or equal, and in doing so being willing to benefit both, rather than one or the other.

Creativity – being willing to discover the new, open to trying different approaches and being open to learning through relationship makes more possible.

For people wanting to enjoy effective relationships, it is essential to have these qualities and to be able to communicate them.

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01. Contacting

Rapport, human connection; contacting is the bedrock of all effective relationships, and this is where our model starts.

Creating warmth and rapport that is fit for purpose, requires attention and understanding of the context. Not having to be the persons close friend or their caretaker but working as peers. Taking a little bit of time to get to know the person you are working with and letting them get to know you, creates, and builds trust. This includes getting to understand more of their context – both personal (if appropriate) and professional.

Effective Listening

Active listening is the superpower that fuels any effective relationship. Active listening follows quite different rules from the conversational listening that most of us engage with. Real listening to another person means consciously becoming interested and engaged with their world so that we are invested in the other person and become actively involved in what we are being told.

Really listening is at the core of so many emerging roles in our contemporary world – listening to unspoken market needs marks out the entrepreneur; listening to people and planet, the social entrepreneur; to the deeper questions within a person, the coach; and to the emerging requirements for a business in a changing context, the responsible leader and manager.

Sufficient Contact

Any relationship requires sufficient connection for it to form. This stage is helped by ensuring there are no distractions and the potential for interruptions is minimised. If the work is more personal, the atmosphere needs to feel safe enough to talk about difficult or challenging issues. If there is likely to be emotional content, it is worth considering a private setting. Being genuine in your communication, coming over as available and respectful, not in a hurry to be somewhere else, and demonstrating that you accept the person, are all characteristics that help in building rapport.

In this stage you will need to give attention to the following elements:

- Finding balance: between offering information about yourself and active listening
- Pace: allowing the other person to find their own speed
- Being agile: being willing to respond flexibly to what is said

Where to Begin?

Whilst great rapport is crucial, if we spend too long catching up and saying 'hello' we may never get round to any crucial work. Lots of good chat may happen but nothing much may emerge. However, If you begin with too abrupt a request to get to the heart of things, the other person is likely to back off. It may help simply to ask: 'Where is a good place to begin?'

Most of us are aware that much of what we communicate is non-verbal, related to complex forms of behaviour including tone and body language. Non-verbal prompts and nods of encouragement can be surprisingly effective at this stage. For many, refraining from doing too much or saying too much is a very worthwhile skill to develop!

Where to Begin? continued

Some reminders of what works when building rapport:

- Adopt an ‘open’ posture – sounds simple, but a person will often be more open if you are more open
- Be aware of the other person’s overall body posture and mirror their body posture and movements in a natural way
- Look at the person without staring
- Match their language to get on the same wavelength
- Listen to their perspective to understand their frame of reference rather than challenging their ideas and beliefs too early.

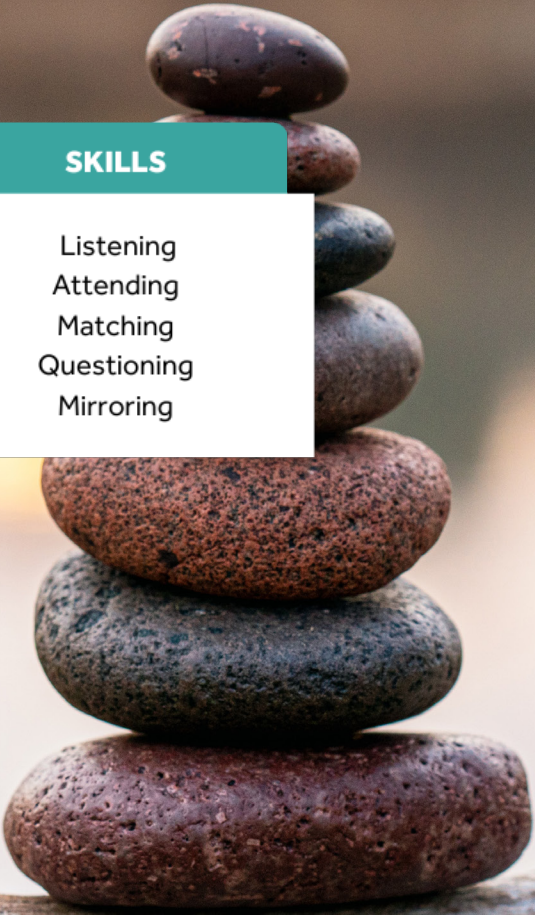
No matter what the context, if you need to develop an effective relationship, contacting is the foundation. It is all about you moving toward the other person – not necessarily physically, but certainly in terms of willingness to engage. If you want a person to feel more comfortable, being comfortable yourself helps, but more than that, being willing to match and mirror your movements and words to them has a profound impact on establishing a sense of connection. Out of respect for the other person and an understanding of the importance of making effective contact you should bring all your skills to the relationship. To be effective you need to care enough about the other person to give them your full attention.

Establishing rapport creates the environment to help a person move from where they are to where they would like to be. It sets the scene for a problem-solving process that works through and out of a relationship.

If during the later stages of the seven-stage model, or if and when things become more challenging, there is insufficient rapport, we need to return to this stage to rebuild the relationship.



TASKS	SKILLS
Establish rapport Relationship building	Listening Attending Matching Questioning Mirroring



02. Contracting: Conditions and Agreements

We've said 'hello', we've created a connection. This next phase is about establishing what good will look like, what some of the milestones might be, how you will work together and what level of support is required and can be offered.

The context defines the nature of the contract. To reach a realistic outcome, those involved need to take their specific context into account.

Developing a Shared Agreement

If you are the one in the acknowledged enabling role, you need to manage the process. Agreements on how you are going to work together must be made explicit and boundaries clearly established – even if they need to be changed later in the light of new information.

The following need to be clarified:

- Time: the length and possible frequency of meeting
- Space: the location – minimising any interference or distraction
- Ways of working - the options that might be used in any work together
- Purpose: overall clarity, so that no one misconstrues the situation or the reason for the meeting.

Contracting Questions

Within this stage, there are a few questions that are essential for those involved to ask to reach a mutual agreement. This list is not exhaustive but provides a useful starting point. We have known these questions save organisations tens of thousands of pounds through effective contracting. At a personal level they can help most people shape a clearer understanding of what they want or need.

1. **What do you want...?** What do you really want? This is the killer question and helps to access the genuine requirements and motivations
2. **Is it realistic?** This engages a more rational and cognitive response, often leading to exploring the wider context and forces that may help or hinder a piece of work.
3. **How will you and I know when you have achieved the change?** This establishes measures and qualitative indicators for success.
4. **What will you have to give, or give up, to get it?** This accesses the power dynamics that often are very strong in difficult negotiations or serious development challenges.
5. **How might you sabotage yourself?** This names some of the known patterns the person might use to undermine him/herself or the initiative – naming things helps to loosen their power and increases conscious choices.
6. **What is the first step and by when?** This can help determine how committed the person is to changing something, as well as simply clarifying the first step in a more comprehensive action plan.

The more uncertain or unpredictable the context you are working in, the more the initial contract is likely to be loose and informal. As more becomes clear, the contract will become more specific. A contract offers enough structure for progress to be made without overwhelming those involved. Contracting is not a one-off event and is a stage that will be re-visited in the form of review, revision, and evaluation throughout the relationship, particularly as new information becomes available. This enables flexibility, agility and renewing or refining of initial commitments.

Ways of Working Together Conditions - Agreeing Ground Rules

Studies into performance clearly show that effective individuals and teams develop a set of understandings that help them achieve their purpose, or contract. The time and dialogue necessary to develop these ways of working together can encourage stronger bonds, bonds that in turn deepen trust to sustain the whole relationship. Whilst the ways two or more people work together vary depending on the contracts agreed, the following have proved effective in many settings:

- That you are -individually and mutually responsible and accountable for the success of the endeavour.
- Silence is not taken as agreement
- It's OK to clarify and/or challenge
- It's OK to ask for help.

Depending on the nature of the work, some discussion and agreement about confidentiality is often necessary.

Esablishing the Relationship

During these early stages, the other person begins to feel you are taking the trouble to learn about their individual way of seeing the world, and that you are keen to understand their challenges. As a result, they will be more willing to introduce you to further areas for exploration and clarification, and later be more open to being challenged to develop new options and choices.

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TASKS

Gaining commitment for change
Agreeing boundaries
Establishing initial outcomes
Establishing individual and mutual responsibility
Establishing time, frequency and style of meeting

SKILLS

Outlining conditions
Negotiating
Checking
Appropriate questioning
Managing power

03. Clarifying

We've said 'hello', created a connection, agreed initial outcomes and how we are going to work together. We now need to build our understanding.

This next stage is built on the belief that all of us have the wisdom and resources within to find our own solutions. If you do this phase well enough and often enough the need for confrontational challenge diminishes

Clarification is a process that gathers data from all our senses, and with the other/s involved we process the information and communicate what we have understood to the person we are working with. In such a way they hear themselves more clearly. Predominantly the clarifying stage is about refraining from advice giving or trying to fix the other person. It's a phase of listening and questioning to create a shared understanding of how things are and what might assist or stand in the way of progress.

Asking questions and inviting a more detailed response allows the person, team, or organisation to go further into their experience and to retrieve more detail of what has happened, what they are working with, or what they have experienced so far. The tasks relevant to this stage are:

- **Hearing the story:** identifying the themes and issues; listening for generalisations, distortions, deletions, and additions
- **Retrieving meaning:** breaking up abstract concepts into specific experiences; listening for generalisations or untested assumptions that would benefit from greater specificity
- **Constructing meaning:** listening to construct a way of seeing and understanding that matches the person's experience.

The skills used during this stage are those which help the other person clarify or amplify their ideas, thoughts, or feelings further. These skills, when utilised well, elicit self-direction – as the other person becomes clearer about what they think, how they understand themselves or a situation, very often the process itself leads them to become clearer about what they want to do. Hearing oneself talking about something causes one to see the bigger picture, and may be all that is needed to move forward.

Within a team context, this phase is often related to gathering information regarding how they perform or undertake a role or responsibility. As a result, the context, questions and ways of working become clearer.

It is important to remember that gathering understanding of what is happening or clarifying a situation is like listening to a story. Rather than being overwhelmed, it is worth considering that some stories, even work based ones are complex and will take more than one telling. Some stories only become clear in the process of telling them, and the very act of telling of a story can create new possibilities and endings.

A story can be understood at different levels, and it is these levels of understanding that unfold during clarification.

Level 1: Content – the facts of a story including such aspects as how it began, who was involved, the sequence of events, the consequences, and outcomes, if any.

Level 2: Feeling – this level provides the significance or meaning of the story for those involved. How do they feel about it? In many settings this calls for what is termed emotional intelligence as you listen to a person outline a situation and their response to it. There is a great deal of skill involved in communicating an understanding of what another person is experiencing at this level.

Level 3: Intuition – this is a more complex level, at which a deeper sense of what is being experienced is discovered, almost working with the hunches about what might be happening beyond what those involved are fully conscious of. In organisational settings we might be uncovering the cultural norms that operate just outside awareness.

Level 4: Empathy – at the deepest level we can aim to ‘walk about’ inside the experience of the other person. We can demonstrate understanding and accurately predict the possible implications within the bigger picture of the person’s world.

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TASKS	SKILLS
Developing safety and permission Enabling understanding Identifying issues and questions Identifying themes and patterns	Reflection/paraphrasing Open questions/prompts Re-stating/word repetition Testing understanding Summarising

04. Challenging

We have made a connection, agreed outcomes, understood the context and whilst doing so uncovered some of the factors that might be holding us back. To get unstuck we need challenge to create forward motion.

Effective challenge can create new possibilities and more choice. Offering clear, incisive feedback, holding up a mirror and asking questions that cut through and encourage the person to approach things differently. This can be a tricky stage and requires a robust, trusting relationship for it to be effective.

Approaching Challenge

Many of us have a negative view of challenge and misinterpret it as conflict. Whilst it may feel conflicting, the intention of effective challenge is to unstick and create forward movement. Essentially it is any intervention that provides information or data that questions a person’s understanding of their world. For instance, if a person thinks they aren’t very good at something but is given positive feedback that surprises them – this is a challenge.

Challenge needs to be undertaken not only with the person’s interests paramount but also with the person’s permission. For a challenge to succeed it is essential that the person owns the issue, i.e. takes responsibility for their part in whatever situation they are in. In all this, they need to feel supported by the person giving the challenge.

Challenge requires a balance between care and power. It requires compassion to be demonstrated, so the other person recognises there is a sense of you being with them in any distress or discomfort. There needs to be enough power to hold the challenge effectively, especially when the person wants to move to the safety of keeping things the way they have always been. Challenge requires the challenger to be explicit and direct with care.

Challenging skills move all the way along a spectrum from gentle requests to major confrontations. Ideally, all direct confrontation should come out of a desire to assist the other person and not to serve one’s own needs. Therefore, there should be no great investment in any approach you might take; if a particular observation or challenge to a person does not work, you don’t have to pursue it until it does. Try something else!

It is during this phase that you will most need emotional sensitivity; working at any depth within the challenge stage can produce a release of feelings. When we see things more clearly, we can be irritated with ourselves, upset about a particular realisation or simply happy to be free of what might have felt like a weight or burden.

Challenging Questions

Challenge may be experienced at any point, but the explicit use of challenging questions at this stage has four principal purposes:

- To free a person or situation from unhelpful blocks or barriers
- To obtain more refined information
- To move beyond untested assumptions
- To bring more specificity.

There can often be an impasse; a person gets stuck and struggles at the thought of going ahead and making change. Challenge questions are designed to help move beyond some of the barriers that can create an impasse.

Challenging questions include:

- What is the pay-off for things being like this?
- What have you tried already?
- What would happen if you did...?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?
- What would you really like to do?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for?
- How do you know that would happen?
- Who says you can/cannot?
- What stops you?
- How do you feel about...?

Summary

Challenge is likely to be the most emotional of all the phases of a relationship; it is also a time when the person or team can experience a ‘breakthrough’. The challenge stage is when giving and receiving feedback is most appropriate.

There is sometimes the elation of moving beyond a place in ourselves that we were sure was going to limit us forever. It can be a time when there is the excitement at attempting to succeed in situations that have hitherto baffled or overpowered us. It may well be a time of satisfaction at the realisation that some long-held belief or sense of inadequacy is about to diminish and reveal what we are far more capable of many things than we had ever considered. When a team are met by an effective challenge they might have to come to terms with difficult feedback, but once accepted and understood it can lead to improved performance and a greater sense of freedom.

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TASKS

Identifying the impasse
Working with themes or patterns
Offering permission
Encouraging consideration of options
Encouraging self-confrontation
Holding the challenge
Developing new and latent strengths

SKILLS

Focusing
Defining
Confronting
Immediacy
‘Tough loving’
Cathartic skills
Specifying actual examples

05. Choosing

We have maintained a strong connection, an agreed destination which we have explored and understood. We have faced into any of the obstacles that might prevent our success. This releases energy and brings more choice and possibility.

The phrase of choice is a helpful one in which you can facilitate the process of generating options and weighing and valuing them for yourself and with others. Offering your own solutions into the mix can also help, if done well!

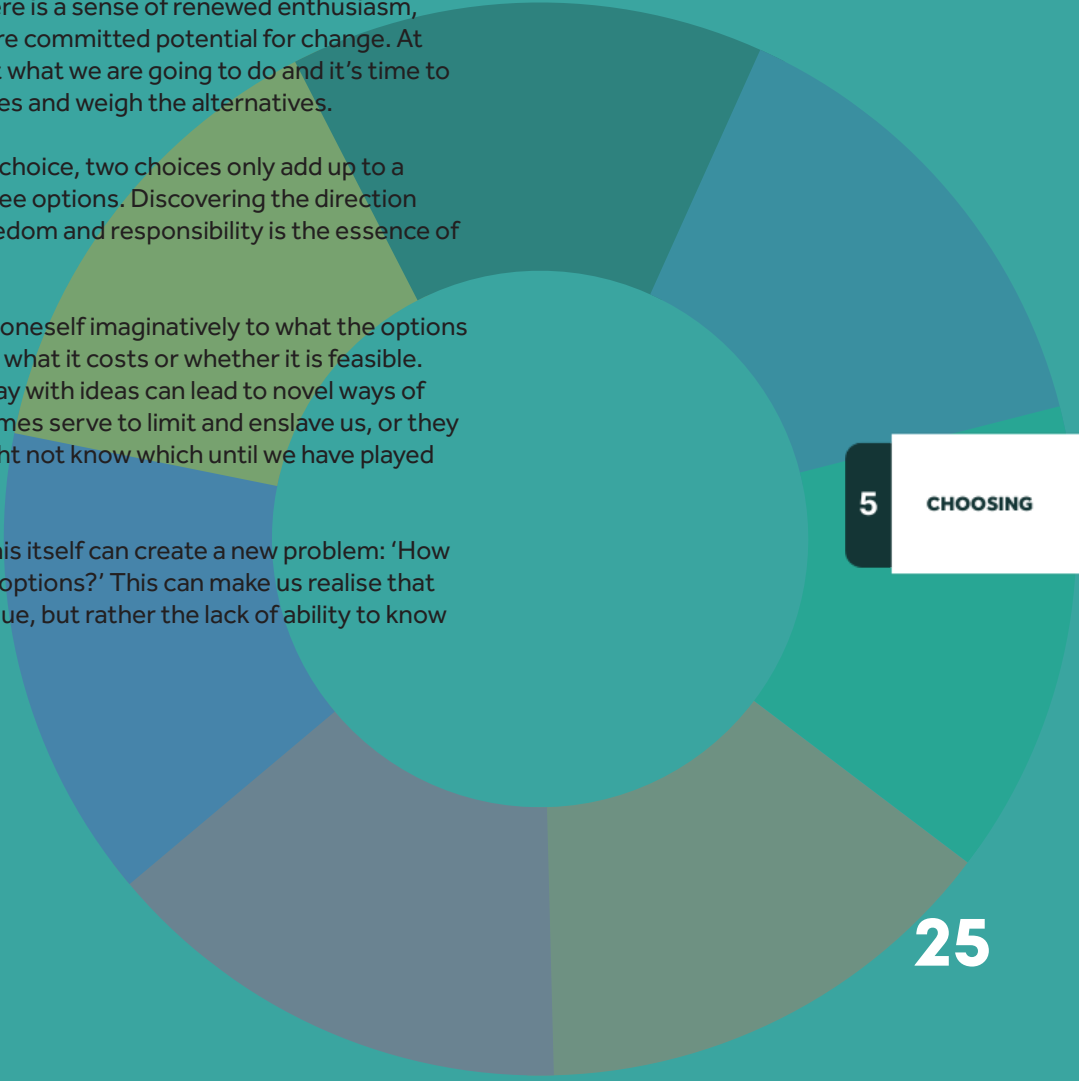
The ‘True Third Alternative’

Following a successful challenge, there is a sense of renewed enthusiasm, a willingness to go forward and a more committed potential for change. At this stage, we move into working out what we are going to do and it’s time to generate options, imagine possibilities and weigh the alternatives.

It could be said that one choice is no choice, two choices only add up to a dilemma. Real choice begins with three options. Discovering the direction that offers the greatest sense of freedom and responsibility is the essence of this stage.

It is the stage for dreaming, opening oneself imaginatively to what the options could be. Never mind, for a moment, what it costs or whether it is feasible. Simply encouraging the person to play with ideas can lead to novel ways of fulfilling the task. Dreams do sometimes serve to limit and enslave us, or they can point the way ahead, but we might not know which until we have played with them.

There may be several choices, and this itself can create a new problem: ‘How do I choose when there are so many options?’ This can make us realise that it is not a lack of choice that is the issue, but rather the lack of ability to know how to effectively make a decision.



Decision Making

Assessing the likely consequences, considering implications and impact, and rehearsing possibilities can all be very valuable in assisting us to develop our skills within this stage.

In developing effective decision making there are essentially three core ingredients:

- Building the picture (thinking)
- Valuing and weighing (feeling)
- Deciding to act (willing).

The last ingredient can have two paths, to take action or to deepen our understanding. The former results in a decision to do something, the latter occurs when no action is necessary or possible, and often all that can be done is to gain a shared understanding.

In many settings the first two ingredients are given too little attention. When a person, team, or organisation keeps coming back to the same or similar issues, a repeating pattern, it is often as a result of moving too quickly into decision making. A desire to move at speed rather than take the time necessary for applying a more effective approach which may be experienced as slow at first but can in the longer term create more pace.

Avoiding examining alternatives at this stage can cost dearly later, when the person or team discovers that things that could have been anticipated have simply been ignored. The potential for this stage is that those involved can gain a rich sense of their own capabilities and resources for taking action.

Taking action is the focus of the next stage.

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TASKS

Opening new perspectives
Widening options
Generating and creating choice
Anticipating consequences
Moving towards change

SKILLS

Identifying resources
Problem solving
Re-contracting
Dreaming and imagining
Testing out ideas

06. Changing

Now we have made informed choices, it's time to move to implementation

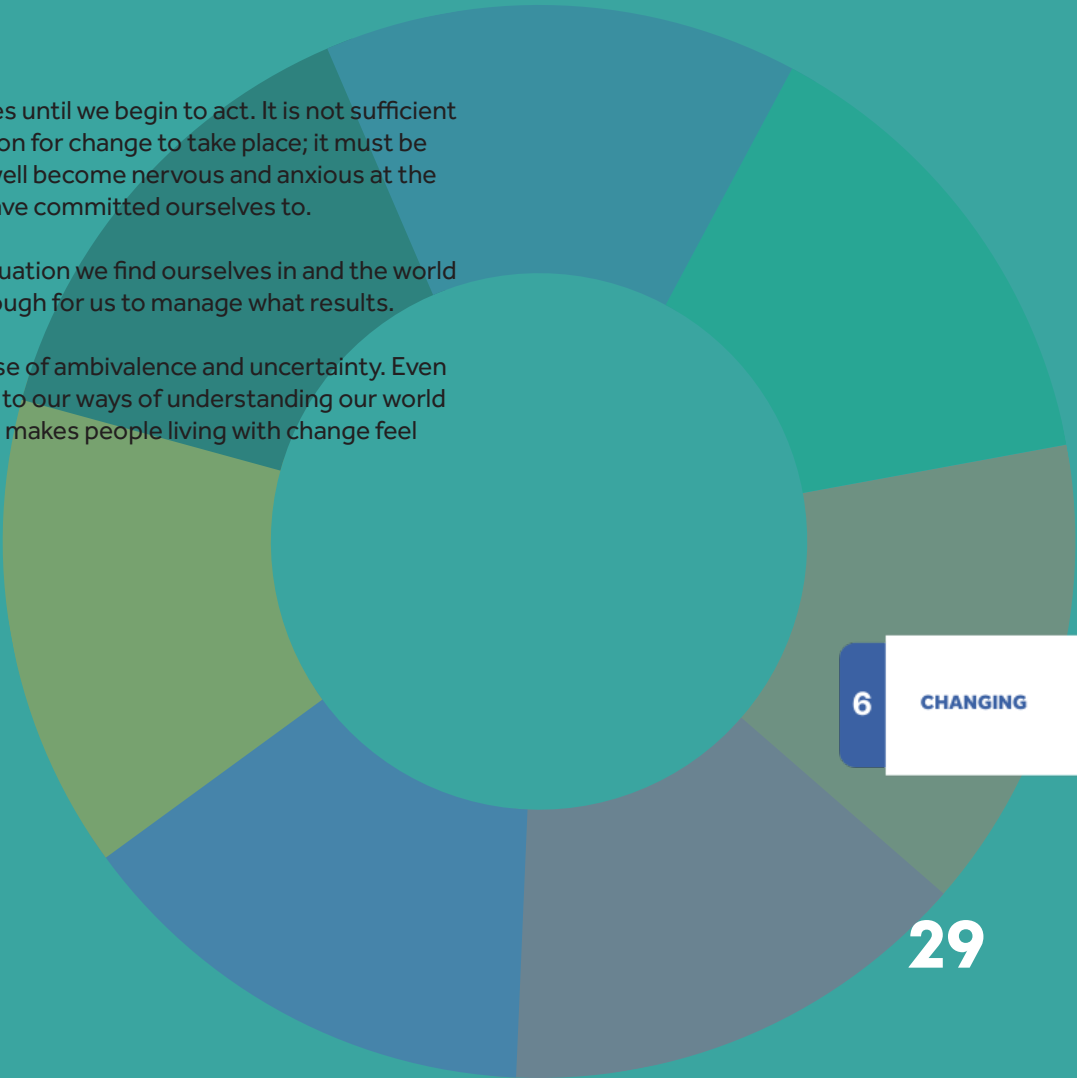
Taking action, trying things out, space and time to plan together and, crucially space to acknowledge positive progression **towards desired change.**

Managing Change

Nothing changes in our circumstances until we begin to act. It is not sufficient to have an insight or come to a decision for change to take place; it must be implemented. At this stage we may well become nervous and anxious at the prospect of what we now know we have committed ourselves to.

Before a change is attempted, the situation we find ourselves in and the world in which we exist must be aligned enough for us to manage what results.

Most change processes create a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty. Even hoped for changes bring disturbance to our ways of understanding our world and our sense of how things are. This makes people living with change feel vulnerable.



Implementing Change

A path of action has to have manageable chunks of activity and realistic steps that we can, with a reasonable degree of confidence, expect to accomplish. It helps many people to report back to someone on their progress. Reviewing what actually happened in the light of experience is an important source of further learning that without encouragement might be overlooked.

A good deal of useful effort fails at this last stage if not enough time and attention is given to asking, ‘Will this work, given where it is to be implemented?’ or ‘Will those who have the task of dealing with our decisions have the capacity to manage the consequences?’

Asking a person if they have thought of how they will manage the impact of any decision they make ensures they do!

Communicating change

Where change is being undertaken, communication is a core skill that will need to be developed and applied. Communication needs to match the stage for which it is appropriate, for instance, is it to connect, clarify, challenge, stimulate choice, urge change, or bring something to a close?

When to communicate, about what and to whom, is a challenge in itself. It is an art rather than a science, and no approach will be ideal. However, few people like to hear things third hand. Most of us like to be in adult relationships, even when we don’t think we do, and it’s healthier to be incomplete and open rather than complete after leaks have happened.

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07. Closing

After all we have done together comes a crucial and often missed out phase.

Closing effectively brings an opportunity to gather and acknowledge what has gone well, what progress has been made, what has been learned, what can be taken from all of that into the next phase. And, to say ‘Goodbye’ if necessary.

Managing Change

Closing is an important stage in any relationship and never more so than in a working relationship of significance. Closing is about completion – of the work or the issue. It is a time to look back and evaluate what we are taking away or what the team has achieved.

Any ending means saying ‘good-bye’. It means acknowledging that we are no longer going to be meeting like this. For the person who has found an effective facilitator, coach or manager, there is a loss to face, as well as the potential freedom and discovery change can create. Preparation for the end of any effective relationship may be as important as the work that has been done within it, and often holds another opportunity for learning and development.

Phases in Closing

We all have things to work out about how we end things and the people involved will have their own reflections and will be making assessments. It is important to:

- Bring reflections and assessments into the relationship
- Talk together in good time about the ending
- Harvest what has been learned along the way.
- Think beyond the relationship’s conclusion so that the other person can plan their future beyond its end.

You can usefully take time to identify your own fears and concerns about what endings represent to you, so that you are as free in your closing of relationships as is possible and the other person is left with the opportunity to make this one more important learning.

Once the ending phase has been given appropriate time and space, you are free to close for now or to engage with the next phase of the work; moving back around the phases of the seven stage model as you need to.



TASKS

Bringing the work and
relationship to a close
Reviewing and evaluating the
effort

SKILLS

Managing endings
Disengagement
Letting go



Human
Relations

School of Thought

Body of Practice

Space for Learning

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