

The Experience Cube:

A Model to Increase Being, Relating and Collaborating for Collective Leadership

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require large groups of people, often across multiple boundaries, to collaborate over long periods. We have found the larger the group or the longer the time they work together the harder it is to maintain collaboration. For more than 25 years, we have used the Experience Cube to help ourselves and others build and sustain the high-quality, collaborative relationships required to succeed in increasingly complex environments by helping them learn from their personal and collective experience. In this chapter, we describe why it's so difficult to sustain collaboration and why using the experience cube can resolve the problem. We show how using the Experience Cube, and the associated beliefs and attitudes, can increase the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) of Being, Relating, and Collaborating. We then discuss the relationship of adult vertical development to the IDGs, the qualities of leaders required to accomplish the SDGs, and how the Experience Cube can help foster movement to later stages of adult development. We conclude by offering an exercise people can use to resolve problems of collaboration.

Since their launch, the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to create a sustainable global society have made progress and had some success – but not as much progress as most people had hoped for. The inner development goals (IDGs) were created to enhance progress toward the SDGs by highlighting that we need not only technical solutions to problems but also specific skills and abilities in the individuals, teams, and organizations that play crucial roles in working to fulfill the vision. This insight is a critical one, and we believe it may be more important to invest in how things get done than what things get done. An expert team skilled in working together can overcome most technical challenges they face. However, a team of technical experts who have difficulty working together may have a hard time completing a project within their area of expertise. This is why the insights of the IDGs are so crucial, and we would like to add our voice to three of the IDGs

that we have some experience with: Being, Relating, and Collaborating.

To understand how our work fits in we need to start from Collaborating. The SDGs are goals that require large groups of people to collaborate over long periods. We have found the larger the group, or the longer the time they are working together, the harder it is to maintain collaboration. We hypothesize that most of the collaborations required to achieve any SDG would run into difficulty and fail unless investment is made in building up the collaboration skills of the individuals working together. What can they do in those inevitable moments when the collaboration is not working as everyone hoped? For more than 25 years, we have used the tool/model we'll describe to help ourselves and others build and sustain high-quality, collaborative relationships required to succeed in increasingly complex environments.

It's called the Experience Cube (the cube), a practical and effective model of experience that empowers people to learn from their personal and collective experience.

As people reading this book are well aware, the IDGs are an answer to the problems that complexity creates for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. What kind of person can absorb and conceptually integrate the dozens of different systems impinging on global problems like poverty, hunger, gender equality, climate, and true justice? What qualities and skills are needed to build and work with coalitions strong enough to manage highly complex situations across multiple boundaries? What tools and methods can support them in achieving these competencies and ways of being?

The theories collectively known as vertical development offer some answers (Binder, 2023; Cook-Greuter, 2014; Keegan, 1994; Loevinger, 1976; Torbert, 2004). Building on the work of Jean Piaget (1952), stages of increasing cognitive, social, and emotional intelligence have been described and verified through decades of research. Linkages between these stages and leaders' competence to manage organizational and social change challenges have been offered. There is widespread agreement that leaders capable of managing the level of complex collaboration required to achieve many of the SDGs are beyond the vast majority of adults, who operate at what has been labeled the "conventional stages" of adult development. As coaches deeply interested in promoting adult development, we see our task as shifting people from conventional to later post-conventional mindsets. Later in the chapter, we briefly describe vertical development and some observations on how the Cube can stimulate development toward the post-conventional.

To begin, however, we will focus on how the cube can support an increase in three of the five

inner development goals – skills of being, relating, and collaborating. To understand why the cube is so useful, we first need to explain our understanding of why collaborative relationships seem so hard to sustain. Achieving the SDGs requires long-term partnerships, but in our studies of collaboration in organizations, we have found that even among people committed to a common purpose and who want to be in collaborative relationships, sustaining them over time is difficult, and they often fail.

We argue that it's because we are sense-making beings, and much of our beliefs about others and situations come from stories we make up and treat as the truth (Weick, 1995). Because these stories we make up tend to be more negative than the truth, they can destroy the relationship over time. As a result, collaboration requires acting against this common process and constantly learning from our experience together. This is where the Experience Cube is useful. After briefly describing the cube, we will describe how using the cube can increase competencies in Being, Relating, and Collaborating.

The Reason Collaborative Relationships are so Difficult to Sustain.

People differ in how much time and effort they put into understanding why their boss, co-workers, customers, or team members do and say what they do, but we all do it. We are sense-making machines, compelled to "make sense" of the people we regularly have to interact with. When your team member does something confusing, strange, awkward, or off-putting, what is the likelihood you will bring it up and ask them why they did that and what it means? The answer is likely affected by the office culture where you work, norms and expectations, and your personal history of managing "conflict". However, most of the time, people do not ask

about it. What if the strange behavior comes from someone you have invested in – a business partner? A spouse? Others you are hoping to work toward some SDG with? How direct are you, and if you are direct, how is that working out? The ones who are "direct" but find it makes their relationships worse often make a simple but profound mistake the cube helps to explain. We'll take it up under the Relating section.

When confronted with an unpleasant interaction, most will mull it over or take it to third parties, like a spouse or trusted co-worker, to discuss and make sense of. We make up a story about what is happening in that person's head and then forget it's a story. It becomes "the truth," and we might even confide it to others who ask our opinion of so and so. Future acts of sensemaking depend on past acts of sensemaking, or things don't make sense. Once we have a story that works well, we are much more likely to notice things that reinforce the story and ignore things that don't fit.

One result of this pervasive process is that groups and organizations become composed of people operating under very different stories (narratives), making it harder to understand each other and collaborate. Even more problematic is that our stories tend to be more negative than reality. For example, you don't return my email, and I assume you are avoiding me when, really, it got deleted when my host server went down.

We call an interaction between two or more people, where the things they say and do are influenced by the sensemaking or stories about the other that have not been checked out, "interpersonal mush." Over time, if the mush is

not cleared out, it gets more toxic. The mush will grow in any collaborative relationship that lasts longer than a few weeks. In field studies by Gervase and students, they consistently found about 4 out of 5 strained relationships at work were due to the mush. When the mush got cleared out (that is, people described and listened to each other's experience), the relationships improved.

Once a partnership is in place, we believe interpersonal mush is the most significant barrier to sustaining the high levels of trust, cooperation, and motivation required for collective leadership to accomplish the SDGs. Most partnerships begin with good feelings and high hopes. Working toward meaningful goals like the SDGs provides motivation and a sense of camaraderie. Inevitably, however, unless there is frequent work to clear out the mush, relationships will experience strain. When partners come from different cultures and ages and with different agendas, negative mush is even more likely to appear. Trust and the desire to be in the partnership will fade away. So, we focus the cube and the other tools in our kit on understanding our own and others' experience to periodically clear out the mush and keep our partnerships healthy.

To sustain effective relationships, especially when that relationship must manage ambiguous, complex, volatile, and uncertain challenges, people need to be able to learn from their experience together. Doing that is aided by having a common model of experience from which to talk. For that, we offer the Experience Cube.

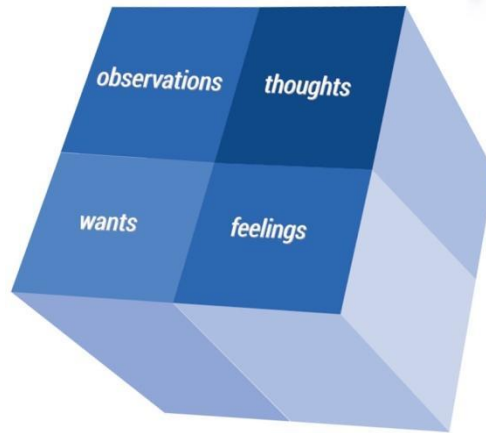


Figure 1. The Experience Cube

The Experience Cube¹

We have long asserted that each person's moment-to-moment experience is primarily created from the inside out (Bushe, 2001), and recent developments in neuroscience support this position (Seth, 2021). Because experience is generated mainly from the inside out, it means that, at any given moment, everyone has a different experience. The cube is a model that allows you to explore your own experience and to get curious about the experience of others.

The Experience Cube is a model of experience that has five key assumptions.

1. Experience comprises four elements: Observations, Thoughts, Feelings, and Wants.

Observations

What a video would record; we could play it back and hear or see it. Observation is the only element of experience with an objective reality. However, people differ in how well they observe and the quality of their recall. We have found a widespread tendency to confuse thoughts for observations. Any interpretation of what was said or done is a thought. Any description of another person's experience (e.g., she's happy) is a thought, not an observation.

Thoughts

All cognitive processes and outputs are included here, like beliefs, perceptions, assumptions, stories, calculations, analyses, imagination, reasoning, interpretation, summarizing, predicting, and so forth. We teach that it is essential to know the difference between observations and thoughts; one is objective, and the other is subjective. One is facts, and the

¹ It has been noted that there are some similarities between the Non-Violent Communication model, another model in the IDG toolkit, and the Experience Cube. There are some key differences: 1) The Experience Cube is not a tool for resolving conflict, it is a model of human experience that helps to define self-awareness and the requirements for interpersonal clarity. 2) The Experience Cube

foregrounds the importance of thoughts and the prevalence of thoughts in human experience – which is largely excluded from the NVC model. 3) The element of “wants” in the Cube covers a lot more territory than “needs” and “requests” in the NVC model. 4) The Experience Cube is just one tool in a large set of skills that we think are required to sustain long-term collaboration.

other is opinion. When people think their opinions are facts, they cannot learn from experience. We also teach that knowing the differences between thoughts and feelings is essential.

Feelings

All bodily sensations are feelings. Often, these sensations are messages from the body that can be interpreted. Emotions can significantly influence what happens even if we don't pay attention to them. Most people take emotion into account during social interaction. Even the least emotionally intelligent person is likely to scan for what their boss is feeling before pitching for a raise. However, even when we acknowledge their importance, people might feel anxious about discussing their feelings or bringing feelings into professional conversations. But if they don't, it creates mush because the other person will interpret their feelings. If they appear at all emotional, the story about what they are feeling will probably be worse than reality.

However, to create interpersonal clarity, it's best to avoid *expressing* emotions, acting them out. Recent research shows that when we become emotionally triggered or flooded, we lose the ability to solve problems or engage in self-reflective practices. Physically embodying and acting on emotions tends to make others anxious, particularly if it causes emotional contagion (Herrando & Constantinides, 2021). Others will focus on containing the emotions, not on getting clear. What is required is a calm, dispassionate description of your emotions. To be able to do that, you first need to be aware of what you are feeling, which means paying attention to sensations in the body. For many people, that has not been encouraged. Instead, we tend to encourage children not to pay attention to feelings, to suck it up, to walk it off, to stop crying. For some, simply paying attention

to sensation is a significant first step in becoming more self-aware.

Being aware of feelings requires not confusing them with thoughts. It is very common for people to call a thought a feeling. Some examples: I feel we ought to try a different route; I feel like we've been through this before; I feel that we should spend money on it; I feel as if there are more questions than answers. Reserving the word "feel" for sensations coming from the body really helps increase our awareness of this part of our experience.

Similarly, it's important to stop using "feel" when talking about wants. I feel like a coffee; I feel better about that option; I feel we should try it out—these are all references to wants.

Wants

In addition to wants and needs, this element of experience includes goals, targets, aspirations, dreams, motivations, as well as don't wants. We have found that what people want is the most unique element of human experience. It's much easier to guess what a person thinks or feels than what they want. When we sense-make, we're most likely to assume others want what we'd want if we said or did what they did – but that is almost always wrong. All forms of collaboration, like win-win negotiation and non-violent communication, require that people honestly describe what they want – but that can be easier said than done. First, does the person understand the needs, desires, motives, patterns, and traumas influencing them in each moment? Assuming that we always have many different wants at any moment, some of which can even be contradictory, opens us up to being more aware of wants. Secondly, how do we expect the other to treat our wants? If the assumption is that if you care about me you will give me what I want, people will have much less enthusiasm for having that conversation. Clarity is encouraged when the norm is to describe your wants without believing others are responsible

for fulfilling them. Collaboration will not persist if people aren't getting what they want, and it's hard to know what people want if they don't tell us.

2. Experience refers to our moment-to-moment experience, and to learn from experience together, we have to be able to talk "right here, right now."

We can't learn from our experience if we don't know what it is; the only "real" experience is available to us right now. Memories of past experiences are open to many distortions. Expectations of future experiences are only possibilities. As sensemaking beings, we make sense of our past acts in a way that conforms to our story of ourselves (Weick, 1995). If we are willing to attend to our in-the-moment experience while acting, we may find thoughts, feelings, and/or wants we weren't aware of before.

Someone's in-the-moment experience is a consequence of their history, biology, ideologies, traumas, victories, beliefs, self-image, hormones, what they recently ate, and probably much else. We can know our in-the-moment experience without knowing why we have those thoughts, feelings, or wants. However, whatever we bring from our past and images of the future that influence our current experience is part of right now. Whatever of that is relevant to the other people in the conversation is part of right here.

3. We have all four elements of experience in all our waking time.

4. Some of our experience we are aware of, and some we are not.

These two assumptions combine into a profound stance for learning from experience. By holding these assumptions, we assume that even if we are unaware of having feelings, wants, observations, or thoughts at the moment, they

are nonetheless there to be uncovered. The experience cube assumes that there are always aspects of our experience we are unaware of; that is why it's a cube. Some of our experience is on the surface, easy to know. Other aspects are further down, requiring more intention and attention to be known. Some are near the bottom and very difficult to uncover. We have found that people differ significantly in which elements of experience they find easy and difficult to access and the speed at which they can access them.

5. We can all learn to be more aware of our moment-to-moment experience, but we may never be fully aware of all aspects of our experience.

Simply paying attention to the four elements of the Experience Cube will increase self-awareness. Regularly taking a few minutes to consider what observations most occupy your attention, what you think about them, how you feel, and what you want will significantly increase anyone's self-awareness. Journaling amplifies the benefits of "taking a lap around the cube."

[The Experience Cube offers a simple, concrete model for clearing the mush.](#)

Interpersonal mush is managed by attaining interpersonal clarity, where I know what my experience is, what your experience is, and the difference between them. The cube provides a simple, practical model to support that.

It provides a clear definition of self-awareness. To be self-aware, I need to know what I am observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting in this moment.

It identifies what needs to be said. To fully describe my experience to others, I need to tell them what I am observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting, and often, it's helpful to describe past events that influence my current experience.

Because we are sensemaking beings, compelled to make sense of those significant to us, others will make assumptions about whatever element we leave out.

It identifies what we need to be curious about to fully understand others' experiences: what they are observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting.

Using the Cube to Achieve Inner Development Goals

The following describes how a person, relationship, or group can use the Experience Cube to increase the IDG skills listed under Being, Relating, and Collaborating. We will provide an overview and then report what 15 Clear Leadership instructors² from Canada, the US, and Europe thought. During a 90-minute Zoom workshop, we had three rounds of small, random groups to discuss how the Experience Cube could facilitate Being, Relating, and Collaborating. After each overview, we offer the bullet points from small group report-outs posted in chat. They've been organized and lightly edited.

1. Being

As a model of experience, the Cube provides a simple yet ever-unfolding roadmap for self-awareness. First, it clearly defines self-awareness: the ability to know, in the present moment, what one is observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting. Secondly, it encourages people to look beyond their surface awareness in all four elements and assume that deeper layers are yet to be discovered. It encourages people to consider that even when they aren't aware of any feelings or wants in the present moment, there are likely to be some just out of awareness. The Cube teaches that learning to be self-aware is greatly enhanced by simply having

the intent to be aware and the willingness to inquire about one's in-the-moment experience in each element of the Cube. These further promote inner development goals of integrity, authenticity, and openness to learning.

To use the cube for self-awareness, we have an exercise where people pick something they are struggling with, and we have them unpack it by "walking the cube." In our courses, we tape experience cubes on the ground so that people can walk around as they unpack their experience, moving from one quadrant to another and embodying it. At the end of the chapter, we will describe an exercise a group working on an SDG can do using this approach. As they walk, they might gain insight into their experience, for example: "I do not know what I want in this situation." One common outcome of walking the cube is that people realize, maybe for the first time, how much of their experience is generated from the inside out with lots of thoughts and feelings based on very few observations.

Responses to how can people use the Experience Cube to increase their skills of Being?

Self-Awareness, Presence, Integrity and Authenticity, Inner Compass, Openness and Learning Mindset

- The cube is simple, practical, but allows one to go deep.
- There is a mutual flow between the cube and IDG framework.
- The cube simplifies the IDG - the tool helps one go deeper / more specific / practical

Palaemona Morner, Scott Bruce, Thomas Safarik, and Victoria Tiller,

² We were joined by Beth Ann Derksen, Camilla Ruden, Cathryn Lecorre, Cindy Coix, Dary Wright, Galloway, Helen Roberts, Josh Stigall, Matthieu Bourgue, Palaemona Morner, Scott Bruce, Thomas Safarik, and Victoria Tiller.

- The cube increases my self-awareness - allows me to peel apart observations and thoughts
- Paying attention to feelings and becoming more literate about them can support our emotional intelligence and, therefore our ability to regulate, connect and avoid reactivity
- Sitting in curiosity can take us very deep into self-awareness, depending on the authenticity and transparency of the person
- We can use it as a template for journaling. It is powerful to use on your own.
- 'Presence' - the power of the tool works best in the moment
- Use it to work through a challenge - unpack the observations etc, leads to greater clarity. It encourages slowing down, to support the separation of thoughts and observation accurately - confusing them can be experienced by others as judgment
- In terms of inner compass the cube gives permission to some people to acknowledge their wants – both what they want for themselves and for others. How are things fitting with my values - inner compass
- Using it with others with curiosity connects with 'Openness and Learning Mindset' IDG
- Helps recognize that 'being' can be different for different people in the moment
- The cube can help navigate "right/ wrong" thinking
- The more contentious the issue the more it may be valuable for us to stay in observation longer

- It's a non-linear process. It doesn't have to start in observations, but needs to cover all domains to achieve clarity.
- Visually, the IDG framework doesn't suggest depth the way that the cube does. This 3D concept is helpful - implicit invitation to go deeper.

2. Relating

We teach that you can tell people what is in your head, or they can make it up – those are your only options. And if they make it up, their story will likely be worse than the reality. So using the cube to describe your experience, when needed, is essential to building and sustaining effective relationships. However, many have seen relationships deteriorate after being "open and honest." We don't advocate being open and honest, but we do advocate being skillfully transparent. What's the difference? Encouraging others to be "open and honest" is often interpreted as permission to say whatever is top of mind. Too often, what comes next is their judgments of the other. This usually leads to defensiveness and hurt feelings. "Being direct" will worsen relationships when what you are direct about are your judgments. However, what is useful is to know your experience of me. That is different. I can't argue with your experience, and if you don't tell me what it is, I'm forced to make it up. To enhance relationships when our interactions create negative mush, we have to unpack our judgments, identify the experiences that led to them, and be willing to describe those without judgment.

At its most superficial level, the Cube teaches that to understand another's experience, we must inquire into what they observe, think, feel, and want. Utilizing the Cube for self-awareness and understanding others develops an appreciation for the notion that everyone always has a different experience, which increases the capacity for appreciation, connectedness, empathy, and humility. Once people start using

the cube, they typically become less judgmental, as judgment is often the outcome of a mental/intellectual polarity: right vs wrong. In any partnership, anyone's experience is as valid as anyone else's. There are still facts, but disagreements are rarely over facts; they are mostly over what those facts mean. Any partnership will have to find ways to integrate the plurality of meanings each partner brings to their work on the SDGs.

We have an exercise called Listening Through the Cube to use the cube to build relating skills. In this exercise, someone listens to another's experience without interrupting or offering advice. They simply listen to be able to paraphrase their experience until that person agrees that they understand it. While listening, the listener uses the Cube to organize their listening and invites the talker to fill in any parts of the Cube that the talker has not yet covered - for example, by asking, "I haven't heard what you want in this situation, can you tell me what you want?" This kind of unconditional listening to show understanding of the other's experience before suggesting alternatives greatly increases people's connectedness and willingness to listen to each other and consider different ways of making sense of the situation.

In teaching these skills to 10th-grade high school students in Estonia, teachers remarked on how different the students showed up in other classes. No longer did they argue about who was right and wrong; they showed a marked increase in appreciating and encouraging different points of view. Recognizing that everyone is always having a different experience, the Cube supports people in being curious about and better connected to others.

Responses to how can people use the Experience Cube to increase their skills of Relating?

Appreciation, Connectedness, Humility, Empathy and Compassion

- The cube is a practical tool. Use the cube to listen to the other person.
- The cube process helps to explore the differences between individuals.
- If we want to encourage authenticity in others, showing up as authentic enables others to be authentic. Deepening awareness of our experience makes us more authentic.
- The cube process can help individuals express ideas in a more neutral way - explore the common here and now.
- The cube can help those that need to find their voice.
- The cube is incredibly disarming, when we ask people to describe their here and now it raises the level of authenticity, openness . It brings people into the qualities described in the book *Becoming the Change* that makes learning possible in groups.
- Helping people focus on the here and now - helps with presence. We very seldom come into this moment; it's more about the past or the future, but here and now is the only thing that is real.
- Here and now allows us to be curious without judgment, fear or opinion, with empathy and understanding – that can be foundational to an open mindset.
- Helps me understand the cultural context of the other .
- Connecting while being different is often our challenge, and the cube assumes we will be different and that is ok. Allows us to appreciate difference.

- Just knowing people are having a different experience shifts our relating. We learn to appreciate the other point of view and then that opens us up to more appreciation. It allows us to celebrate others experience and uniqueness. If I start to understand our wants that leads to connectedness because we are all wanting the same thing.
- When people come to a meeting they often have preconceptions about what will happen and it can be really hard to shift focus to a common agenda. By asking themselves right now what they are thinking, feeling and wanting can elevate the self awareness and group awareness. It's so useful for asking questions from.
- The cube is skill and a tool to separate self from self and others. Understand experience from sorting and sense-making. Builds connectedness. When we see the difference between experiences it builds compassion , humility and empathy.
- Empathy is required to listen through the cube. It's almost like a snowball or something else that grows as it's used. Amplification might be a better term. The more we are in the Here and Now the more the opportunity to amplify the qualities we want.
- Helps learning how perspectives land with other people. Continuous unfolding and connection with people and environment.
- Humility is acting in accordance to the needs of the situation. When you explore the cube it helps you see the bigger picture, stops you from staying in a problem solving mode.

3. Collaborating

Understanding that everyone will have a different experience, that we don't need to have the same experience to collaborate, and that in

any collaborative relationship, everyone's experience is equally valid creates the context for leaders to build genuinely collaborative teams and organizations. It shifts the leaders' focus from thinking their job is to ensure everyone is having the "right experience" to ensuring the variety of experiences can be voiced and heard.

Utilizing the Cube for communication increases people's willingness and ability to understand each other and supports true collaboration. The Clear Leadership framework argues that the single greatest reason well-intentioned people are unable to sustain collaboration is the negative sense-making that builds up over time. Interpersonal mush has several consequences that get in the way of collaboration (Bushe, 2009). Even when people recognize this, they can be afraid to check out their stories because they implicitly frame having different experiences as conflict. When people really get that everyone always has a different experience and that we don't need to have the same experience to work together, the willingness to describe and learn about each other's experience increases dramatically.

To use the Cube for collaborating, we have a method called a learning conversation. A successful learning conversation requires more tools and skills than just the Cube, but we offer it here as an example of how to use the Cube to sustain collaboration. In a learning conversation, two people inquire into their patterns of relating. This is often motivated by some unproductive or unsatisfying pattern but can be useful even when things are good just to keep the mush at bay.

Take a moment to think about some relationship that is less than satisfying or productive. Isn't it obvious to you how they are the problem, and if only they would change it would all be better? It's very likely if we asked that other person about it, they would describe how you are the

problem. For any pattern to exist, each person has to play their part. For a learning conversation to be successful, each person has to be open to the possibility that they have a part in it and be curious about their own role in the problem pattern. They need to be willing to describe their experience (not judgments) through the cube so that the other can hear it without becoming reactive. They need to listen to the other's experience through the cube and summarize it back to them. In the learning conversation, one person starts talking, and the other listens. They switch roles once the listener can paraphrase the talker's experience to the talker's satisfaction. This process goes back and forth until they understand their own and the other's experience of the problem pattern. The goal is to understand each other's experience and clear out the mush. That creates a new and richer field of possibility for what will emerge next in the partnership. It is almost always a positive experience because the stories that were made up were worse than the reality.

A study of 32 healthcare managers after taking the Clear Leadership course (Bushe & Grossling, 2006) found that all had changed how they thought about conflict at work, and 95% had utilized the cube to engage and resolve work conflicts with those they wanted to increase collaboration with. "The most common pattern (45% of participants) in descriptions of conflict after the course was that conflict was only a misunderstanding between stories that needed to get checked out. Somewhat surprisingly, almost a quarter of individuals (24%) had completely rethought conflict such that what was previously deemed a conflict was subsequently redefined, sometimes as personally generated experience..."(p.9). Previous research has consistently found that

about 4 out of 5 conflicts between people who need to collaborate are due to inaccurate sensemaking (Bushe, 2001). The cube provides a simple but effective tool for uncovering what is really going on, which often resolves what appeared to be conflict and re-establishes collaboration.

Responses to how can people use the Exp Cube to increase their skills of Collaborating?

Communication Skills, Inclusive Mindset and Intercultural Competence, Trust, Mobilisation Skills

- Walking the cube³ helps me be present and connect with diverse groups.
- Clarifying my experience creates a more constructive way of seeing things.
- The cube process works across diverse groups - we all have thoughts, feelings, experiences.
- The cube supports dialogue not to get stuck in a debate, to listen better. Stay in the moment and talk about the experience in the moment will open up space for collaborating.
- The cube helps me manage my (and others') reactivity - park reactions.
- Being willing to describe my experience is a vulnerable act, which helps to create trust.
- Listening through the cube helps to build trust and sets the stage for co-creation by helping understand the experience of the other.
- If I really listen and hear your experience, I see our common humanity. Then If I ask more questions through the cube they will trust me more, because they see I am interested. It allows us both to elaborate and go deeper which creates trust.

³ Walking the cube refers to putting a large representation of the cube on a floor and having people stand in the part of the cube they are speaking

from as their partner(s) seeks to understand the speaker's experience.

- When I become more aware of my own experience, and then listen to the other's experience it gives us points of finding where we might co-create.
- Getting folks to express "wants" creates space to work together.
- Less reactive when I am able to express my wants.
- Power in naming wants and needs for collaboration.
- Maybe, in organizational contexts that even if I'm not getting what I want, I can feel like my wants have been heard and I understand why we are going in a different direction – so I still feel like I belong, which is essential for collaboration.
- Expressing more than wants creates more space. By using the cube to help people understand how they came to their wants, we can understand each other more clearly and find points of commonality. By going deeper into our experience, we can find our shared wants.
- By having everyone have a turn of walking the cube it helps those who talk less be heard, which builds collaboration.
- When it helps to create clarity about the differences, it creates a space for a more profound kind of collaboration.
- We move past people coming to the table with the agenda to convince others to think and want what I do. So, the different context of *everyone is having a different experience* makes collaboration more attainable.
- We learn that we don't have to have the same experience to collaborate – we never have.
- Instead of the differences creating polarization... it creates a wider space for collaboration. We can be differentiated.
- If I express my inner experience fully to another person, it has the impact on the

other to be willing to mobilize, to share, to engage – impact on mobilization.

- Just getting everyone to say what they want leads to a much more grounded mobilization, but it's just not about wants – it's the process of holding the container for the variety of different experiences to be voiced.
- The cube can be used in the context of conflicts or the sense that there are different groups, contexts, agendas to find common ground.
- This builds more motivation - a willingness to move forward.
- Using the cube to sell things or ideas, helps with collaboration. Helps with communication skills. It is important to paraphrase and mirror the other.

The Experience Cube and Adult Development

Achieving the SDGs probably requires leaders exhibiting post-conventional adult development patterns of thinking and relating (Keegan, 1984; Torbert, 2020). Constructivist developmental theory (Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1994; Loevinger, 1976) provides a roadmap to adult development that identifies a series of self-sealing stages that provide complete and coherent explanations of self and the world. Each successive stage builds on the previous one so that stages cannot be skipped over. Each stage is a new resolution of the paradox of the desire to belong and be a separate individual (Kegan, 1982). At each later stage, what was once seen as a part of oneself is now seen as something one has, not what someone is. Studies of adult populations have found that around 75% of the adult population is in two stages: one where people primarily identify with their expertise and the next stage where people primarily identify with their roles and accomplishments (Binder, 2023). These are

referred to as conventional stages of development.

Leaders at the conventional stages tend not to be curious about other people's experience and tend to overestimate the accuracy of their sensemaking. They generally don't realize that everyone is always having a different experience, nor how much their assumptions about others are stories they've made up. Interpersonal conflicts are often framed as needing to figure out who is right and wrong, and there is frequently an unconscious desire to "win." They tend to view polarities and paradoxes in either/or terms and make sense out of things in linear and logically consistent ways, missing paradoxical, systemically circular realities. While they can see the utility of addressing conflict for achievement, they tend not to be aware of inner conflicts and often split off and project their inner conflicts onto their environment. One common way this might show up is that rather than take responsibility for agreeing to take on too much work and now struggling to keep my agreements, I will blame those I made those agreements with for asking for too much.

Post-conventional patterns of thinking and relating demonstrate a greater valuing of relationships in contrast with the cherishing of achievements, ability, and ideals, but not at the expense of one's individuality. They no longer identify with their roles and achievements; they have roles and achievements. Instead, they identify with their choices and choicefulness. They make sense of themselves and the world as an almost infinite variety of opportunities, perspectives, and meanings, some of which are chosen and others not, including one's identity. The hallmark of the post-conventional stage is the acknowledgment of inner conflicts rather than repressing or projecting them, and therefore, the ability to track one's own experience and the experience of others with

minimal distortion. There is a genuine respect for other people's autonomy while acknowledging mutual interdependence. Individuality and uniqueness in self and others are cherished. Spontaneity, sincerity, and intensity are characteristics of people operating at post-conventional stages, and feelings tend to be vividly expressed.

Our contention, and we believe this would be shared by those who study and work with vertical development, is that achieving the SDGs requires leaders operating at post-conventional stages of development. Recent research suggests that the complexity of contemporary life has resulted in more leaders at post-conventional levels in large organizations (Torbert, 2020). According to Cowie (2012), at post-conventional stages of development, leaders "pursue self-fulfillment rather than achievement because I have now separated myself from my activities... given up my certainty for curiosity because 'not knowing' is now a state that does not threaten my sense of who I am...Embrace complexity, paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty, and flux because I now know that reality is not defined by my wishes, hopes, fears, anxieties, theories, and beliefs or those of my cultural group...tolerate the shortcomings of myself and others because I now accept human nature for what it is rather than how I would prefer it to be...Acknowledge and cope with the inner conflicts I feel...because I now understand they are part of the human condition, and I have the courage to deal with them as such...Experience deep feelings of connection with and empathy for other people because I now realize that we all belong to the same human family...(pp.33-34).

We have seen people begin their journey from conventional to post-conventional when they confront the extent to which they operate on stories they are constantly making up about others. As they realize that even in most face-to-

face interactions, they are making up a story of how the other is receiving them and making choices about what to say and do next based on that story, it pulls the rug out from underneath the certainty that is a hallmark of conventional stages. As they explore their experience through the cube, they confront how much of their experience is typically out of their awareness. Recognizing, perhaps for the first time, that wants and feelings unconsciously influence their actions, they open up to the hidden world inside. Noticing the different quality of connecting with others, when they are allowed to have their own experience and others to have theirs, a new desire for high-quality relationships is kindled. All of these, we believe, serve to push people out of the self-sealing properties of the conventional stages and begin their journey to post-conventional stages.

This change is amplified by our teachings on "self-differentiation" (Bowen, 1985), which we operationalize as the ability to be separate and connected simultaneously. The key thing that gets in the way of interpersonal clarity is confusing one's own experience for the experience of the other, making ourselves responsible for their experience and making them responsible for our own. The way out of this is to work at being separate while connected to others. This means being separate enough to know what my experience is independent of you, yet, at the same time, being curious about your experience, wanting to know what you are observing, thinking, feeling, and wanting, without being emotionally hi-jacked.

A deeper understanding of Being emerges as people explore why it seems much easier to discuss observations and thoughts than feelings and wants. The Clear Leadership framework teaches that it comes from an inability to differentiate from our experience, that is, to be connected to our experience but separate from it simultaneously; I have experience, but I am not

my experience. We tend not to identify ourselves with our observations – we think observations come from outside, so we are not our observations. Describing them does not feel like an act of self-disclosure. Similarly, most people don't strongly identify with their thoughts – they recognize they can hold competing thoughts simultaneously, which is nothing to be ashamed of. I have thoughts, but I am not my thoughts. However, it is more common for people to identify with their feelings and wants, as they seem more subjective and more personal. When I identify with my feelings, describing them to you makes me vulnerable. Will you treat my feelings, and therefore me, well? And if I am my wants, then if I express them, and you don't give them to me, you are rejecting me. Far too vulnerable. The Experience Cube teaches that I have feelings, but I am not my feelings. I have wants, but I am not my wants. I have experience, but I am not my experience. When one learns to differentiate from one's experience, it becomes much less threatening to become aware of disowned aspects of one's experience and to be authentic when sharing experience with others. We realize that we can choose our experience - how to make sense of something or someone, feel about it, and what to want – a hallmark of post-conventional development.

How Can I/We Use the Experience Cube to Help Achieve SDGs?

The sustainable development goals can only be achieved by large groups of people working collaboratively over long periods. They could take decades or more to accomplish – and in our experience, long-term collaboration is challenging to sustain without a tool like the Experience Cube.

We will describe a pattern that we often see in collaborative relationships in organizational settings. Have you ever seen this pattern in your

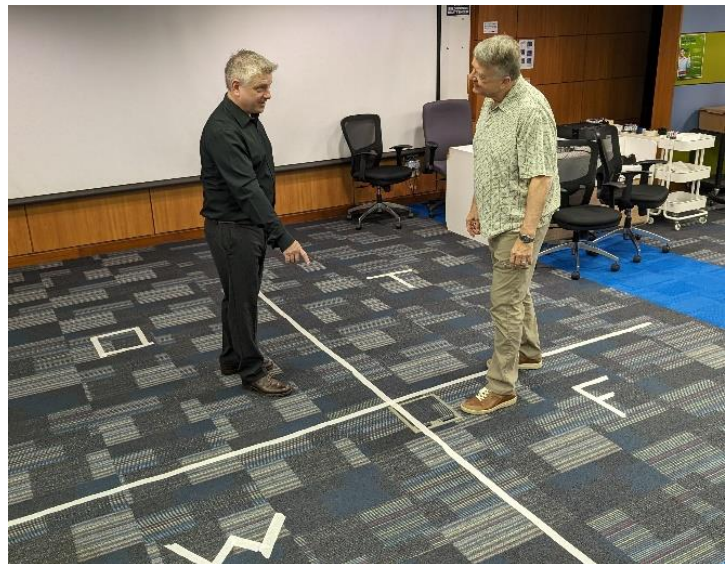
work? You joined a team of like-minded people to work toward a meaningful goal. At the start, the energy was vivid, everyone had great intentions, the ideas flowed, and everyone seemed ready and willing to get on with the work. And then, slowly (or sometimes not so slowly), collaboration started to become challenging. The behavior of some team members was puzzling to you – why was she doing or saying that? Or you just started to develop a dislike for someone on the team. You started talking more to those who shared your views and being annoyed by those who did not. Sub-groups emerge with overt or hidden conflicts. Eventually, all the energy and ideas that were there at the start do not get acted on or brought to a conclusion. Does this sound familiar? Have you had this experience in your work towards the SDGs – or are you watching the

early stages of this process in your current SDG work?

Four out of five times, this happens because people are acting on stories they made up to fill in the gaps of what they know about other people’s experience, stories that are inaccurate and more negative than reality. Because of that, when people ask and listen to each other’s experience, are honest to themselves and their team about their experience, and are curious about and respectful of others’ experiences, the conflicts go away. And if it doesn’t, it is now clear what the conflicts are really about.

The best way to do this is with a learning conversation – which we described earlier - but there is another simpler exercise that you can do with your team right now using the Experience Cube. We call it “Walking the Cube”.

Gervase and Michael Walking the Cube



1. Pick the topic that you want to explore. Some examples are your team's purpose, how the team functions, or what procedures you should be using. Any issue the group seems to be stuck on or avoiding is a candidate. Ask your team members if they are willing to inquire into their different experiences of the topic.
2. Explain how the cube works and remind them that everyone is always having a different experience, and we don’t need to have the same experience to work together, but we do need to avoid acting on our stories about each other’s experience. As people walk the cube our only job is to listen and ask questions to understand their experience

fully. Don't disagree with the person in the cube.

3. Use masking tape to create an experience cube on the ground – see the picture above.
4. Invite each team member to take a turn describing their experience of the topic by standing in the part of the cube they are talking from. If they are talking about what they think, they stand in the T. If they are saying something about what they want, they stand in the W. Sometimes it is helpful to have another member of the team (or a facilitator) walk with them, making sure they are standing in the right square, asking questions, and inviting them to go to parts of the cube they haven't spent much time in. Ensure everyone feels satisfied they understand the person's complete experience before moving on to the next person.
5. Close the exercise by discussing what you now understand about the topic and what people think should happen next. Understanding each other's experiences will create a richer, more accurate ground for what emerges next in the team's journey.

Try it out; we are sure you will find the exercise useful for your team. You can also use it to reconnect people and get them moving forward when things seem to be getting stuck.

Conclusion

Initially presented in the first edition of the book *Clear Leadership* (Bushe, 2001), the Experience Cube has been used in coaching and leadership development with tens of thousands worldwide over the last 25 years. During that time, as we taught the Cube in our *Clear Leadership* course, we witnessed almost universal improvement in participants' ability to be self-aware, relate to others, and sustain long-term collaboration and partnership. Even more promising, the cube can be an important tool to help those ready to move

from a conventional to a post-conventional mindset, essential for the kind of leadership needed to create the teams and networks that can meet the complex challenges of sustainable development.

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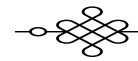
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