
Using the OK Modes Model to Enhance Clarity in Communication

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Abstract

The author believes that there is a need to update transactional analysis (TA) theory so that it is congruent and applicable today, particularly in relation to the concepts of structural and functional ego states. Earlier references to the Adult ego state as a data processor led to a mix-up within transactional analysis between using Parent and Child to indicate the past when referring to structural ego states and then, conversely, to the present in the functional ego states model. This article addresses this confusion and outlines the rationale for a more recent model designed to replace the functional model and to outline transactions based on OKness. Titled *OK Modes* (Mountain & Davidson, 2011), this model is appropriate for all fields of transactional analysis, although this article focuses on its use in the organizational field. The author's aim is to develop a theoretically rational model that is congruent with the structural model of ego states.

Keywords

ego state theories, life positions, OK Modes model, structural ego states, functional ego states, integrating Adult, mindful

A Brief Review of the Structural and Functional Models of Ego States

All concepts are just that, ideas or maps designed to assist our understanding. However, using a model because it is convenient (e.g., the functional ego states model) but that does not fit with the theory attached to associated models, confuses the constructs of those models. Rather, the development of models that integrate and are congruent with each other promotes understanding, consistency, and continuity.

In transactional analysis, the validity of the structural ego states model has long been debated, prompted recently, in part, by developments in neuroscience. In the structural model, the Child ego state is viewed as a set of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that are replayed from childhood, whereas the integrating Adult is the part of us that is in the present moment. If, as neuroscience now suggests, we can develop new neural pathways, then we can also develop new ways to look after ourselves and experience playful and joyous ways of being. This process can update our core sense of self within the integrating Adult. This is what Eric Berne (1964) meant by the concept of *autonomy* (pp. 158-162).

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It is essential to be clear about which construct is being used when employing the structural ego states model. I am using the concept of the integrating Adult ego state, which reflects the fact that when we are in the here and now, we have learned and incorporated our own experiences and behaviors as well as those of significant others from our past. This is synonymous with mindfulness, which is what we call the here-and-now process within the OK Modes model.

Mindfulness in its most general sense is about waking up from a life on automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences. . . . Instead of being on automatic . . . mindfulness helps us awaken, and by reflecting on the mind we are enabled to make choices and thus change becomes possible. (Siegel, 2007, p. 5)

Therefore, this article needs to be read within that frame of reference and has implications for where I believe the self resides, namely, in the here and now of the integrating Adult. Although Berne (1961/1986) argued that “each of them, Parent, Adult, and Child, is entitled to equal respect and has its legitimate place in full and productive life” (pp. 27-28), this differs from what I am using. When people are in their integrating Adult, they can be both creative and responsive. Their behavior, thoughts, and feelings relate to the present and are not just copied from parents or parent figures, nor are they regurgitated aspects of childhood. The Adult integrates the positive aspects of parents and significant others as well as taking the best experiences from the person’s own childhood to use appropriately today. This is undertaken with thought rather than as a purely emotional reaction, which is what happens when we are in the Parent or Child ego states. It is important to emphasize that, when in the integrating Adult, we also have feelings, even though some people still describe the Adult ego state as an emotionless computer:

Despite more recent work developing Berne’s (1996/75a) incipient notion of the Integrated Adult (such as James & Jongeward, 1971; Erskine, 1988; Erskine & Moursund, 1988, Lapworth, Sills & Fish, 1993), Berne’s description of Adult as a data-processor still haunts TA. (Tudor, 2003, p. 201)

If the Adult ego state were merely a data processor, then we would be rather one dimensional and certainly not living in the here and now. Today, it is generally recognized that when we are in the integrating Adult ego state, we think, feel, and behave appropriately for the situation. For example, if we are sad because something has happened, it is important to appropriately express our feelings without being seen as coming from the Child ego state.

Students of transactional analysis often confuse the structural and functional models to an extent that does not occur with other TA concepts, and so a clear delineation between the intrapsychic and behavioral models is needed. The confusion arises partly because of the way in which the term *Adult* is used in both the structural and functional models. On the one hand, practitioners might say, for example, that someone is coming from the Child ego state because he or she is expressing a feeling, or from a Parent ego state because he or she is structuring. In fact, there needs to be a full diagnosis before the practitioner can be sure because the person might be coming from the integrating Adult.

By using the construct of the *integrating Adult*, we can refer to nurturing, structuring, cooperative, and playful behaviors in the here and now rather than reaching back into history to recall a parent or be playful as a child. This relates to Cox’s (1999, pp. 49-58) observation that Berne’s extero-psyche and arche-psyche subsequently developed into the five-category functional model, which then became divorced from the structural model and confusingly interchanged with it. Erskine (2003) further noted that the Parent and Child ego states are “non-integrated fixations of unresolved previous experiences” (p. 87).

The originators of the OK Modes model are in accord with Cox and Erskine and have therefore decided that the very premise for the functional ego states model requires rethinking.

The OK Modes Model

The OK Modes model is based on one of the basic philosophical tenets of transactional analysis: OKness. If we operate from the basis that we and others are OK, then effective communication is more likely to follow.

In addition to the points made earlier, the rationale for developing a new model includes the following:

- Inquiring about the past depends on the contract. It is not always appropriate to ask people whether their behavior or beliefs originate from their parents or significant others or if that is how they were as a child. In some fields and some situations we can only use behavioral and social diagnosis.
- Organizational consultants and coaches have frames of reference with regard to regression that are understandably different from psychotherapists. Consultants and coaches need to ensure that clients can remain in the here and now while referencing the past, whereas psychotherapists may be able use such regression in their work with clients.
- In psychotherapy, the therapist usually has a contract to inquire about intrapsychic processes. This is highlighted by TA psychotherapist writers who diagram transactions using the structural ego states model, which assumes a contract for inquiry into the person's past. (In coaching there may be a contract to inquire about the past, but that cannot be taken for granted in all organizational work.) The structural ego states diagram used by psychotherapists has slipped into use in other fields without sufficient questioning regarding its relevance and appropriateness.

To expand on this last point, the structural ego states model requires four types of diagnosis—historical, phenomenological, social, and behavioral (Berne, 1961/1986, pp. 68-80)—which means that the context and contract need to be in place for this to happen. When that is not the case, the model should not be used. In contrast, the OK Modes model avoids dipping and diving between the here and now and the there and then and, instead, deals with what is in front of us and how we need to transact. Thus, when referring to the structural ego states model, I use the concept of the integrating Adult, highlighting its here-and-now nature. This is the only ego state that links with the OK Modes model and with the mindful process and its associated behaviors.

As with all fields, organizational transactional analysis deals with ambivalence all the time and requires models that fit with the contract. The OK Modes model is effective even when we are not sure which structural ego state someone is in. Structurally, although it may look as if a person is in the Child ego state, he or she may actually be in the Child in the Parent or vice versa. And unless there is a contract to do so, it is not appropriate to use the four types of diagnosis to inquire further. Course participants and coaching clients merely need to know how to effectively transact with another person in any given context. We can work with this uncertainty as we are exploring what went on at the social and behavioral levels. When course participants and coaching clients are learning to analyze the communication between individuals, the use of the OK Modes model is more appropriate, even though the structural ego states model can be useful for their own intrapsychic analysis.

The functional ego states model muddied the communication waters somewhat by offering a simplistic model that many mixed up with the structural model, taking certain behaviours as fact (e.g., “They were coming from Critical Parent”). This type of statement conflated behavior with an ego state and sometimes led to communication problems. It is time for a new approach, one that offers clarity and is more easily understood.

Development of the OK Modes Model

When Ernst (1971), the originator of the OK Corral, drew four positions in a quadrant, he was writing about visible behaviors rather than underlying beliefs. Since the early 1990s, I have been coloring the OK Corral in red and green because doing so made it clearer that communication would stop when the person was in one of the red not-OK quadrants and would more likely flow when he or she was in an OK/OK green quadrant. My colleague, Chris Davidson, and I followed this color-coding system when we developed the OK Modes model. (Due to the fact that the hard copy of the *Transactional Analysis Journal* does not show color, we have indicated the color green in regular font and red in italics to represent the effective and ineffective areas, respectively.)

The Model

The OK Modes model has 10 communication behavior modes, four of which are effective and prompted by the process of mindfulness. (The OK Modes and the structural ego states models are kept separate by using the integrating Adult for the latter and mindfulness for the former, thus avoiding a replay of earlier confusion between models.) The concept of mindfulness is used here to mean taking account of current reality and acting accordingly. The other six modes are ineffective and likely to be part of a person's script. These six modes use adjectives that are simply examples, and they could be extended and expanded.

Definition of Effective

Effective means:

- A communication is likely to achieve the intended response or result. Information is received, necessary action(s) follow, and good relationships are maintained or developed.
- Communication will (if necessary and desired) be able to continue, either now or later.
- Both parties to the communication, whether they agree with each other (or not) or like each other (or not) maintain an "I'm OK, You're OK, They're OK" position (Davidson, 1999, pp. 6-9; Mountain & Davidson, 2011, pp. 22-24).

Definition of Ineffective

Ineffective means that any or all of the following apply:

- The intended communication is not understood.
- The person receiving the communication is himself or herself invited into a not-OK position or to make someone else not OK.
- Communication may be broken in some way and so does not continue, or it escalates to even more discomfort or misunderstanding for those involved. In extreme cases, the rift may be permanent.
- What needs to be done is less likely to be done or may be done incorrectly.

Colors

As mentioned earlier, just as we do with the OK Corral, the OK Modes model is diagrammed in green and red: green for effective and red for ineffective transactions. Adopting this approach makes it easy to visualize the stop and go (or flow) of each exchange in a conversation and therefore to track

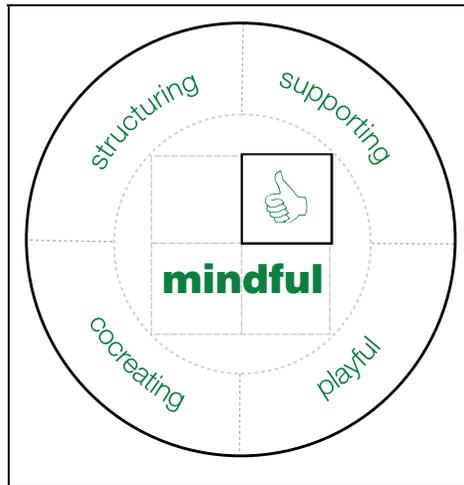


Figure 1. The OK (Effective) Modes of Behavior.

and understand what went on. This rather simple idea of using traffic-light colors is positively received from those learning transactional analysis, including young people.

I will now describe the OK Modes diagram piece by piece. I have used the role of leader where an example may be useful.

Effective Modes of Behavior

When we are in one of the four effective modes (supporting, playful, cocreating, or structuring), we are responsive to the present situation (see Figure 1). Generally, when something is said from an effective mode, the response from the other person is likely to be from an effective mode and vice versa. Of course, in reality, there are not just four effective ways of behaving, and these descriptors are intended to be impressionistic rather than definitive. It is also the case that some behaviors will fall on a continuum between two or more of the modes.

The Mindful Process

People do not just respond or react, they also initiate. In addition, how we behave in any particular moment will depend on whether we respond in a reflexive or automatic way, one that is rooted in the past or in the present moment and dealing with current reality.

The central area of Figure 1 is labeled *mindful* to remind us that we need to bear in mind the totality of the situation and the possible consequences of any actions and interventions. This relates to the concept of the integrating Adult in the structural model. It is not a mode of behavior because we cannot actually see someone being mindful, but we will see his or her subsequent actions, which reflect the person's mindful process. The mindful process is circular to represent being in the flow, taking into account current reality, and being effective in the moment.

When in this central circle, positive behaviors have been incorporated and developed from the past and brought appropriately into the present as resources to draw on. In Figure 1, the effective modes have been placed within mindful process to reinforce this. When we are mindful, we can discuss and debate with others, be interested in others' opinions, and have thoughts and feelings that are related to the present. If circumstances change, we can decide whether to move to a different effective mode. We may not always be overtly aware of doing this, because when in this mode, we

are relaxed and creative. However, there are times when we need to stand back and observe a situation before deciding what to do next, which is why mindful is in the center. All of the effective modes communicate “I’m OK, You’re OK, They’re OK.”

Supportive Mode

When in this mode, we are appropriately caring and affirming in our behavior and do not aim to take away the other person’s power or assume his or her inability to do something. We will be consistent, our support will be reliable, and it will fit what is actually needed.

Structuring Mode

This is a boundary-setting mode that facilitates offering constructive criticism and being caring although firm. Using this mode, we respond to, and deal with, situations and take action when a limit has been reached and overstepped. For example, a trainer outlines the schedule for the day and ensures it is upheld unless there is a need to alter arrangements.

Cocreative Mode

Cocreativity in this model means being willing to join with others to develop and create something different, whether that be in discussion or in practical or logistical terms. The term was introduced to transactional analysis by Summers and Tudor (2000). Tudor (2014) defined cocreative as “emphasises the ‘co’ (mutual, joint) aspect of professional relationships, whether therapeutic, educative, and/or consultative. . . . The ‘co’ of co-creative acknowledges the transactional, interrelational, mutual, joint, and co-operative, as well as partnership” (p. xix).

From this mode, we can create something with others that is greater than the sum of its parts. This mode develops through learning the rules that help us live with and work alongside others for the good of all. Both leaders and team members need to be cocreative and cooperative, which is different from being compliant. When relating from this mode, we behave in ways that keep us and others OK. We can consider the pros and cons of suggestions and work with others. This may include such basic administrative details as when and where to meet and who will do what so that we can develop mutuality and cocreativity.

Playful Mode

This is the creative, fun-loving, curious, and energetic mode and is closely related to the cocreative mode. One of the strengths of this mode is that we can confront others playfully as a way of dealing with difficult situations. This can diffuse a potential problem and communicate a message well. We can be appropriately humorous and also encourage others to be playful. Our frame of reference is largely positive, and we experience the world as interesting and exciting.

When in the mindful process, it is possible to choose which of the effective modes to use depending on the situation. If someone is invited to use an ineffective mode, he or she has a choice, although it may not always be a conscious one. The person can accept the invitation and move to a subservient or domineering position in the conversation or resist the invitation by staying in an OK/OK/OK stance and responding from one of the effective modes, thus remaining in a mindful process. This would be a crossed transaction.

From the mindful process, we will treat ourselves and others as OK and are more likely to achieve a positive response. We can also have healthy fun from there and enjoy cocreating with others. This follows Berne’s (1961/1986) idea that when we are operating in a mindful, integrated way, we are

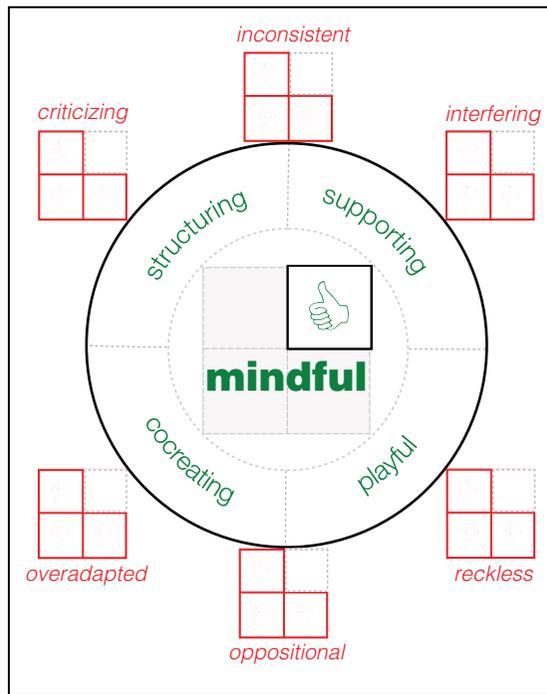


Figure 2. The Complete OK Modes Diagram.

charming, courageous, and appropriately using our past experiences in the present. This is different from someone who is operating in an ineffective, unintegrated mode and who may “revert to being charming, and may feel that he should be courageous” (p. 195).

Ineffective Modes of Behavior

I will now describe the ineffective modes and add them to Figure 1 to show the complete model, thus making it possible to see how the ineffective behaviors relate to the effective ones. In the full diagram (Figure 2), miniature OK Corrals have been incorporated to reinforce the message that ineffective modes reflect and invite a not-OK response and that the four effective modes reflect and invite an “I’m OK, You’re OK, They’re OK” response. However, depending on the context, analyzing which of the ineffective, not-OK positions someone would go into on the OK Corral is more notional than essential. These mini OK Corrals need to touch the circle to show the possibility of the person moving into one of those scripty behaviors.

If we slip into one of the ineffective modes, we have left the present and are operating as we did as a child or as a significant person from our childhood behaved with us. In Figure 2, these are shown as boxes to symbolize the process of defaulting to the past behavior and in so doing, being rigid, inflexible, and therefore in script.

The ineffective zones all reflect outdated and unintegrated experiences from our past (i.e., script). We do not seem to be in control of these responses, which would more accurately be described as reactions. They are the overdone counterparts of the positive ones within the mindful process circle and are likely to be hooked by a trigger, which might be another person’s ineffective communication or when someone presses one of our buttons, that is, a sensitive issue or area for us.

When assessing which mode someone is coming from, it is not always necessary to consider which of the not-OK positions they may be in. The experience itself, through social and behavioral assessment, will be sufficient to reveal that it is one of the not-OK positions and that it is important to move to or remain in the OK/OK/OK position if we wish to proceed with effective communication that develops trust.

Criticizing Mode

When in this mode, we may be authoritarian and act as though we believe that others cannot do things as well as we can. We will either persecute, prohibit, or patronize. Leading from this mode is unlikely to result in the development of a loyal, supportive team or culture because the workforce will be tense and ill at ease. This is the overdone aspect of structuring and communicates “I’m OK, You’re Not OK.”

Inconsistent Mode

Leaders in this mode tend to change their behavior in unpredictable and apparently random ways. For example, leaders may sometimes take control when others are capable of doing things for themselves and then, at other times, sit back and leave the workforce to take control. This behavior is confusing because others do not know which position the leader will take. We only know if someone is inconsistent over time, which is why it is in the middle of the outer section of Figure 2. This mode also communicates “I’m OK, You’re Not OK” because the person either acts as if he or she can do things better than others or appears to ignore their needs.

Interfering Mode

When in this mode, our behavior is rescuing, that is, doing things for others that, in reality, they are capable of doing themselves. We can also be overindulgent or fussing. This is the overdone supporting mode in which we behaviorally express “I’m OK, You’re Not OK.”

Overadapted Mode

In this mode, behavior involves overadapting to others, that is, trying to please them without asking what they want and being passive and compliant. If a leader operates from this mode, he or she is likely to become stressed because it is not possible to please all of the people all of the time. This is the overdone cocreative mode. In this mode we express “I’m Not OK, You’re OK” or “I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK.”

Oppositional Mode

Behavior in this mode will be resisting and opposing without any objective or consistent basis for being so. Employees who do this earn a reputation for being obstructive, saying “No” when others are saying “Yes” and vice versa. Again, we are more likely to notice this over time, which is why it is in the middle at the bottom of the outer section of Figure 2. When in this mode, we are usually unwilling to hear others and consider their perspectives, and we will express “I’m OK, You’re Not OK” or “I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK.”

Reckless Mode

In this mode, we express “You’re Not OK” (or “You’re Irrelevant”) (White, 1994). At work, we will tend to behave in ways that indicate an unwillingness to take responsibility for our actions. Our energy appears unfocused, and we fail to keep to agreed on time boundaries, for instance, by frequently being late. This mode is different from the oppositional mode in that actions are not in response to another person but more the result of “doing our own thing,” regardless of the people around or the situation. This is the overdone playful mode.

When diagramming this model freehand, it is easier to just draw the red zones with a red “X.” This is a quick, useful way to show the model once workshop participants are familiar with it while still appropriately denoting ineffective transactions.

Since using the OK Modes model, I have not encountered any misunderstanding or confusion with the intrapsychic model of structural ego states. Further, workshop participants and transactional analysis students find it useful because it highlights the need to remain OK/OK/OK and to be mindful. Depending on their personality type, many have come to use the statements “I stayed in the green zone” or “I moved into the red zone,” which is often sufficient for them to know what to continue doing or what they need to change.

Application

Table 1 and Table 2 offer brief analyses of transactions using the OK Modes model (Mountain & Davidson, 2011, pp. 49-50). The link with OKness and the additional use of color assists in making things clear at both kinesthetic and cognitive levels. Even if the situation does not permit a lengthy analysis, it is possible for people to obtain a feel for when they or someone else moves into a red or green mode.

As stated earlier, in the workplace, assessment of transactions between colleagues can only be based on social and behavioral analysis because, generally, there is no contract to inquire about whether someone’s actions emanate from their parents or significant others or from how they were as a child. Therefore, we cannot be sure which structural ego state the other person is in, but we can assess through social and behavioral analysis which mode they are in. In coaching, it may be appropriate to inquire about a client’s past as well as enable his or her awareness of a particular ego state, but the person needs to be able to remain in integrating Adult structurally or mindful in the OK Modes model.

The structural ego states model is important as a concept for raising self-awareness, including our own processes, in relation to other(s). For example, when facilitating leadership training, the aim is to develop autonomous, aware individuals who are able to transact with a variety of people at different levels of the organization and who can make decisions while taking into account current reality. Therefore, understanding their own responses to a particular situation is an important prerequisite. Although the OK Modes model is used in relation to others, both the structural ego states and OK Modes models can also be used for the self.

It is worth noting that the structural Parent and Child ego states do not correspond to particular red modes in the OK Modes model. Therefore, the terms *Parent* and *Child* are not used in the OK Modes model because doing so would discount the use of the four types of diagnosis and once again mix models.

Conclusion

The OK Modes model is a useful, effective alternative to the functional ego states model. It was designed to encourage mindfulness as well as to deconfuse the intrapsychic structural ego states

Table 1. Detailed Example of Ineffective Transactions.

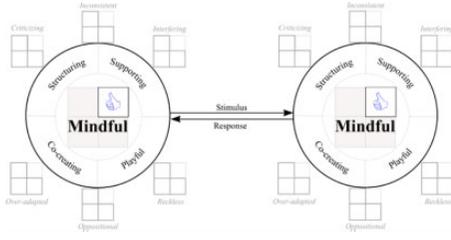
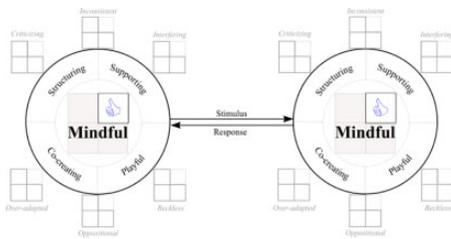
| Transaction | Mode of Behavior | Life Position |
|---|--|---|
| <p>Jo “Joan, come into my office, now!”</p> | <i>Criticizing mode</i> | I’m OK, You’re Not OK |
| <p>Joan Thinks, “What have I done wrong now?” but does not say anything. Follows Jo into the office without saving the work she is currently doing. (Once in the office) “What is the problem?” (in a small, meek voice, trying to be conciliatory)</p> | <i>Overadapted mode</i> This will later lead her to believe that life is tough and that she is useless. | I’m Not OK, You’re OK |
| | | |
| <p>Jo “At last, you’re here. Now, I want you to find out how many new sales we have had this month, and I need to have that information on my desk by 4 pm.”</p> | <i>Criticizing mode</i> | Still acting as if she believes that Joan is not OK |
| <p>Joan “OK, I have a lot going on, but I guess I can work late to finish off the other things you wanted by today” (said in a sharp, terse tone). On returning to her desk, Joan finds that she has lost all the work she was doing on the computer.</p> | Joan is being passive and is still in <i>Overadapted mode</i> . There appears to be more resistance than compliance. She is saying she will work late, but there is an ulterior message here, namely, that she resents having to do that. Had she not returned to her desk, the tension might have moved into an argument, with her boss asking what her tone of voice meant. This would have escalated the process. | Sounds as if she is in the position of I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK either |
| | | |

model from behaviors. It is the only model of its kind to be based on OKness, thus reflecting one of the central tenets of transactional analysis. Once we develop that frame of reference and are able to apply it, communication will be enhanced. However, any model we use needs to reflect the nature of the contract.

Berne created his own approach with its own concepts, and we only have to look at his publications over time to see how he developed and changed his own theory. Within this tradition, transactional analysts have continued to develop Berne’s theory, and no doubt someone will develop and amend ours. This is part of the rich tapestry of being a transactional analyst, and long may it last.

Table 2. Detailed Example of Effective Transactions.

| Transaction | Mode of Behavior | Life Position |
|---|--|---|
| Jo “Joan, would you mind coming into my office a moment? I need to discuss some statistics with you.” | Jo is behaving from mindful process – a mixture of structuring and cocreative modes | I’m OK, You’re OK |
| Joan “Fine, Jo, give me a minute while I save what I’m doing on the computer.” (She saves her work and goes to see Jo.) | Mindful process – mixture of structuring and cocreative modes | Jo’s invitation to Joan to stay OK is effective; Joan chooses to keep herself and Jo OK |
| Jo “I urgently need the statistics for this month’s sales. Could you get them to me by 4 pm?” | Jo gives information from mindful process – cocreative mode, inquiring rather than demanding the statistics, inviting Joan to cocreatively problem solve | I’m OK, You’re OK |
| Joan “Yes, I can do that, Jo, but I will need to stop doing the other things on my priority list. It sounds like this is the most important task for you right now, so if it is OK with you, I will drop the items you asked me to do this morning and get on with this.” | Joan acknowledges the current reality, for instance, that her time and the new task are important; she needs to negotiate dropping other tasks in favor of this one. | Joan remains OK/OK |
| Jo “Yes, that’s fine. I realize I have just thrown this one at you, and of course something else has to give. I trust you to manage your time.” | Jo keeps her demands reasonable. | By expressing her trust in Joan, Jo keeps the relationship OK/OK |



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