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INJECTING LOGIC INTO CASUAL CONVERSATION

By H. William Dettmer

Recently I was contacted by a young man from Europe who posed an interesting question:

My question is the following: How does one get structure in conversations that do not provide the possibility or occasion for using tools such as software or pen and paper? In such conversations, thoughts and utterances tend to be somewhat unproductive or even wholly unfruitful. Is that the 'sad' inherent nature of such conversations, or is there a way to improve the outcome of these conversations dramatically?

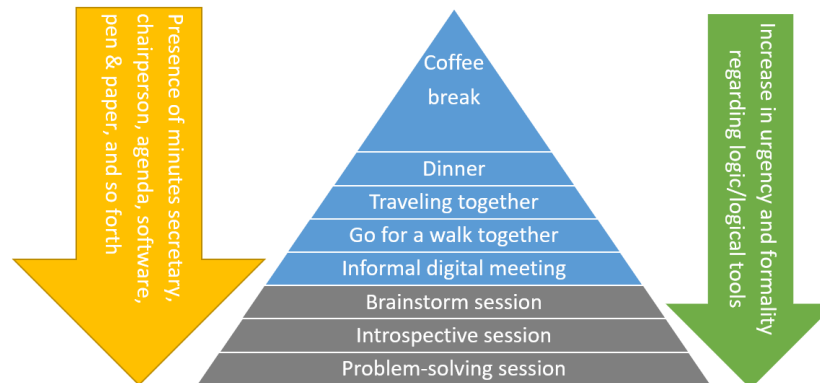
I'm sure this conundrum has occurred to others. While I myself have occasionally pondered something similar (usually only in passing, and at the same time deploring the absence of critical thinking in most informal situations), until I received his message, I never took the time to really think about it detail. Well, his message forced the issue in my mind.

I thought my response to him might have some usefulness for others, so here it is...

Hello, Jonathan...

I received both your messages. Thank you for sending them.

You raise some interesting questions. First of all, I like the structure of the figure you sent... it needs a good title, though!

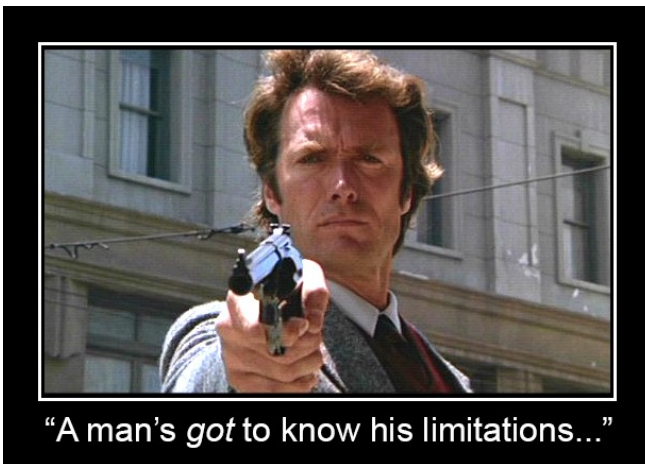


As I look through your pyramid list, I see that the items in blue all have one thing in common: they're informal and mostly unstructured. The ones in gray are more focused and structured. I'm also curious about why you placed "Introspective session" between brainstorming and problem solving. Brainstorming typically involves a number of people, as does problem solving. Introspection seems to me to be a solitary activity. In fact, introspection is the only one of all the layers that involves only one individual. All the rest are multi-person activities.

I like the continuum nature of the two arrows, too. (Formal data collection and urgency)

Your original question was: "How does one get structure in conversations that do not provide the possibility or occasion for using tools such as software or pen and paper?"

Clearly, the rigor of the Logical Thinking Process (LTP) was designed for a formal problem solving effort. More than that, it was not intended to fit into a constrained "time box," such as are the informal conversation modes in your list. Understanding this is essential to applying the "Dirty Harry" Principle ...



The LTP was never intended for casual conversation (the prevalent communication mode in the top seven layers of your pyramid). The Categories of Legitimate Reservation (CLR), however, CAN be useful in those modes. And you would do well to internalize them yourself, even if others don't understand them.

But there are other techniques that very much apply to those informal modes of interaction. They constitute a body of knowledge we can call "critical thinking." Unfortunately, just like learning the CLR, mastering critical thinking is a learning process that must be voluntarily engaged in. And while YOU yourself can do it, there's no way you can ensure that those you converse with understand what it takes to think critically... or are even willing to devote the time and effort needed to learn it themselves. Henry Ford once observed that "thinking is hard work, which is the probable reason so few people engage in it."

So, the best you can do to be prepared for the first six layers in your pyramid is to learn to think critically. And then practice, practice practice! As Miyamoto Musashi, the prototypical samurai warrior in Japan in the 17th century once observed:

"Practice is the only way you will understand what the Way of the Warrior is about. Words can only bring you to the foot of the path."

I realize that this may not entirely advance you in your search for an answer to your original question.



The best I can do is recommend chapter 12 in my [systems thinking book](#) (which you mentioned that you're already reading). That chapter is all about critical thinking, and it provides a number of references for more research in the chapter endnotes.

Between a deep understanding of the Categories of Legitimate Reservation and of critical thinking, you will probably be in the best position to influence informal conversation with others in a logical direction. However, to the extent that those you're conversing with are not knowledgeable in (or unwilling to invest the time and energy to learn) critical thinking themselves, you may find your conversations to be less than completely satisfying for you.

On the other hand, your demonstration of such understanding to those who do not have it may well persuade them that you are a logical, critical thinker and to put more stock in your arguments than they might otherwise do. That could ultimately enhance your reputation with others ... if they (and you) care about such things.

I hope that this helps!