

Relationships Built on Instinct

By Edward Hoffman, Ph.D.

The field of relationship counseling today is in a troubled state. From practitioners' offices to academic conference halls, this assessment is becoming undeniable. Indeed, a recent cover story in USA Today vividly publicized this situation. As pioneering researcher John Gottman of the University of Washington observed, "A large part of marital therapy is not working. That's a very consistent finding in the research literature." Likewise, UCLA's Professor Andrew Christensen, who has received a five-year grant to study forms of marital therapy, commented that, "Marital therapy is in a state of flux... Our power is not as great as we, in initial optimism, had hoped. We need treatments that work better."

Increasingly, counselors today are therefore seeking new ways of conceptualizing, evaluating, and intervening with relationships. Acutely recognizing the need for revamping our treatment models, such clinicians are showing greater openness for innovative approaches. In this article, I'd like to highlight the Kolbe Wisdom's relevance for counselors, and identify several key domains for which this approach provides a crucial tool for understanding - and aiding - troubled relationships.

I. The Kolbe Wisdom

The Kolbe Wisdom™ is the brainchild of Kathy Kolbe, daughter of E. F. Wonderlic, who pioneered the field of personnel testing in the 1940s. As described in her two major books - Pure Instinct and The Conative Connection - Kolbe's background was in journalism and education for the gifted. During her earlier career, she began studying individual differences among children, and arrived at the viewpoint that "what people do often has quite little to do with what they have the ability to do." Kolbe noted that humanity's great thinkers had long postulated three basic features of the human mind: knowledge or intelligence, motivation or emotions, and volition; and decided that volition - or what has historically been called conation - has been given inadequate attention as a vital aspect of individual functioning, and of self-actualization. Conative actions are those derived from insight.

For this reason, the Kolbe Wisdom, as it's been developed, has focused not on cognitive or personality aspects that underlie our behavior in daily life - but rather, on our innate drive toward action, achievement, and problem-solving. After more than a decade of research involving thousands of men and women, Kolbe created a 36-item psychological test designed to assess our particular conative MO (modus operandi), based on a conceptual grid of 12 distinct categories. Known as the Kolbe Index, this approach can enhance personal awareness and relationships in a way that have been empirically validated and proven statistically significant and reliable.

Philosophically, it's allied with the perspective of humanistic psychology - especially its leading figure Abraham Maslow - that we each possess a "core-self" of instinctual talents, abilities, and predilections that form the basis for creativity and successful accomplishment in life - in the domain of intimacy no less than in the workplace or classroom.

The Kolbe Wisdom's crucial point is that this core vitality includes our instinctive drive, and therefore, the one thing that relationships should never do is compromise your sense of self. Healthy relationships involve nurturing to be who you are. When we fail to acknowledge and respect the legitimacy of our partner's conative drive - or worse, try forcing that MO to mirror our own - trouble inevitably starts. However, before examining specific counseling applications, it's first essential to become acquainted with the basics of this system.

The Striving Instincts

According to the Kolbe Wisdom, all human beings share four fundamental drives - Striving Instincts. These can be understood as inner fountains of energy and strength, but equally crucial, these drives must find outlets in the outer world.

In a nutshell, these four drives enable us to be productive, to do things. When we function according to them, we fulfill our destinies and make our best decisions. When we act contrary to them, their power works against us. Furthermore, we self-actualize only through these Striving Instincts.

They are:

1. the probing instinct - which involves our method of gathering information. It's known too as the Fact Finder action mode;
2. the patterning instinct - which pertains to how we deal with patterns and systems. It's also identified as the Follow Thru action mode;
3. the innovating instinct - which relates to ways of handling change and risk. It's also identified as the Quick Start action mode;
4. the demonstrating instinct - which is our approach to converting ideas into tangible, "hands-on" forms. It's known as the Implementor action mode.

Here are some additional descriptions of our Striving Instincts:

1. the Fact Finder drive is most oriented to activities that encompass defining, calculating, formalizing, and researching;
2. the Follow Thru drive is most oriented to such acts as arranging, coordinating, integrating, and implementing;
3. the Quick Start drive is most oriented to activities that involve brainstorming, intuiting, inventing, and risk-taking;
4. the Implementor is most oriented to such acts as building, crafting, forming, and repairing.

The Operating Zones

According to Kolbe, everyone possesses these four Striving Instincts, but in different forms. To offer a simple example: we all experience at least a tiny bit of satisfaction from craftwork - such as cabinet making or sewing. But some of us actively seek out such activity, while others avoid it. For this reason, each of the four Striving Instincts is divided into a three-zone format.

These Operating Zones are labeled as:

1. Initiate/Insist - the extent to which a person actively insists upon, relies upon, or begins problem solving by using a striving instinct;
2. Respond/Accommodate - the extent to which a person accommodates, mediates, or cooperates through the use of a striving instinct;
3. Prevent/Resist - the extent to which a person prevents problems by resisting action through a striving instinct.

The important point is that everyone possesses all four Striving Instincts, and each is placed within one particular Operating Zone. The overall combination of these four drives comprises our unique style - our modus operandi or MO.

Let's take a couple of examples to master this grid, and then see how this system can significantly guide us in relationship counseling.

Example 1:

John and Carol are buying new furniture for their daughter's bedroom. Several purchasing choices exist, including bookcases and desks that require fairly elaborate home-assembly, but at a big, money-saving inducement. In Kolbe's system, such "hands-on" activity taps into our Implementor instinct.

Now, if the prospect of spending your Saturday afternoon assembling furniture at home is attractive, then you're in the Initiate/Insist zone for this particular instinct; that's your natural inclination. If you're willing to assist your spouse or teenager in the assembly, but would not take the initiative in the activity, then you're in the Respond/Accommodate zone. And, finally, if the image of spending your Saturday afternoon on furniture-assembly is something you instinctively resist and reject, then you're in the Prevent/Resist zone for that instinct.

Example 2:

Bob and Jennifer are newlyweds planning to have two children. They've just embarked on house hunting in the Chicago area. Before making a decision, they may decide to spend considerable time investigating such factors as home market values, taxes, quality of school district, proximity to their respective jobs and commuting time, availability of recreational facilities and shopping - and perhaps a half-dozen other factors as well. This behavior involves the Fact Finder instinct.

Now, the relevant counseling question is: what is each one's characteristic zone for this instinctive domain? If Bob or Jennifer naturally jumps into the detail-oriented research work involved in coming to a decision, then he or she is in the Fact Finder/Initiate zone. If either accepts this task willingly but finds it only tolerably satisfying, then he or she would be in the Respond zone. Finally, if Bob or Jennifer skips such investigatory activity - and makes a decision without having to have all those specifics - then he or she is operating in the Prevent zone.

By now, the four Striving Instincts and the three Operating Zones should be clear enough so that a general picture can be provided in applying the Kolbe Wisdom™ to issues that arise in intimate relationships.

II. Application in Relationship Counseling

Over the course of my clinical career, I've found seven key domains of relationships, and the Kolbe Wisdom™ offers a valuable counseling perspective on them all. Due to space limitations in this article, I'll highlight each with a specific example.

A. Communication

How often do we advise troubled couples that they "need to communicate better?" It's almost a truism in the counseling field. And yet, as the Kolbe Wisdom™ clearly indicates, people communicate differently based on their conative makeup. In any relationship, problems may emerge if the two partners possess different instinctive drives and fail to understand this difference when they communicate.

For example, Sally, as a Quick Start/Insist, communicates by spontaneous expression of feelings. To her, that's what communication is all about. However, Steve is a Fact Finder/Insist; to him, communication involves sharing carefully researched conclusions. When the two discuss almost anything, Sally's likely to view Steve as remote, aloof, and even "cold", whereas Steve will likely regard Sally as impulsive and hot-headed. No amount of additional effort will improve their communication until each really understands, respects and nurtures the other's MO.

Conative disparities can even affect the realm of gift giving for special occasions: a Fact Finder/Insist is drawn to writing/receiving a love letter; but an Implementor/Insist will need to make/receive something tangible.

B. Leisure and Social Activities

In our affluent society today, the realm of leisure has become important to many couples, and also a potential battleground for conflict. Especially for dual-career couples, weekend and holiday time has much importance, and counselors need to take instinctive approaches into account when intervening in this arena.

For example, George and Dawn have agreed to take a camping trip together to gain some much-needed "quality time" to enhance their relationship. Sounds good, right? But tensions can quickly arise from divergent instinctive paths. For George is an Implementor/Insist who thrives when building things with his hands, and immediately takes off on their afternoon constructing a durable lean-to. Dawn, a Fact Finder/Insist starts out by classifying interesting plants and flowers in the nearby meadows. It won't take long for them to start arguing and becoming defensively critical, unless each can objectively respect the other's innate needs and give each other the freedom to function separately, when appropriate.

C. Parenting

Parenting is a typical source of marital discord. In my clinical experience, conflicts often emerge because husband and wife possess different conative inclinations, and thus fail to respect their spouse's natural parent-child interaction. Even worse, a spouse may reject his or her partner's mode as unimportant or useless - and then bitter recriminations can result and escalate.

For example, Jane is a Fact Finder/Insist who involves their son in library-and-Internet research. However, Larry is a Fact Finder/Resist whose parenting approach is the discovery method rather than reading about what is already known. Rather than criticize each other's predilection, they need to value their differences as an enrichment for their son. Of course, he has his own MO - and happens to be drawn to Quick Start endeavors. A fruitful goal would be for each parent to offer his or her own perspectives, but encourage him to follow his own instincts and respect his own conative approach.

D. Money

Certainly, money is an arena of conflict in many relationships. Counselors may sincerely advise troubled couples to sit down together and focus analytically on budgeting and spending; but such advice is likely to be unproductive, and may even heighten tensions - unless the conative dimension is addressed.

Why? Because Victor is a Follow Thru/Prevent, who avoids all financial lists and structures, and in direct contrast, Karen is a Follow Thru/Insist, who becomes very involved in the record-keeping. Unless they recognize and understand each other's MO, each will view the other with hostility when faced with a stack of unpaid bills and credit-card charges.

E. Use of Living Space

When two people live together, physical space inevitably becomes a relevant feature of their relationship. An often-overlooked source of tension in such situations occurs when partners bring divergent instinctive drives to this arrangement. For example, Jill is a Follow Thru/Insist, who experiences her home as a "nest" - a place in which tidiness and order are almost sacredly paramount. However, Mike is both a Quick Start/Insist and a Follow Thru/Resist with no such sense of planning reverence. In undertaking home-repair projects, he's likely to create chaos with his tools and materials in a way that can unwittingly provoke Jill to anger and furious

retaliation.

In such cases, each partner needs to be respectful of the other's instinctive needs and agree beforehand on how to be true to themselves without frustrating the other.

Just as physical space is an important dimension of relationships, so too is time. Many conflicts occur because partners have differing instincts when it comes to their innate usage of time in everyday living. For instance, Ellen is a Fact Finder/Resist whose sense of time is the future. She spends little time dwelling on the past. Ted is a Fact Finder/Insist who needs to relive the reunion as part of his inclination to consider historical events in his every day problem solving. Ellen becomes critical of what she sees as Ted's endless and seemingly dull efforts to decide on the importance of previous events. Meanwhile, Ted feels increasingly hurt by Ellen's apparently disinterest in his activities. Ellen may attend Ted's reunion as his social companion, but she will inevitably view it from a vastly different perspective. Hers may seem irreverent to him, and his irrelevant to her. That's fine, as long as they see humor in their differences.

In this common instance, each needs to respect the other's conative style, have separate tasks and agree on a time-line for decision-making. For just as Ellen's mode may cause them to overlook an attractive but little-known tour package; Ted's may inadvertently result in their missing a necessary application deadline.

G. Dealing with Stress and Crisis

Stress is usually inescapable in our fast-paced society today, and how partners deal with tension - and even crisis - is a vital aspect of relationships. It's another dimension in which our instinctive makeup plays an important part.

For example, Gerta's elderly, widowed father in Florida has just suffered a stroke and will need significant long-term care. As a Quick Start/Insist, Gerta is disposed to initiate rapid-fire phone calls to relatives and family friends, and try coming up with a solution for where her father can be housed most comfortably. But Jose is an Implementor/Insist and leans toward constructing a special addition to their home where Gerta's father can live with them. Jose views Gerta's activities as well meaning but impractical in this emergency. To Gerta, Jose is unrealistic in expecting to solve her father's problem in this "hands-on" way. As if often true they must consider who will decide the course of action. It is not always so simple as saying that it is her father, so Gerta will decide. Jose is a stake-holder as well. The assignment of roles and responsibilities can become quite complex. However, such separation can go very far in keeping a couple together through stress.

Conclusion by Dr. Hoffman

The field of relationship counseling today needn't remain at an impasse. As a growing number of practitioners are rightfully asserting, it's time for new insights and methods. From my clinical experience, the Kolbe Wisdom™ provides precisely such an approach. By understanding how conative style - involving our Striving Instincts and Operating Zones - affects virtually all aspects of relationships, we can truly improve our therapeutic success.