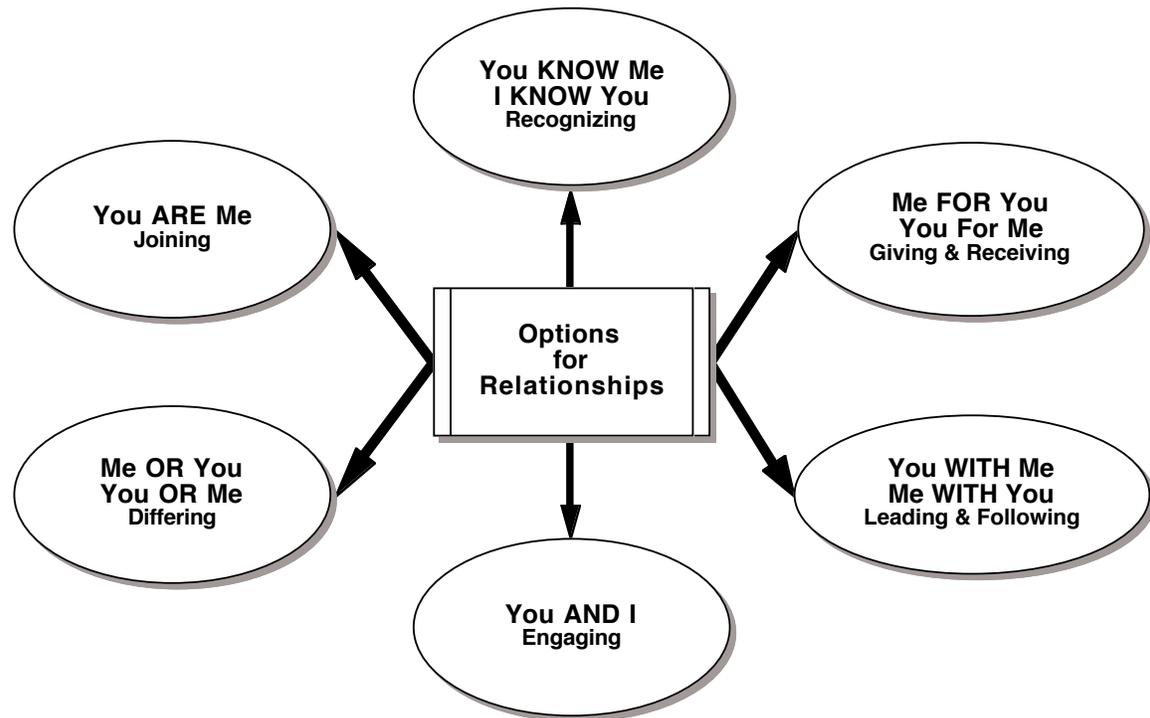


Social Competencies: Six Pathways to Better Relationships

Emily Ruppert & Joel Ziff



We are social animals. Our well-being, success, and happiness are inextricably linked to the quality of our interactions with others – in intimate relationships, at work, with family, with friends, and in our communities. In our increasingly complex, technological world, the need for social competency is even more important as we struggle to respond to the stresses and pressures in our lives.

In contemporary life, we must repeatedly learn to make connection with others as we change where we live and work. In the past, relationships developed organically: we grew up in a community, establishing life-long relationships. We lived in one place and worked at one job. Roles and norms were clear and unchanging, helping us know how to relate to others. Now, our fast-paced and ever-changing society forces us to repeatedly uproot ourselves, living in many different places and moving from one job to another. Families are also less stable as a result of changes in the rate of divorce and re-marriage.

Although this change in our lifestyle has made our lives more difficult, it also offers some opportunities. In the past, we had no choices. We had no alternatives if the community in which we lived was constricting or rigid, or if it

simply did not support our unique nature and being. There was nowhere else to go. In our lives, we have choices; we can find or create communities that fit who we are; we have second and third chances, to re-invent ourselves.

To succeed in this more complex and changing world, we need consciously to develop our capacity to be in relationship with others. In the past, we learned these skills organically and naturally in the course of lives, or we did not need complex skills because we lived in a simpler inter-personal universe. We didn't need to make new connections.

Browsing the self-help section of any bookstore demonstrates the hunger for guidance and information about how to be in relationships – how to start relationships, how to communicate, how to be intimate, how to be assertive, how to be a leader, how to resolve conflicts, how to end relationships.

Sometimes it can be confusing and overwhelming to make sense of the possibilities, to understand what we need to know. The capacity to interact well with others requires that we respond in different ways at different times with different people.

Six Pathways

The six pathways provide a framework for understanding the variety of choices, a menu that helps us clarify what is needed to resolve a particular difficulty in a relationship. Insofar as we have the capacity to use each option, we can respond most effectively at a particular moment. There are six relationship pathways:

- **You ARE Me** - Joining
- **You KNOW Me / I KNOW You** - Recognizing
- **You OR Me / Me OR You** - Differing
- **You FOR Me / Me FOR You** - Giving and Receiving
- **You WITH Me / Me WITH You** - Leading and Following
- **You and I** - Engaging

Getting Started: Our Foundations

You OR Me / Me OR You

You KNOW Me / I KNOW You

You ARE Me

The foundations of our relationships develop in early childhood. Beginning with a basic experience of connectedness, we gradually gain a sense of our separateness and individuality that results in conflict and struggle. We make connections, we make ourselves known and come to know others, and we deal with differences.

You ARE Me (Joining) – We are tribal beings. The experience of a sense of home and basic connection to others is a fundamental need. That sense of connection brings with it a feeling of rapport, safety and comfort. It expresses itself in a shared vision, purpose, and meaning that energizes the relationship and sustains the connection through stress and conflict.

This basic sense of connectedness is exemplified by the relationship between an infant and parent. In the womb, the baby and mother live as one inter-dependent being. In the first months of life, that symbiotic bond continues. The parent is attuned to the baby, sensing intuitively what the infant needs, and responding to meet those needs.

Having the experience of that connection when we are young provides a foundation for us in our adult lives. We know how it feels to be connected and experience that connection as positive and nourishing. We have faith that it is possible, recognize when we feel drawn to make connection, and allow ourselves to do so when it feels safe, appropriate, and satisfying.

Do I have the capacity to make connection? Am I able to develop basic rapport? Can I create a shared vision and mission? Do I know how to establish basic trust and safety?

You KNOW Me / I KNOW You (Recognizing) – We are also individuals, with unique experience, feelings, thoughts, and understandings. Each of us experiences the world in a unique way. We make ourselves known to others, and we come to know the experience of others.

For the infant, the discovery of ‘self’ and ‘other’ is typified by the game of peek-a-boo, when the baby begins to play with recognizing and being recognized. As

adults, we also need to understand that each person has a unique experience. We need to communicate effectively so that other people are able to understand our unique, idiosyncratic experience, to know what we sense, think, feel, and need. Similarly, we cannot assume that the experience and perspectives of others will be the same as our own. We must make the effort to know who they are, to clarify what they think, feel, and need.

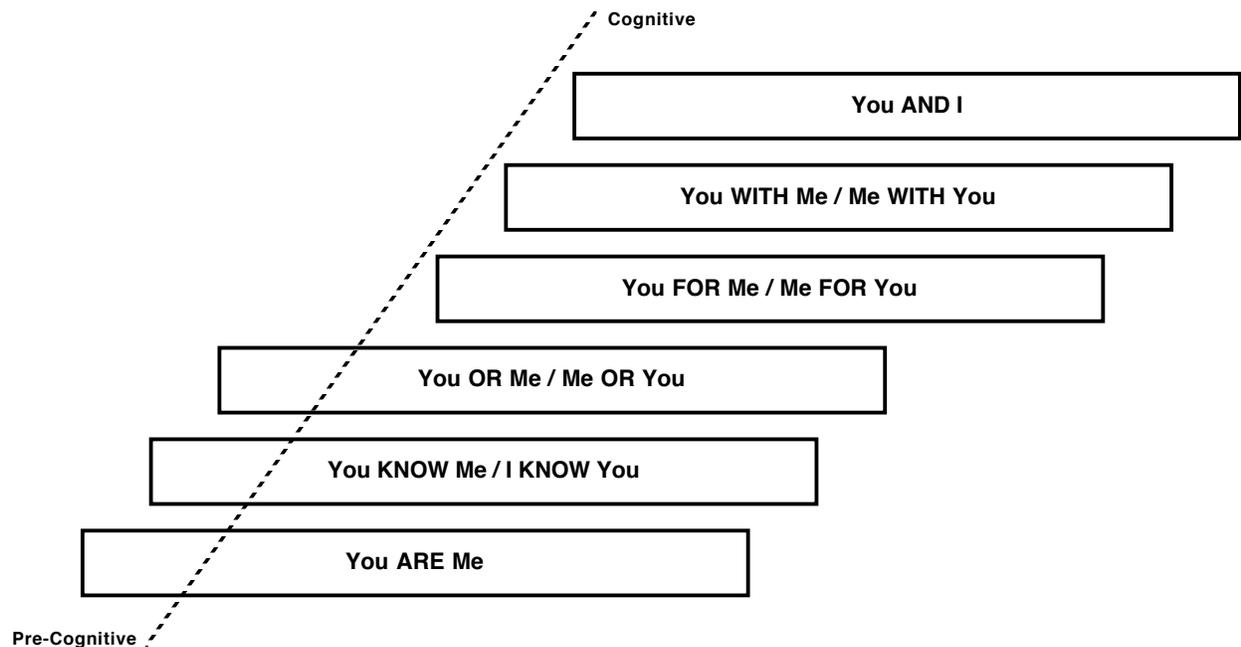
Do I know how to communicate? Am I able to clarify my thoughts, feelings, and perspectives? Can I communicate them effectively with others? Do I have the ability to put myself in someone else's shoes? Do I know how to clarify what other people think and feel?

You OR Me / Me OR You (Differing) - Some differences lead to struggle and conflict, sometimes intense, resulting in all-or-nothing, win-lose battles. In some of those situations, we may be more powerful and are able to get our way. At other times, we fail in our efforts.

In early childhood, the differentiation of self and other leads ultimately to win-lose struggles that provide a basis for learning how to cope with conflict. For example, as the infant develops, the parents may decide they can allow the child to cry rather than respond when he/she awakens in the middle of the night. As the child gains more autonomy, the word 'no' becomes an important part of many conversations. The child needs to learn to lose some conflicts, discovering that it is possible to cope with the loss. The child also needs to be affirmed in his/her power, to discover that it is possible to be assertive and win at other times. What we learn through these experiences provides a foundation for how we approach conflict throughout our adult lives.

Do I have the capacity to be assertive and fight for what is important? Or, do I allow myself to be victimized when I have power? Do I have the capacity to recognize when there are other options, or do I respond too often as if there were only those two choices? Can I be assertive without being vicious and aggressive? Do I have the capacity to recognize when I have no power and must give in? Can I do so with grace and self-care, or do I collapse and allow myself to be victimized?

Getting Along: Maturing - Being Connected, Not Trapped



In early childhood, we experience two contradictory styles of relationship: connectedness and conflict. In the You Are Me stage, we experience relationship as a symbiotic inter-dependence in which we share similar perceptions, feelings, and needs. In the You OR Me stage, we experience relationship as a win-lose struggle in which our needs are mutually exclusive: if I meet my needs, you are unable to satisfy your needs.

Can we be connected without being trapped? We all want to live with our families, friends, and co-workers in a way that is satisfying, even fun. Most of us find that the stresses in relating to others are about needing to compromise over and over again. We may even begin to feel that it is impossible; how can anyone get along without giving up what is personally important. All too often we feel trapped in our relationships when we really aren't.

Relationships are complex: we are both connected and separate. We have to balance our commonalities, aspirations, and predicaments while also taking into account our individuality. The ways in which our perspectives and needs are different and conflict present daily challenges in every relationship. If we can only respond using the win-lose mode, we will eventually face a crisis and breakdown. Each of the next three styles offers a different approach for balancing connectedness and separateness.

You FOR Me / Me FOR You (Giving/Receiving) – We get by with a little help from our friends; and the people in our lives need, at times, to be able to lean on us. The ability and willingness to ask for help and to offer help is especially important as we cope with change and complexity. If we are unable to ask for help when we need it, we risk failure or breakdown. If we are unable to help others, we are equally at risk: we cannot succeed if those around us are failing. Our quality of life, self-esteem, hope, and sense of well-being are enhanced when we experience the good feeling that comes from helping others. Similarly, our lives are enhanced and we feel less alone when we experience caring and support from others.

In childhood, this pathway begins to develop when the words ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ become an important part of conversation. As the child matures, the adult continues to provide nurturance and guidance, but begins to want something in return. The child is asked to be expressive and articulate his/her needs, to be considerate in respecting the adult’, and to be appreciative of the adult’s efforts. The child learns to be the giver as well, responding to the needs of others. These experiences enable us to learn ways of being that inform adult behavior.

Am I able both to give and to receive? What are my unique capacities and styles of giving and receiving? To what extent am I able to offer help, understanding or consideration? To what extent am I able to ask for and receive from others when my own inner resources are insufficient?

You WITH Me / Me WITH You (Leading/Following) – Some situations require that we assume leadership, while others require that we be able to follow the lead of others. To lead, we must understand how to follow; to follow, we must be able to lead. A good leader follows the direction of the people in his/her charge; a good follower offers direction and has clear positions and opinions.

In childhood, we have opportunities to experience ourselves both as leader and as follower, learning the unique skills required in each role. Learning about this option for relationship begins in the simple childhood games of follow the leader and ‘Simon says...’ It develops in team sports and school clubs. Our connectedness is experienced in the cooperative effort towards a common goal while our separateness is respected in the differentiation of roles and tasks. Our experiences in childhood provide us with a basis for our capacity as adults to act in each of the roles.

Am I able to lead? Do I learn from the people who are following my lead? Am I able to energize, inspire, and guide others? Do I take initiative to integrate the variety of different perspectives and needs to create a clear mission and plan? Do I know how to consult with others and refine the plan based on feedback? Do I take responsibility for implementing the plan, monitoring to make sure everyone follows through on commitments? Do I continue to be flexible, making changes to

address problems that emerge as the plan is implemented? Am I able to follow? Do I communicate my perspectives, feelings, and needs clearly and effectively? Am I able to take guidance and direction from the leader? Do I follow through with my responsibilities? Do I provide constructive feedback as necessary?

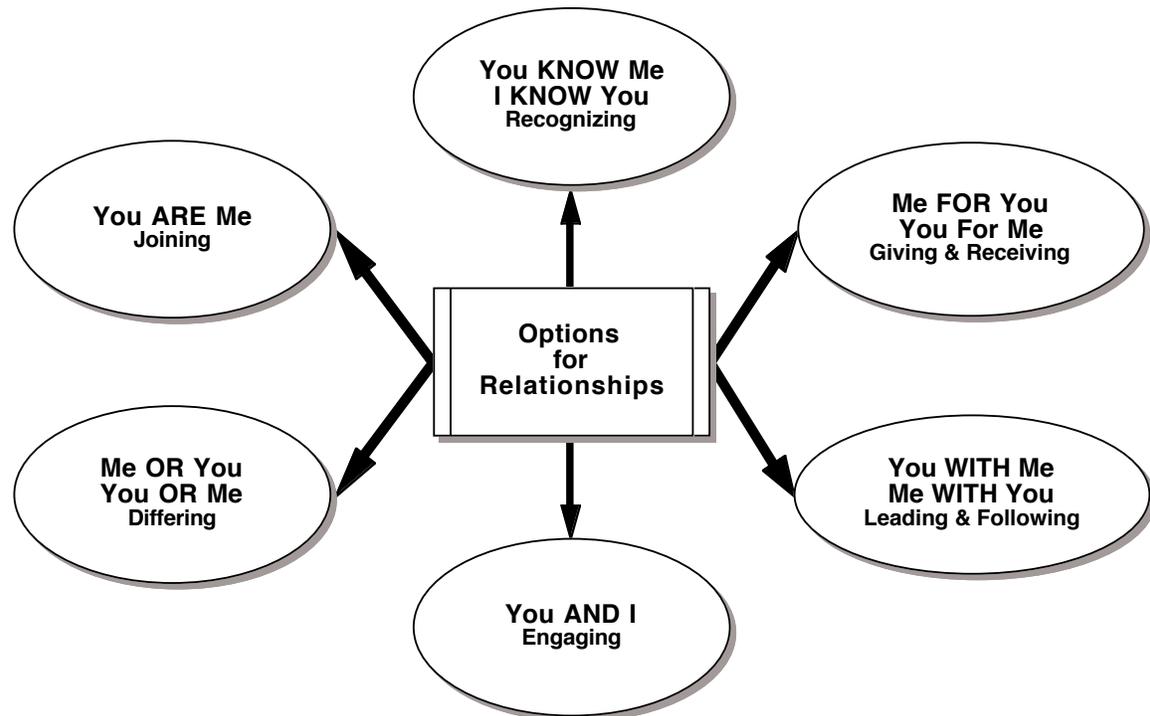
You AND I (Engaging) – This pathway allows for discovery of solutions that integrate respect both for our connectedness and our differences. I now know myself well enough to risk knowing you and consciously assess what is essentially trustworthy in each of us. We find the most complete resolution of the tension between separateness and connectedness. We are committed to one another but we have the capacity to recognize differences and work through conflicts.

In this collaborative relationship, each of us fully respects our own perspective, but we also respond to the concerns of others. Surrendering rigid attachment to a particular position or demand, we commit to shared decision-making rather than unilateral action and reaction. We engage with one another to clarify important underlying needs and concerns, to create a shared vision that incorporates all the needs, and to search for creative solutions to manifest that vision.

A collaborative resolution of a conflict is not a compromise in which each person gives up something and gets something in return, but rather a creative solution in which each person gets what they need, finding a creative solution to what may have appeared to be a non-resolvable impasse.

Am I able to discern when I have the capacity for working collaboratively to find solutions and to know when others are also able to do so? Can I engage to create a commitment to a co-creative process? Am I able to express my feelings, thoughts and needs clearly? Am I able to know the other person's experience? Can I abandon a rigid attachment to a particular outcome and search for solutions that address everyone's concerns and needs?

Putting It Together



How do we use this framework in everyday life? The goal is to develop my capacity to respond using each of the pathways so that I have the choice and flexibility to use the pathway that is most effective at a particular moment in a specific relationship.

Each of us, based on our life experience, learns to use some of the pathways successfully. However, some pathways may never have been developed, while still others may have developed ineffectively. This learning begins in childhood based on experiences in our families and with peers; we continue to learn about relationships through adult life. For example, one person may have learned to be assertive and able to do so effectively when needed. That same person may experience difficulty in situations that require accommodation. Another person may be able to relinquish personal agendas when needed, but may experience difficulty when the situation requires assertiveness. To the extent that we lack opportunities to learn about each pathway or that our learning is impaired, our ability to use that pathway is also impacted. As we reflect upon our own experiences, we can identify strengths and weaknesses in how we relate and begin to understand what we need to learn or re-learn. Our goal is mastery of these options so we have flexibility and creativity in our encounters with others.

When we encounter an impasse in a relationship, we may be using a pathway that is familiar and known but one that is not what the situation requires. Or, if we

are using the appropriate pathway, our ability to use that pathway may be limited or distorted. The framework of the six options can be used as a resource for discovering new, more effective, and satisfying responses when we feel trapped and stuck.

The Three-Step Process

Good relationships are sloppy. We are human. Our knowledge and understanding is limited. We do not always know how best to respond. Often, there is no clear solution to our social dilemmas. And, even when we know the optimal response, we are not always able to turn cognitive understanding into effective social behavior. Fortunately, we do not need to be perfect; what we do need to be able to do is learn.

How do we discover new ways to respond? We can use a three-step process to help us create connections when we are stuck:

- **Focus** – Develop more detailed and specific awareness of the ‘facts’ of our social encounters, the moment-to-moment experience of your interactions as well as your inner experience of feelings, thoughts, and interpretations
- **Witness** – Develop the capacity for observing yourself while interacting so you are able both to experience and to reflect on your experience.
- **Respond creatively** - Consciously inhibit habitual, rigid responses, allowing the space to explore new possibilities for resolving the impasse using the framework of the six options to clarify the possibilities.

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