Customer Collaboration Over Contract Negotiation

A sample chapter from
Sprinting In Place: Why Your Agile Team Isn't Agile and What You Can Do About It
by Jeffrey Fredrick and Douglas Squirrel

A wise CEO we know, after negotiating a detailed software-delivery contract with a major bank comprising hundreds of pages, put the thick, bound document in a drawer, never to look at it again. "I plan to build a great relationship with this client," he said. "I won't need the contract to do that - I just need to listen to them and build software that does what they need, whether or not the contract requires it. But if my relationship with the client ever gets so bad that I have to get out the contract to prove who's right and who's wrong, then I've already failed, and the contract won't help me fix the relationship anyway."

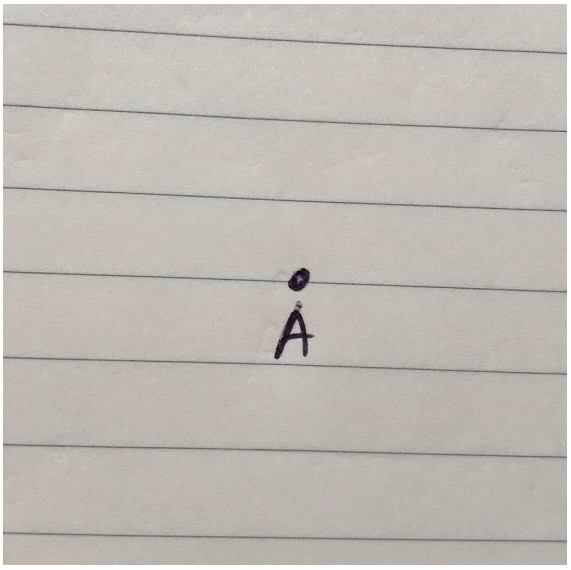
The third manifesto value statement gives us a simple description of this CEO's lesson. We'd like to apply this collaborative approach to daily interactions with *all* our customers, both internal and external — product owners, project managers, system admins, testers, executive sponsors, and more. To adhere to this value, we'll need to drop formal, prescriptive processes in favour of working cheek by jowl with our colleagues and customers and addressing their needs, and just like the wise CEO says, we'll get a much better outcome for those customers. Easy, right?

Of course it *isn't* easy. It is human to only see the situation from our perspective; there are many cognitive biases that make it so. To get to the point where we collaborate by default requires building great relationships, and building great relationships is hard work. It's much easier and more common to build a wall of process, our internal version of contract negotiation. We know we will deliver if only those other people do their job; process will make it clear we aren't to blame. And if anyone starts getting too nosy, process keeps those pesky collaborators at bay.

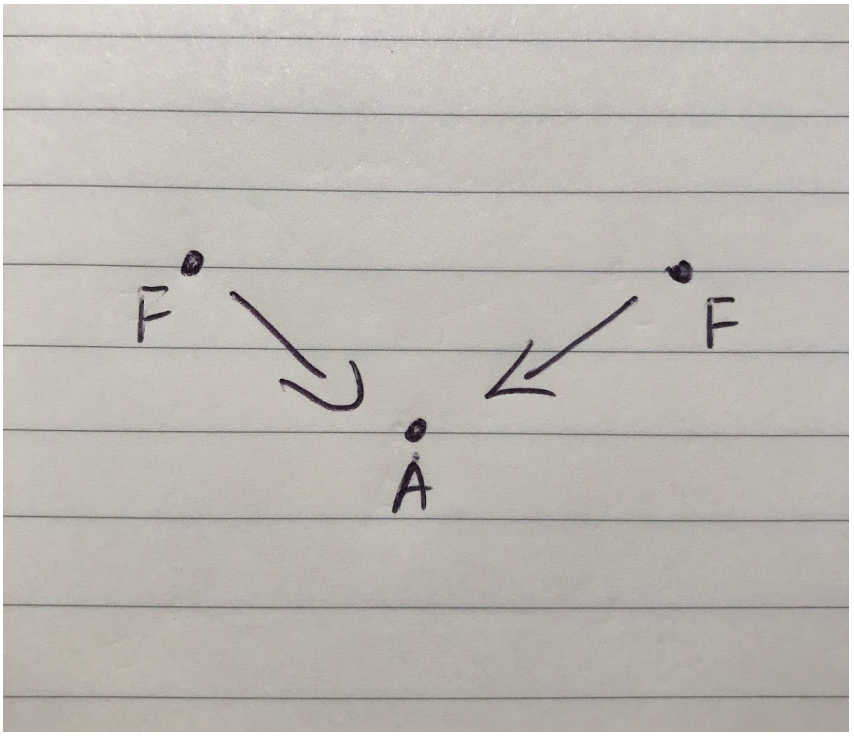
In this chapter we explain how we get past these confrontational interactions and start building collaborative relationships instead. We start with a doodle.

The Aaron Doodle

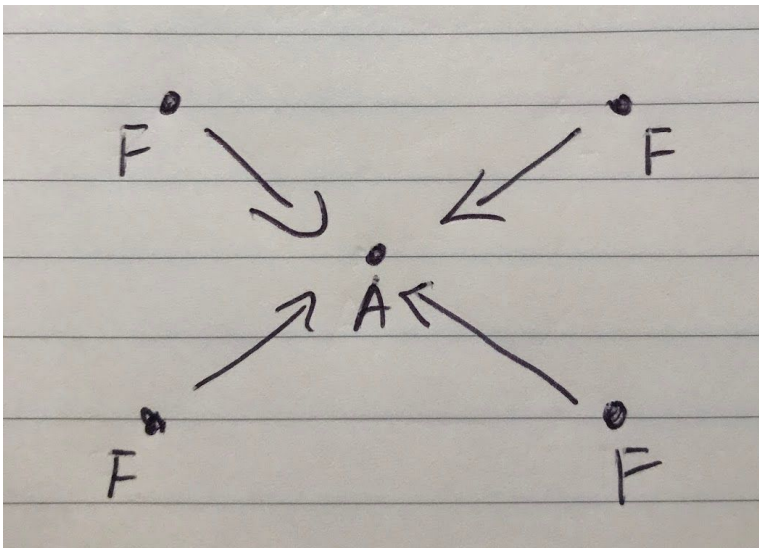
Aaron, an creative and artistic product manager with a persistent doodling habit, was explaining how his relationships worked. "Here's Aaron," he said, drawing himself as he spoke, "trying to make great products."



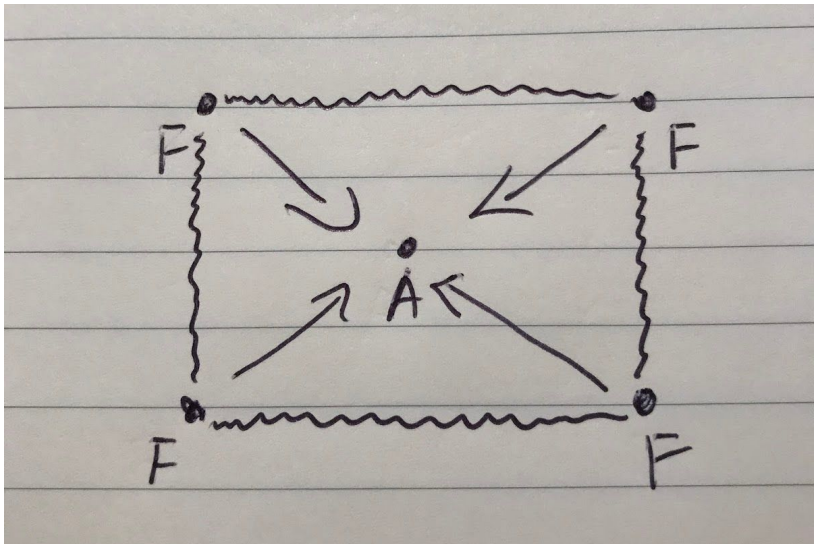
“And here are two of our founders. I report to them. They tell me what to do a lot. I feel I have to listen to them because they are founders.”



“Now here are the other two founders. They aren’t managers. In fact they work in my team. They often tell me what to do as well! I feel I have to listen to them, too, because they are founders.”



“This would be fine if everyone agreed. But in fact the founders disagree. A lot. I get conflicting directions, and if I do what one wants I inevitably annoy the others.”



Then Aaron stepped back and looked at the picture - himself in the middle, surrounded by the jagged lines of argument and commanding arrows pointing different directions. “No wonder I feel trapped!” he said.

Thus were relationship maps born.

Relationship Maps

You probably don’t need a doodle to figure out whether you or your team have reduced or nonexistent collaboration. But as we invite colleagues and clients to draw them, we find that relationship maps are a useful guide: they show which relationships are working, which are broken, and which are just plain missing, and also help us see the larger context for those relationships. This larger context will be the beginning of empathy and mutual understanding.

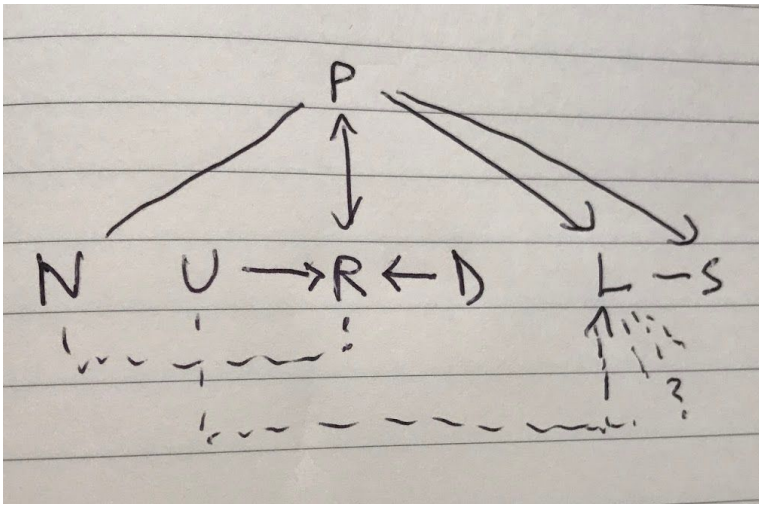
When we ask someone to draw a relationship map, we go light on instructions. We usually tell the Aaron doodle story and show his map, then say something like this:

Please draw a map like Aaron's with yourself at the centre. Use initials for the people you work with regularly. Draw lines where there is a relationship, and show the state of the relationship, as you perceive it, with the shape and type of line, or a word to annotate it. Be as creative or simple as you would like.

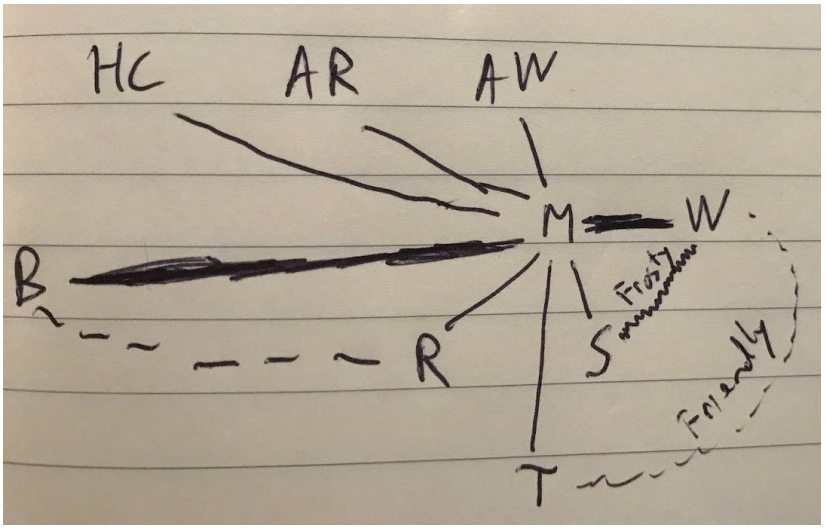
Then, of course, we ask the mapper to talk us through his or her picture. This often leads to further edits to the map or even starting over with a new map. We find this process leads to all kinds of insights and understanding both for us and for the mapper.

Sometimes the mapper wants to share the map with some or all of those on it, and sometimes she doesn't - that's up to her. The primary beneficiary of a relationship map is the one drawing it, as it leads to reflection and action for her.

Here are some examples of real relationship maps - do you recognise any of the patterns?



In this diagram the developers and the manufacturing team have to collaborate closely, but their leaders R and L have no relationship at all - every interaction is mediated by the product manager, U. It doesn't help that in this example, Manufacturing was located on the other side of the planet from everyone else!



Here, we have an uncomfortable relationship between two collaborators, W and S, with one going around the other to a friendlier subordinate, T. The CEO, B, also uses a back channel to a longtime employee, R, who works for the CTO, M.

Before moving on, take a few minutes now to create a relationship map of your context, and then study it. What patterns of behavior have you chosen to capture in your map? What did you leave out? What are the range of interactions, from most energizing to the most demoralizing? What do your choices say about yourself as a collaborator?

Understanding the Story - Two Examples

Now that you've created your relationship map, choose a relationship you want to improve. We recommend you start by trying to understand the narrative about the collaboration (or non-collaboration!) that you and your colleague have built up. What story are you telling yourself? What story is the other person telling herself? How is each of you feeding the other's story? While you can provide your side of the narrative, getting a complete picture is going to mean involving the other person.

If this existing relationship is tense, this will probably involve having one or more difficult conversations and asking genuine questions to discover each other's stories; as we've been saying throughout this book, there's no path to strong relationships that avoids difficult conversations! Entering into these conversations feels risky, or perhaps too time consuming. But is it?

Squirrel, while working at an e-commerce company, had a chance to contrast two approaches. Alice had worked for months to prepare a new product for Christmas sales. Unfortunately, engineers took her product off the site over Black Friday weekend, the biggest few days of sales in the whole year, because of a bug. It seemed her product was causing random site crashes when people bought it. This was heartbreaking enough for Alice, but it was made worse when engineers realised later that the bug was unrelated to her product after all.

One approach to the situation, taken by the company founder, maximised short-term efficiency and minimised communication: he simply told Alice that he had participated in the decision to remove the product and asserted that it was the right decision, without further discussion. This approach is the common human response. The founder had a coherent story that explained the decision, and therefore he felt there was literally nothing to discuss. The situation was unfortunate but sometimes bad things happen. There wasn't time for long discussions - Alice would just have to get over it.

The other approach, taken by Squirrel, was to have a difficult conversation with Alice, sharing how the error had occurred, Alice's emotional response to it, and Squirrel's response in turn. The result of this conversation was the discovery of two pieces of valid and immediately useful information: Alice learned that the development team valued her product and had carefully weighed options for restoring it to the site, and Squirrel learned that Alice had not been informed about the product removal at all (she'd been left off a key chat channel). Beyond the immediate actions, the result from the conversation was much improved communication and a more trusting relationship with Alice, with a shared story about product owners and engineers with a common goal to make and sell great products.

Given the benefits, why are such conversations so rare? Certainly part of the reason is because they are uncomfortable. In initiating the conversation, Squirrel was nervous about what Alice might say and how she might react. It was easy to imagine the conversation going very badly. Opening himself up to the unknown emotional journey required the conviction that collaborative relationships have a foundation in dialogue. In the end this conversation only took about 30 minutes. Even if it had taken much longer, or even lasted several conversations, it would have remained a good investment given the need to build a shared understanding as the basis of future trust.

Sharing emotions, building trust

Trust, for us, comes from the ability to constructive a positive narrative for another person. It is the ability to assume positive intent. "I trust that Rhonda is doing useful work for our team." "I trust that Bobby is working on the company's top priority." In the abstract this seems easy. You don't know Rhonda or Bobby, so our statements of trust seem perfectly reasonable. However, a funny thing happens in our real relationships. When our expectations aren't met, we tend to invent negative stories. The more often we are disappointed, the more negative the stories become. The Rhonda we know is always pandering to her boss, while Bobby is always distracted by a pet project.

These stories come so naturally and feel so true we forget that we don't actually know the real internal stories of the people involved. And the process is the same for others, and their stories about us. When Squirrel took the time to talk with Alice, they had the opportunity to share their stories. Squirrel's curiosity about Alice's views uncovered new information. Squirrel's transparency gave Alice the opportunity to replace her internal story of an indifferent development team with the real story of people wrestling with a challenge. She could now appreciate the positive intent behind their actions. An important part of this process was moving beyond the rational into the emotional part of the story.

Sharing our emotions feels vulnerable. It goes very much against our cultural training to "act rationally". Looking back at the founder's approach to Alice, we can see that his approach reflected this rational bias: there were facts, decisions were made based on those facts, and we should move on. Squirrel's approach, in contrast, acknowledged the role emotions play in relationships, and their significance more broadly in human lives. In the story he shared with Alice, the emotions he felt, and the emotions of the development team, are a key piece of information. Alice has a very different reaction when she can view the engineers as concerned people who were disappointed by what happened, as opposed to uncaring or indifferent.

We've seen this pattern repeated many times, that sharing a piece of information when it feels unsafe to do so is actually the key to building trust. A heuristic for action in a conversation is to get yourself to blurt out "unsafe" things, for example asking "dumb" questions or sharing your doubts about how you drew a particular conclusion. When you are transparent about what you know and what you don't, about your chain of reasoning and interests, you are being vulnerable because you may not appear as rational and knowledgeable as you might like.

Vulnerability shows that you are approachable and invites the other person to give you information that helps you align your stories. Conversely, trying to feel safe - say, by pretending to know something you don't - often gives false information that moves your stories further apart, and if you are found out it verifies that the stories are indeed misaligned and drives trust down further.

Three Relationship-Building Tools

When the relationship is poor, being transparent and curious is not a natural human response. There are lots of tools throughout this book, like LHRH case studies and the Ladder of Inference, that improve your communication and will help you build a great relationship. The three we describe here are particularly aimed at helping you collaborate by overcoming an unproductive response. As with all of techniques for changing behavior it takes practice to be able to apply these "live". Start by using them in planning a conversation, or during post-mortem LHRH analyses, then gradually develop the reflex to apply during conversations.

Tool 1: Coherence Busting

We regularly teach a technique called Coherence Busting in workshops and coaching engagements. To explain why it is useful, we ask the audience to imagine themselves making a presentation: *"While you are talking, you notice the main stakeholder — the person in the audience you most hope to persuade — is glancing at her watch. What do you think is going on?"*

We ask this question to allow the audience to experience the decision-making heuristics that Daniel Kahneman describes in this book **Thinking, Fast & Slow**. Kahneman models our

consciousness as made up of two systems, our fast, automatic, unconscious *System 1* and our slow, deliberate, effortful *System 2*. Part of what makes System 1 fast are the shortcuts it uses. Two of these shortcuts consistently arise with the watch example. The first is that we assume that a coherent story must be correct. The second is that we limit the facts to what we can immediately recall, a process Kahneman calls What You See Is All There Is (WYSIATI).

These two shortcuts are displayed in the watch scenario.

We unconsciously construct a coherent story for what the glance means — for instance “she has somewhere else to go”. This story is based on our first thoughts about what the glance might mean (WYSIATI). The coherence in our story give us the sense that our story is true. We then design our actions in response *to a story we made up*. This is the key lesson of the watch example: We feel as though we are responding to the reality of the situation, because WYSIATI and coherence cause us to mistake our single plausible story for the truth.

This is why we need Coherence Busting.

With the watch example, we ask the audience to describe what they think the glance means. After we have harvested the normal stories from the audience (“they’re bored”, “their attention has drifted”, “they are running short of time”), we ask them to consider other possible meanings of the glance, *all* of the possible reasons, even wildly implausible ones (“she has a plan for world domination written on her hand”). Now the audience generates dozens of possible reasons: it is a nervous habit, she was admiring her new watch, it’s a smartwatch sending an alert, a mosquito is crawling on her arm, and lots more. What makes this Coherence Busting is not just that there are many options, but that the options are mutually incompatible. Once we can imagine conflicting explanations, we are not longer trapped by the original coherent story. These options were always there, but it requires invoking System 2, our conscious and effortful thought process, to bring them to the surface. That’s not something we do naturally when we feel we already have a good explanation.

So what would trigger you to use Coherence Busting? Try reaching for it when you’re frustrated. A common pattern is to get frustrated when you can’t come up with a justifiable explanation for the other person’s actions, when you don’t like the explanation that System 1 has suggested for you - a signal that you and the other person lack trust and a shared story. When you recognize that pattern, try to think of at least three *incompatible* motivations for why the other person might be behaving the way you observe. The technique of Coherence Busting is a way of reminding yourself that there are infinitely more possibilities than you’ve considered. It allows you to let go of the story you’ve made up about the other person. It reminds you that if you want to understand what the other person is thinking, you’re going to have to get out of your head and into theirs — probably starting with asking them a genuine question about what they are thinking.

Coherence Busting could have helped Squirrel with Claus, a product manager he clashed with over the introduction of agile techniques. Squirrel could have developed a wide range of explanations for Claus’s resistance to agile ideas - a bad previous experience, aversion to change, a wish to get Squirrel fired, inside knowledge about an executive wedded to Gantt charts, or an allergy to words starting with “a”. Having awoken System 2 by generating this

list, he could have started a difficult conversation with Claus using a curious frame rather than a confrontational one - the start of building a shared story and positive trust.

Tool 2: Fredrick's Mirroring Principle

Once we have learned about the mutual learning model, it is much easier to spot failures to use the model in other people than in ourselves. That is because when we judge our own actions we are evaluating our intent, and we know (or think we know!) that our intent is good. When we judge others we don't have access to their intent, we can judge only their actions, and their actions are often lacking context.

The Mirroring Principle is a technique to use this asymmetry to our advantage. The Mirroring Principle says we should assume that whatever mutual learning failure we spot in others, we are also producing. In practice the Mirroring Principle spurs us to consciously invoke mutual learning actions, and to have compassion for others.

To apply the Mirroring Principle during a conversation, notice when you criticise the other person's motives or values in your head (that is, in your left-hand column) and *apply the same criticism to yourself and your actions*. For instance, if you hear yourself thinking, "Those questions aren't genuine", make an extra effort to make your own next question as genuine as possible. Or if you think, "She's trying to win here", start figuring out how you might get out of the win/lose trap yourself.

Squirrel applied the Mirroring Principle during his difficult conversation with Alice. At one point early in the discussion, Alice blamed developers for not notifying her about the product removal, saying that they didn't care about product sales, only site uptime. It would have been easy to view this as a fault - "Alice is jumping up the ladder of inference to a negative conclusion!" - and react defensively in an attempt to change her mind. Instead, Squirrel slowed down his own climb up the ladder, assuming that he also was leaping to conclusions - and by asking what Alice saw or heard that led her to blame developers, discovered that she had been left off the relevant chat channel, an important problem that was easily corrected.

Tool 3: The Framing Technique

When preparing for a difficult conversation, get out a pen and paper - you may need a lot of paper for this one! To start, write down

- How you view yourself,
- How you view the other person, and
- What your goal is for the conversation.

These three views together form your *frame* for the conversation. Here's how Alice from the Black Friday story could have described her frame:

> **Self:** Ignored, disappointed, let down.
> **Other:** Uncaring, high-handed, holier-than-thou.
> **Goal:** Get those thoughtless engineers to respect me and our product strategy.

Next, look for signals that the frame may not lead to mutual learning. For instance:

- You view yourself as wronged.
- You don't believe that you could be contributing to the problem - it's all on the other person.
- You see the other person as having negative intent.
- You have not expressed any doubt or curiosity about the other person.
- Your goal is for the other person to change behaviour or thinking.
- Your goal is not directly observable (something you can see or hear, or something you think or feel yourself).
- If you achieve your goal, you will have "won".

Alice's example above has most of these characteristics (can you spot them?), as do most frames when we first write them down.

Now for the hard part: rewrite the frame to move closer to a mutual learning approach and the goal of building a relationship. This may take many rewrites! Eventually, you want to wind up with a frame like this:

> **Self:** Disappointed in the outcome; curious about the developers' motives.
> **Other:** Well-meaning but indifferent to company goals and Alice's feelings.
> **Goal:** Understand why the engineers acted as they did.

Notice we've lost none of the key attributes or emotions captured in the original frame; Alice is still disappointed and she still believes that the engineers were insensitive. But her approach is much more curious than it would be with the first frame, and it's easy to see that she might change her mind during the conversation if she learns something new.

Of course, actually adopting this more constructive frame is difficult in itself, but just writing it down often seems to help change your thinking. It can also be useful to bring the written frame along to the conversation, either to refer to when you're stuck, or to show the other person to help create a common language and goals for the discussion.

(We developed this technique based on the work of Diana Mclain Smith (*The Elephant in the Room*) and Roger Martin (*The Relationship Virus*).)

Relationships Matter

There are lots of benefits to having a shared story. When we describe our internal narratives it becomes easier to empathise, to view each other's actions as guided by positive intent. We understand that our failings are a function of circumstance; shared stories allow us to see the failings of others as similarly circumstantial. This mutual sharing builds psychological safety.

Psychological safety is a key attribute of high-performing teams. It brings lots of benefits for efficiency - shorter discussions, faster alignment, more willingness to be open and exchange information that might be threatening, and therefore faster learning. Ironically, the road to safety starts with a willingness to be vulnerable.

A CTO we know, Zeke, used some of these techniques to resolve a long-standing battle with an overseas manager. After careful preparation with coherence busting, he was able to change his frame and hold a difficult but productive conversation - in which he and his remote peer discovered that much of their battling had been caused by a simple misunderstanding over reporting lines. Their relationship is now much more collaborative and they are even sharing staff.

The techniques in this chapter should help you and your colleagues to improve your relationships and get outcomes like Zeke's - which we're sure would make our wise CEO very proud!