



*navigating* **TOUGH RUBS**

**THE ALCHEMY OF RELATIONSHIP SERIES**

*mistaking empathy for* **AGREEMENT**



## THE CONCEPT

When we are empathetic and present with people, they may confuse that with agreement on their position. And then when that position is tested, feel betrayed when we *don't have their back* in the way they assumed. Part of this rub comes because some people have only experienced intimacy in situations where there is no dissent in opinion. Another part of this rub stems from the conflation of *support* and *consensus*—the lack of experience in being *all in* with each other even when there is fundamental disagreement on issues.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Describe a situation where it is more important to just be with a person than it is to help them clarify their position or perception. Describe a situation where it's more important to help a person clarify or think about things differently. What are the markers that help you know the best approach?

**QUESTION 2:** Who on the team is more likely to err on the side of fully showing up, but not challenging the assumptions and conclusions of the other person? Who is more likely to err on the side of challenging and clarifying, but at the expense of the other person feeling like they no longer have an ally who is *all in*?

**QUESTION 3:** Imagine the energies you radiate when dissenting or challenging positions. Now imagine the energies you radiate when things are going well, you are inspired, or find yourself in ideal circumstances. Is it possible to disagree with an opinion or conclusion while simultaneously infusing the conversation with enabling, opening, and reconciliatory energies?



*dynamic systems seek* **BALANCE**

## THE CONCEPT

Some of the most difficult situations with other people will naturally balance if we are patient and help create the right conditions for release or transmutation. Too often we jump in at the worst moment—when it's most intense—and try to resolve things. Or *fuel the fire* by unconsciously adding more negative energy even as we are attempting to say *all the right things*. Achieving internal balance with difficult issues may take minutes, days, or even weeks. But until we experience a shift in the emotional body, no amount of good reasoning transcends the rub.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Describe a situation you made worse by responding—one where you would have been better served by staying present and engaged by simply pausing while something needful happened internally for the other person. Why is the urge to *fix it now* so strong for most of us?

**QUESTION 2:** How do you know when it's better to react quickly and decisively—or when to support more passively and simply pause as the other person comes back into balance on their own? Energetically, how can we *pause* without *disappearing*?

**QUESTION 3:** When something untrue and hurtful is said about us, sometimes it's better to set the record straight. Other times it's better to let it go for the time being and wait for a natural balance to occur with the people involved. Give an example of both. How do you know whether it's best to do the one or the other? What are the risks of *intervening* versus the risks of *not intervening*?



*animating the present with the*  
**PAST**

## THE CONCEPT

The most intense moments with people are often animated with energies from the past. That intensity—if only understood through the current storyline—is confusing. The rub comes when we seek to understand the other person without understanding to what extent the present situation is overlaid by their past. Without an adequate sense of this, our attempts to create better relationship consistently fall short.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** What's the difference between incorporating insights from your history and holding the present hostage with your past?

**QUESTION 2:** Imagine a timeline spanning from the *past*, through the *present*, into the *future*. Now re-experience some of the most important conversations of the last few months. When is the *content of the conversation* not aligning with the *experience of the conversation*? Pay special attention to moments when people are talking about stuff happening now, but you are experiencing a pull *away from the present* and *into the past*.

**QUESTION 3:** If someone in a group is consistently overlaying their past on the present in unhelpful ways, how can you create a shift without shutting them down or making them feel devalued? Think about the people you know who are most likely to derail a group in this way—what other characteristics do they share? Do these common characteristics have an even more fundamental common ground?



*mistaking the overt for the*  
**ESSENTIAL**



## THE CONCEPT

Sometimes what's really being said is easily expressed through words—the story being told conveys most of what's really going on. Other times what's really being said is not easily expressed through words—the story being told may *even be counter* to what's really going on. Perceiving *the essential* behind *the overt* is key to relating masterfully.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Who on the team most frequently offers a sense of *what's really going on* that seemingly transcends what's knowable in ordinary ways? What makes them more perceptive? How could you develop more of that ability? In what situations are you most—and least—likely to have an intuitive read? What's your sweet spot—what's your Achilles heel?

**QUESTION 2:** What important conversations are you in now—individually or as a team—where you sense there's something really important going on that's not being communicated overtly? What shifts can you make that might precipitate a deeper view? And based on any sense of the *truth behind the message*, what can you do to create the conditions to leverage opportunity or mitigate risk?

**QUESTION 3:** In what relationships or situations are you overtly communicating something not fully representative of what you desire? Or expressing only a small part of how you really feel? What's occluding a deeper exchange in these relationships?

An illustration of a tree with a thick, light green trunk and a canopy of falling money bills. The bills are brown and green with black outlines and a central black circle. Three stylized human figures are shown: one on the left in a brown robe reaching for a bill, one in the center in a white robe reaching up, and one on the right in a dark green robe reaching up. The background is a textured yellow and green gradient.

*the* VALUE EXCHANGE

## THE CONCEPT

The best relationships have a value exchange—something essential happens for both people. This is especially important for especially difficult conversations. But often our most vital conversations get increasingly unbalanced as they get increasingly difficult and dense. One person must be right at the expense of the other. One person's gain implies the other's concession. And yet, contributing in the world is one of the most fundamental human desires. So the Sage creates a way for the other person to contribute—to make a difference—in *every situation*. This requires a shift from an exclusively materially-oriented frame of reference to a much more expansive frame of reference. Designing for both *the seen* and *the unseen*.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Are you more likely to insist on *having it your way* in situations where you are making a more marginal contribution?

**QUESTION 2:** Think of someone who is consistently difficult to work with, never seems content with any compromise, and sometimes behaves *even more poorly* when you give in and they get their way. How can you create a path for them to contribute in new and meaningful ways?

**QUESTION 3:** In what relationships are you confusing *the deal* with *the value exchange*? Describe a time when you assumed *the deal* was the glue of the relationship and you unknowingly changed the *value exchange*. In what relationships are *you experiencing* an essential value the other person might not be aware of? Is it time to let them know?



*making it too*  
**PERSONAL**

## THE CONCEPT

When we feel most vulnerable, we are most likely to over-personalize and unnecessarily internalize the emotional intensity of the other person. Just because it's *pointed at you* doesn't necessarily mean it has much *to do with you*. And even though the other person may insist you are the lead character in their drama, it doesn't necessarily mean the roots of what's going on with them connect deeply to you. But this doesn't mean you can't change the situation for the better. When we don't over-personalize, we stay more neutral and have increased opportunity to improve, resolve, or reconcile the situation.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** What's the difference between *not taking it personally* and *being numb*? Between *not taking it personally* and *being accountable*? Or between *not taking it personally* and *being flip-pant*?

**QUESTION 2:** If you know another person has a tendency to over-personalize in difficult situations, how can you adjust your approach to maximize the opportunity for them to learn and grow and minimize the chance of them reacting strongly, getting bogged down, or even becoming resentful? How can you be *decreasingly threatening* as you interact with *increasing potency*?

**QUESTION 3:** Describe a situation where you misinterpreted because you were over-personalizing. Why did you feel vulnerable or at risk? In what other situations are you experiencing a similar vulnerability?



*unspoken* **NEEDS**

## THE CONCEPT

Our deepest needs continually seek expression. When they are not met, they subtly express through almost every situation and relationship. The needs of the other person always create a vacuum in the relationship. Some vacuums we should fill—some we should not. Some needs arise from dysfunction, and meeting them creates a burst of appreciation in the short run by relieving a surface tension, but does harm by further entrenching the other person in a damaging cycle. They will resent you for this in the long run. Other needs arise from unactualized gifts, and meeting them creates a burst of growth and power in the other person—or even a metamorphosis from caterpillar into butterfly. This creates enduring appreciation and timeless gratitude.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Describe a need in someone who works for you that stems from a positive potential. Describe a need that stems from a dysfunction. How are these needs currently expressing?

**QUESTION 2:** Is it possible that a need arising from a positive potential can express in *disabling ways*? And is it possible that a need arising from a dysfunction or glitch can express in *enabling ways*? Describe a situation where you were distracted by the way something was expressing and missed what was going on underneath.

**QUESTION 3:** Describe a positive potential you recognize in another team member. How could the team create the conditions for this potential to express in the best way—most quickly?

*the perils of*  
**OVERCOMPENSATING**





## THE CONCEPT

Sometimes we overcompensate after we've slipped up in some way and then reach out to *get a read on the other person*—or some sign that everything's okay. This may take the form of emails that are three times as long as they need to be. A bunch of emails in a row when we've not heard back from the person and are grasping. Generic *I'm just checking in with you* voice mails. Or even totally out of context drop-ins at someone's office. Other times we overcompensate by helping too much, going too many extra miles, or being excessively generous. Any of these create an imbalance and awkwardness in the relationship, and may even result in the other person avoiding you.

## THE DEEP DIVE

**QUESTION 1:** Think about the times you've overcompensated with other people. What was the driving need? Did all of these situations involve a similar circumstance? Describe the personality characteristic in you that was triggered by the situation.

**QUESTION 2:** What's been the most disabling way others have overcompensated in their relationship with you? What about your behavior or personality makes this more likely? What's the perfect storm of personality characteristics and circumstances to create *extreme overcompensation*?

**QUESTION 3:** Who on the team is most likely to experience overcompensation with the people they lead—and why? Describe a positive characteristic in another team member that increases the chances of others overcompensating with them.

*more to come . . .*

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