

**CHAPTER****2***Context of People  
at Work***Introduction**

This chapter examines beliefs about self, others and the world. These beliefs have a large influence on what happens in relationships. From the shop floor to the board room, people need to relate effectively with each other, and the quality of their communication is an essential part of this. Communication will be most effective where people are respectful of each other. This will especially be the case where they disagree or dislike each other. Without such respect, more time is spent on defending or attacking, than on problem-solving.

One central concept in TA is *OKness*. This is to do with our relationship with ourselves, others and the world.

**Examples**

The following examples illustrate how our beliefs affect responses to different situations and how these in turn affect the final outcomes:

<p>Miranda applied for a promotion she did not get. It took her a long time to decide to apply for the post because she was not at all sure she was good enough. When she failed to get the post it reinforced her belief that others are better than her.</p>	<p><i>Miranda is unlikely to apply for further promotions unless she changes her beliefs about herself. Someone may employ her if they believe they can boss her around. They may pick up on her need to please others and her belief that others are more important than her. If this should happen it will just reinforce Miranda's beliefs.</i></p>
<p>Nicky has been overlooked in terms of promotion. She experiences her boss as favouring Neil, who got the promotion instead of her. This experience reinforces her belief that she is not good enough. At the same time she believes that Neil sucks up to the boss and that was how he got the position. As for her boss, Nicky believes that he appoints people who will do as they are told.</p>	<p><i>Nicky is unlikely to learn from experiences and may have difficulty moving on. Her perspective is that the world is an awful place and she just has to put up with it. She believes that she is not good enough and that others are also, in some way or other, not all right.</i></p>

<p>John also applied for the position and did not get it. He is angry, as he believes he is the best one for the job. There was a presentation to do and he believes that others had an unfair advantage over him as he didn't have all the information. He has decided to look for another job and in the meantime is acting as if he is better than others, getting impatient if someone does not do something straight away or does something wrong.</p>	<p><i>John may eventually obtain a promotion but he is likely to remain angry and when things don't go his way he will probably take it out on others and not look at what is his responsibility. He views himself as better than others and is likely to alienate other people.</i></p>
<p>Frances also applied for the same post. She did not get it either but recognizes that the person from outside the organization who did get it had far more experience than she did. When Frances tells a colleague, Tina, that she was unsuccessful Tina responds by saying 'I'm not surprised'. Instead of immediately taking offence Frances clarifies what Tina means by this and Tina apologizes saying that she put that in a clumsy way but meant that she thought Frances needed more experience for that particular post. Frances is OK with Tina's response and is determined to develop her skills and experience so that when she applies for promotions in the future she has more likelihood of achieving them.</p>	<p><i>Frances has the ability to recognize others skills and abilities without putting herself down. She learns from situations and can also hold her disappointment at the same time. When her colleague, Tina, makes an insensitive response Frances does not immediately withdraw or attack her but clarifies the situation and the relationship is maintained.</i></p>

## Reflection on the Examples

These examples can be considered using the TA concepts of *Life Positions* and *OKness*. Your Life Position is the deep-rooted stance you take up in terms of the way you see yourself and others. For example, you may under stress consistently believe that you are wrong and become defensive. You may put others up on a pedestal and think that someone else would be able to do things better than you can. In this frame of mind, you want to get away from other people, leave the office, go home or even leave the job. In the vignettes above this would reflect Miranda's response to the interviews.

Alternatively, in response to a problem, you may believe that no one can do anything about it and that everything is hopeless. When you ask for help you can see no value in what the other person is suggesting and respond with 'Yes but I've tried that' or 'Yes, but you don't understand' and so on. From this stance you are more likely to be passive – and at your worst, resort to drink or drugs to solve problems. This at least eases the pain for a bit. From the vignettes, this would be Nicky's response.

A different response would be to believe that others are always wrong, and move into blaming. You are angry at these times and would like it if people left you to get on with the job – 'if a job is worth doing you need to do it yourself' – others can't be trusted to do it. You feel good about yourself only if you are putting other people down. If the other person were to be Miranda, then her stance and yours would reinforce each other, since they 'fit'. If you are someone who puts others down you may well have started life being put down by a member of your family. You may then have come to believe deep down that you are

inferior, making others more important. However, since this is not a comfortable situation, you may have later reacted by reversing this – and in so doing, put yourself in the upper position. At least by Persecuting you can invite other people to be Victims, rather than feeling a Victim yourself. In the vignettes above, John has responded to the interviews in this way (see also the description of the Drama Triangle, Karpman, 1968, Chapter 9).

Ideally you need to believe that you are OK and that others are too. This means that when a mistake is made, either by you or by another person, you see it as just that – a mistake. You are able to separate out the behaviour from the person and find ways to learn from the situation. This would be Frances' stance in the vignettes above.

## SO WHAT IS OKNESS?

### Life Positions

Life positions are basic beliefs about self and others, which are then used to justify other decisions and behaviour. There are four Life Positions, based on the permutations of *I'm OK* or *I'm Not OK* and *You are OK* or *You are Not OK*.

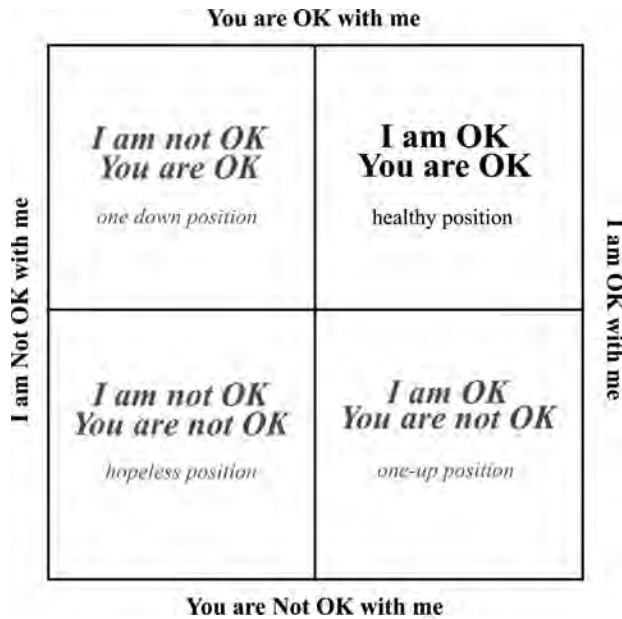
During its time in the womb, providing nothing untoward happens, a child is waiting to emerge into the world once sufficiently grown to be able to survive outside this protective environment. In this case he or she is likely to perceive the world from the perspective of *I am OK and You are OK*. Given that at this stage the child has no language, this is a sensing, rather than a thought or belief. In this respect, it is not yet a Life Position.

Berne (1972) argued that where the mother had some traumatic experiences during pregnancy, or the birth was difficult or even life threatening, this experience would be likely to have an effect on the way the child experiences the world. In this case the sensing may be that life is scary. Subsequent life experiences might reinforce this initial impression, or contradict it. If the child were to be treated punitively, talked down to, and not held, they may begin to form the belief *I am Not OK and You are OK* or alternatively *I am Not OK and You are Not OK*. This might be the only sense they can make of their experiences.

Thirdly, let's take another situation, where someone was picked on and bullied as a child. They learnt that the way to get by was to bully others, and that way they felt stronger and in control. Their behaviour then comes into the *I am OK and You are Not OK* quadrant. However, this will be covering up their internal belief that they are Not OK. However, that internal belief will not usually be visible to others. In fact the child may have forgotten all about their negative feelings towards themselves as they successfully moved away from them by adopting this strategy.

These Life Positions are perceptions of the world. The reality is just *I am and You are*. How I view myself and others is just that – a view, not fact. However, we tend to act as if it were a fact. Just like when somebody says 'I can't do this, I'm useless', rather than 'I don't know how to do this. Will you show me?' The latter stays with facts – that they do not yet know how to do it, whilst the former links 'being useless' as a person with not being able to do something.

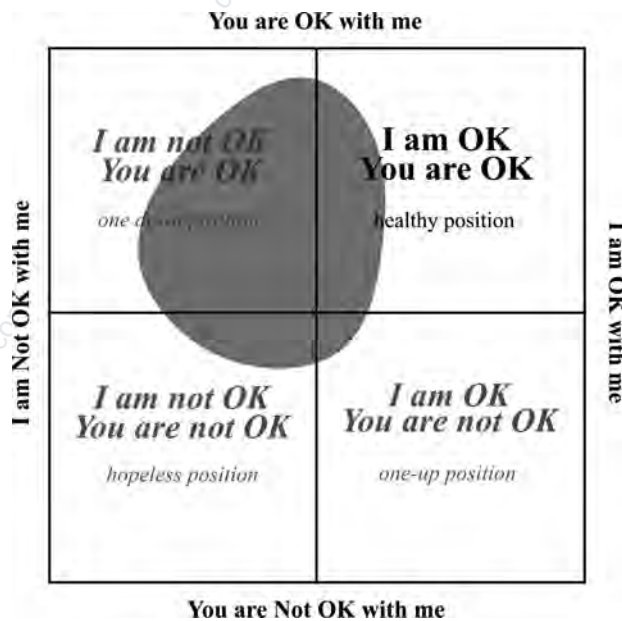
There are a number of ways of diagramming the Life Positions. Ernst (1971), the originator of the 'OK Corral', drew the four positions in a quadrant – though he was actually writing about the visible behaviours, not the underlying beliefs.



**Figure 2.1 The OK Corral**

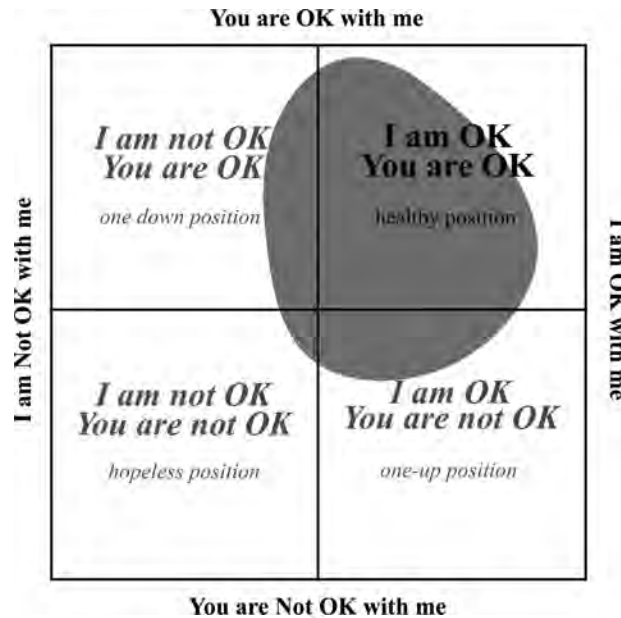
In this book, we have used **bold black text** to signify the effective, and *italic grey text* to signify the ineffective, positions for communication and healthy relationships (in colour, as with traffic lights, these would respectively be green for go and red for stop).

By shading in the squares according to the amount of time you think you spend in each you can get an idea of the way you function.



**Figure 2.2 The OK Corral – shaded – Not OK**

In this first example, the person spends a lot of time in the *I am Not OK, You're OK* position, less time in *I'm OK, You're OK*, and less still in the other two positions. In the second example, the person spends most of their time in the *I'm OK, You're OK* position.

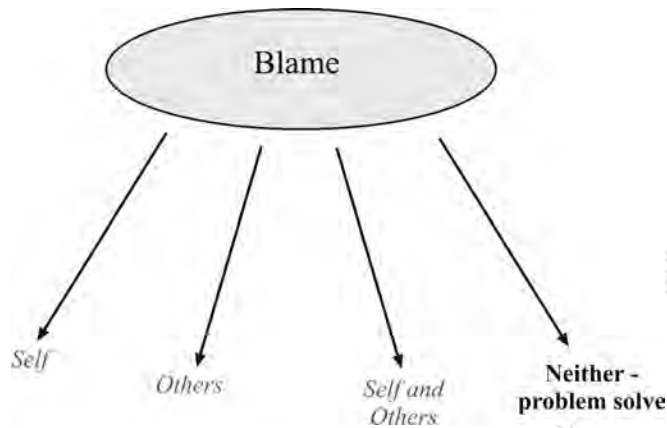


**Figure 2.3 The OK Corral – shaded – OK**

Whilst you might move around any or all of these positions during a typical day, there is likely to be one of the positions to which you are more likely to go to under stress. This is the Life Position, and this can change as you develop and grow. The difference between the behaviour and the underlying belief is important. The basic, 'existential', Life Position is particularly useful when working with people over time so that we can make sense of the patterns they are more likely to get stuck in. In this way we are more likely to find interventions which enable them to change to the *I'm OK, You're OK* quadrant. However, understanding the behaviours is important because it helps us make sense of the 'invitations' people constantly give each other (see the OKness Mix later in this chapter).

Jim Davis, a TA colleague, came up with the idea of using the word 'blame' as a way of considering OKness, particularly in relation to problem-solving. When a situation occurs which is problematic some people may blame themselves for the situation going wrong, they may blame the other person, blame both people, or blame neither. Of course, in the last position everyone just gets on to sort it out, rather than beat up on themselves or others.

Jim's diagram looks like this:



**Figure 2.4 The Blame Model**

Source: Davis (unpublished).

So here, blaming self equates with *I'm Not OK*, blaming others with *You're Not OK*, and blaming neither with *I'm OK, You're OK*.

It is possible to differ strongly from someone else, or be unhappy with what they are doing, and still hold them as being OK. In this way OKness represents an ethical position of treating others with respect and acceptance. You may not always live up to this goal, but it is arguably not only a worthwhile objective, but also a pragmatic one. People tend to respond to you more positively when you respect them. This does not necessarily equate with liking or agreeing with them.

We can see the existential Life Position as a frame of reference governing a person's whole outlook on life. However, in addition, you can move to any of the four positions as a response to what is going on around you in the moment, as Ernst (1971) argued. An example here could be:

<b>Frank:</b> You stupid idiot!	<i>I'm OK, You're Not OK</i>
<b>John:</b> How dare you say that to me!	<i>I'm OK, You're Not OK</i>
<b>Frank:</b> Well you started this!	<i>I'm OK, You're Not OK</i>
<b>John:</b> I'm sorry I feel bad now, I should have thought before I opened my mouth	<i>I'm Not OK, You're OK</i>
<b>Frank:</b> Well it's fine to say sorry now – you started this	<i>I'm OK, You're Not OK</i>
<b>John:</b> I don't know how to sort this out – I'm lost, and you're not helping	<i>I'm Not OK, You're Not OK</i>

However, there is likely to be one consistent position that you flip back to under stress – and this is the Life Position.

## Ubuntu

The African philosophy of Ubuntu – ‘humanity towards others’ – fits well with OKness. Ubuntu philosophy speaks of our humanity existing only through other human beings. Despite the western view of people as independent individuals, in reality we need each other for our survival and well-being (Nabudere, 2007). At birth – when we are completely dependent – without the generosity of the adults around us we simply would not survive into childhood, let alone adulthood. As adults, we are still interdependent.

## The Positions

### I’M OK, YOU’RE OK

If you are in the position of *I’m OK, You’re OK* then you will see both yourself and others in a positive and accepting way – which may or may not include agreeing with them. If this is your existential Life Position, it will represent your predominant way of being in the world. You are therefore likely to ‘get on with’ other people, even though you may not always like their behaviour. This is an important distinction, given the tendency for parents (and other caregivers) in white western society to fuse children’s personalities with their behaviour (for instance ‘You’re a bad girl/boy’ – rather than something like ‘What you have just done is not acceptable’).

By fusing personality with behaviour, we arguably create the kind of situation which sometimes happens in appraisal, where reference to minor ‘issues for development’ leads the appraisee to react out of all proportion to the feedback. Their experience has taught them that if there is a ‘defect’ in their behaviour, then that is equivalent to there being a defect in them as a person.

Very frequently, people’s behaviour and interactions ‘invite’ others to move away from the OK–OK position – often with the apparent aim of rejection. Staying ‘in there’, keeping self and that person OK, is an important strategy to keep communication going.

### I’M NOT OK, YOU’RE OK

If you are in the *I’m Not OK, You’re OK* position, you will see yourself as less important or able than others, so that you are likely to give your power away to them and put them on a pedestal (‘because you are so much better at ... than I am’) and so on. You are likely to want to get away from them in embarrassment or discomfort.

### I’M OK, YOU’RE NOT OK

If you are in the *I’m OK, You’re Not OK* position, then you place yourself in a ‘one up’ position in relation to others. This can take two principal forms. You may have a need to do things for others, with the implicit, and sometimes explicit, message that they don’t have the ability to do these things for themselves. You are also unlikely to check out with them whether they want these things doing anyway. Alternatively, you will blame, berate, oppress or criticize them for all the things they (from your perspective) get wrong. You may make them the cause of all your troubles – ‘without you, my life would be so

much better'. This is an angry position, and ultimately leads to your wanting to 'get rid of' them. John was in this position in the vignette at the start of this chapter.

## I'M NOT OK, YOU'RE NOT OK

The *I'm Not OK, You're Not OK* position is 'hopeless'. If nobody is OK, then everyone is to blame for things that happen. This can happen in the low point in an argument – where you have reached a 'stalemate', 'get nowhere' place.

## Attributes and OKness

Attributes and adjectives can be assigned to the different positions (Berne, 1972), For example, manager–worker. Here are just four examples:

- a. I am a Manager and therefore OK; You are a worker and therefore Not OK.
- b. I am a Manager and therefore Not OK; You are a worker and therefore OK.
- c. I am a worker and therefore OK; You are a Manager and therefore Not OK.
- d. I am a worker and therefore Not OK; You are a Manager and therefore OK.

The traditional western view about status is that those who have it either have innate superiority (for instance as members of the aristocracy), or have achieved status because of their hard work. In contrast, according to this view, those without status are in the position they are because they are lazy, or not as worthwhile human beings as their 'betters'. Managers who accept this view would correspond to position (a) above. Conversely, those without status who take on the diametrically opposite view to this would correspond to the position (c).

This highlights the subjective nature of the Not OK positions – ideally if you believed in the innate value of all human beings, you would hold none of these four views on status.

## Context

No relationship exists in isolation. All of our interactions, whether with one, or more, people, take place in a variety of contexts – families, friendships, communities, teams, organizations, society at large and, increasingly, the global context. People are dealing with a complex web of relationships in their living situation, at work, in their family and local community. They may view themselves as 'OK' within their family, for instance, where they experience positive relationships. They may experience bullying at work, leading them to move to one of the Not OK positions for at least the period they are working. Their existential Life Position will play a part in this too – if this is one of the Not OK positions, then the bullying will simply reinforce this. In contrast, if they have a strong *I'm OK–You're OK* base, they may well ride through the negative experiences at work.

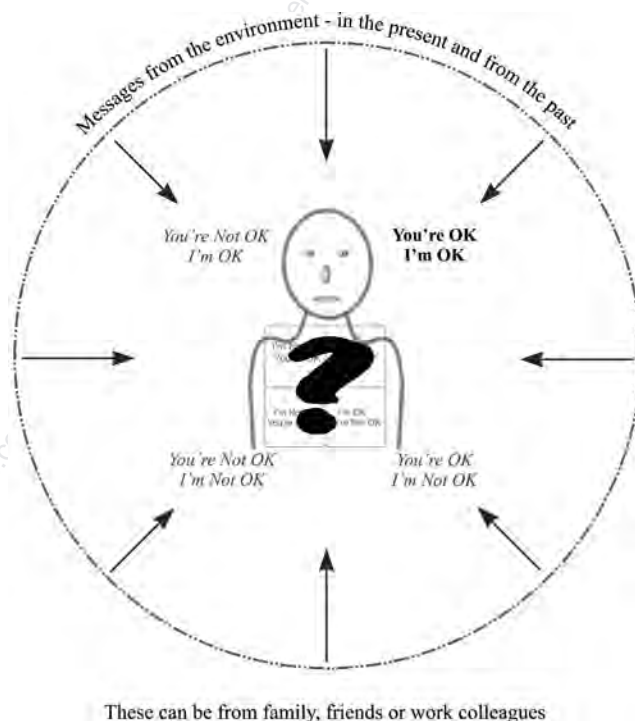


## The OKness Mix

Moment by moment, you are influencing others and being influenced by them in terms of your experience of OKness. You put out invitations for other people to respond to you from one of the four positions, and they are simultaneously doing the same. Different people will have differing levels of energy that go into their invitation. This means that one invitation may be more powerful than another. An example of this would be when a group of people who are all behaving in an OK–OK way with each other are joined by someone who is overbearingly negative. The mood of the group may then shift. The opposite is of course equally possible.

## Messages from the Environment

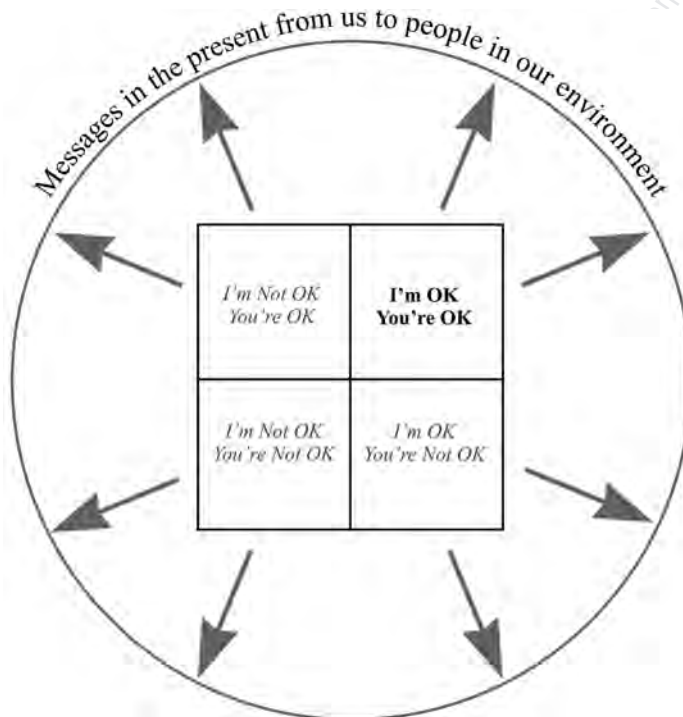
The following diagrams aim to illustrate this phenomenon. The first diagram illustrates the way in which people in our environment are giving you invitations in relation to OKness. They may be treating you as if you are OK or Not OK and you can decide if you wish to go along with this or not. It is, however, important to stress that this process is likely to go on out of your awareness most of the time. If the invitation fits with your own internal self-talk and beliefs then these are likely to reinforce your position, whether this be negative or positive.



**Figure 2.5 Messages from the Environment**

## Messages to the Environment

The second diagram illustrates the messages which you communicate to others – whether in your awareness or not. Your perspective on the world will affect your relationships and the responses you get back are likely to reflect this – and very likely reinforce your view of yourself and them. As with the messages from the environment, you are giving out invitations to people to respond to you in a particular way.



**Figure 2.6 Messages to the Environment**

The importance of this lies in the fact that many social situations are much more changeable than you might think. With the messages you send out and receive, a situation which seems hopelessly negative, can be changed, often without a great deal of effort.

## Resilience

Our inner well-being has two broad aspects:

1. The overall way in which we see ourselves. This represents, as we have seen, our existential Life Position. In other words, the overall way we see ourselves and others – that we return to regularly – especially under stress. The four basic permutations revolve around whether I see myself as OK or not, and whether I see the other person (I am currently with) as OK or not.

2. The more momentary changes in our perspective dependent on many factors:

- the extent to which we are thrown off balance when things go wrong
- whom we are with – and what our intuitive ‘antenna’ says about them
- the internal OKness state of the person/people we are with
- how tired/energized we are
- our physical health
- any beliefs that are current for us – maybe related to recent events for instance

## An Example of Resilience

Resilience isn’t the same as stamina – here is an illustration of what we are talking about:

### SCENARIO 1 – LOWER RESILIENCE

You get up, feel good, have a shower, but the water runs cold before you finish. You mutter an expletive, and go down for breakfast. Whilst you are eating your cereal, you knock over your coffee, spilling it all over your clothes. You mutter another (stronger!) expletive. You leave the house, only to see your bus disappearing over the hill – your watch has stopped. You decide you have had enough of today, and go back indoors and retire to bed in a huff.

### SCENARIO 2 – HIGHER RESILIENCE

You get up, feel good, have a shower. The water runs cold, so you get out sharpish and resolve to call a plumber to see if you need a bigger hot water cistern. Whilst you are eating your cereal, you knock over your coffee, spilling it all over your clothes. You wonder what led you to do that, and get changed. You check your watch, realize it has stopped, and that you will miss your bus. You phone in to work to let them know you are running late and need to make the urgent work calls from home now before going in.

The different outcome in each scenario is not to do with the triggers – which are the same – but the sense/meaning you make of it, and what you do in response to what happens. In the first scenario, the person appears to be a Victim to what happens to them, and their initial sense of OKness with themselves and the world is fairly easily knocked off course by the three, relatively minor, things that happen. In contrast, in the second scenario, the person ‘problem-solves’ as each incident occurs. Although this could be seen as stoicism or toughness, the crucial variable in terms of resilience is the internal experience of holding a sense of OKness, rather than just that the person ‘deals with’ things.

## Putting the OKness Model into Practice in Dealing with People

Imagine a situation where you are in conflict with some at work.

Some useful self-monitoring questions are called for here:

1. Is this person significant to me?
2. Am I generally having difficulties in my dealings with them?
3. Do I sense that they are generally having difficulties dealing with me?
4. Do I need to work with this person, regardless of my liking/disliking of them?
5. Can I actually work with them even if I disagree with them on some issues?
6. Is there a recognizable pattern here for me in terms of other times and other relationships?

These questions do not in themselves provide the means to change the patterns of OKness in a situation. They do, however, provide a way of making sense of the way you relate to others, and enable you to realize that you have options. Life Positions are not facts – they are beliefs and beliefs can be changed.

Ultimately, you need to have an internal sense of OKness. If your sense of OKness depends on others continually giving you reassurance, then your sense of self will be fragile and illusory – when people go away, or this continual reassurance is not there, then you are likely to lose this sense.

You cannot will other people to move to an OK–OK position. However, you will increase your chances at some point of succeeding in this aim if you consistently stay in an OK–OK position in your dealings with them. It may come as no surprise that, very often, people who you find difficult experience *you* as difficult. Many years ago, one of the authors worked in an office where the postman arrived each morning, grunted, threw the post on the desk and disappeared. We resolved in the office to make sure that we enthusiastically welcomed and thanked the postman each morning. After just one week, he came in and said animatedly ‘Good morning!’ After a further few days, he said that this was the only place he went to where people were friendly. So from his perspective it was other people who did not welcome him, rather than he who behaved in this way. We can fantasize that people’s actions are intentional and conscious, when, instead, they may be conditioned, and arising from a narrow range of experience of how to be with others in this particular situation.

OKness is about relationship and connection. If there are problems with these two areas in an organization then it is highly likely that effectiveness will be hampered. In the above example of the postman, the staff were proactive in making connection and developed the relationship. This proactive stance enabled the postman to develop a sense of belonging and in response he changed his behaviour with them, even though he may not have immediately altered his beliefs. That might (or might not) follow later. Neither the staff nor the postman were looking for a deep, meaningful relationship in this context – they simply needed to do their job, and if that can be done with hassle-free, clear communication, they can be more productive, and find their contacts with others pleasurable.

The culture of leadership and power within the organization will have an influence on the workforce’s beliefs about themselves and others. For instance if managers describe their reports in negative, Not OK ways, this is highly likely to lead to a drop in motivation and hence productivity.

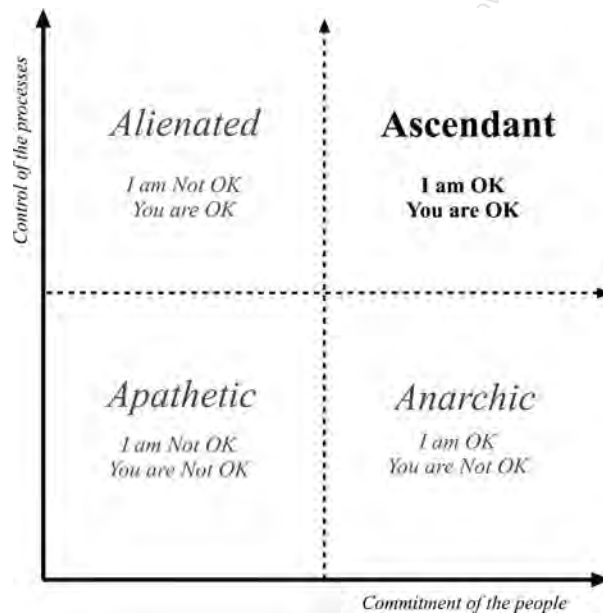
You can decide to enter situations with a resolve to hold an OK–OK position, and this can be an effective strategy, but to be successful you need to be congruent in terms of your philosophy and your behaviour.

## Ascendant Organization and OKness

In this section we are going to take a look at the application of OKness to the macro perspective of the organization.

Wickens (1995) writes about the 'Ascendant Organization' – a term he uses for an organization that combines high levels of commitment with control of the processes to 'achieve a synthesis between high effectiveness and high quality of life leading to long-term, sustainable business success'.

In order to obtain commitment, employees need to be valued along with their experience and expertise, and need to have the opportunity to further develop their skills. Wickens' basic Model corresponds with TA's OK Corral. The Ascendant Organization quadrant falls within *I'm OK and You're OK*. This type of organization is the one in which there is most prosperity, power and happiness.



**Figure 2.7 The Ascendant Organization with the OK Corral**

The anarchic quadrant has high levels of individual commitment but little control. People do what they individually think is right for the organization or themselves without much thought for any corporate objectives. This is within the *I'm OK and You're Not OK* quadrant on the OK Corral.

The alienated organization utilizes top-down imposition of rules and procedures, with no attempt to involve people or get their cooperation, except by edict. Managers may be autocratic. This fits with the *I'm Not OK and You're OK* position.

With the apathetic organization there is neither commitment nor control, no centrally respected authority or any attempt to involve the workforce. People broadly do what they want, without any shared objectives or sense of direction. This is in line with *I'm Not OK and You're Not OK* position on the OK Corral.

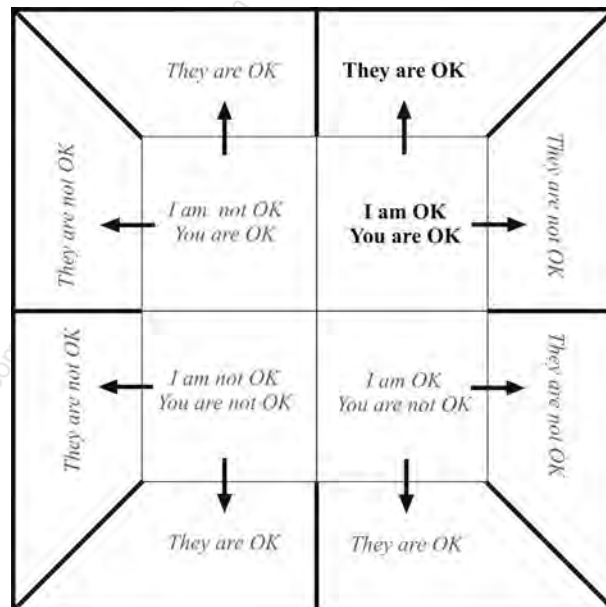
Wickens sees the ascendant organization as requiring 'high-quality investment, engineering, financial control and product development. Above all, it requires high-calibre, highly motivated people, and a culture and leadership committed to these goals'. So the organization needs to be seen as a whole from his point of view. This fits in with the Organizational Transactional Analysis perspective.

### The Three Dimensional Model of OKness

The original OK Corral implies that there is only one other person in the equation, when in reality there are often more than this. For example, the behaviour of a team member in an organization may suggest that they believe they are OK and that other members of their team are OK, but that individuals from other teams (or other teams as a whole) are Not OK. You find other people whom you like and then gossip and put other people down. You are therefore saying that you believe you and your fellow gossips are OK but those you are gossiping about are not.

Another example would be in an organization where the senior managers are seen as Not OK by the administrative staff and the finance departments because they are seen as 'swanning off' around the country and not really working. Therefore two departments join forces to make the managers Not OK.

Diagrammatically, if we are to take account of this third dimension, we need to extend the four Life Positions to eight. It can be seen that each of the four original positions is related to two three-dimensional positions – where the third person/s are either OK or Not OK – as indicated by the arrows in the diagram.



**Figure 2.8 The Three-Dimensional Positions**

Education into this format starts early. Parents talk to their children about how the world is – an exciting place, how people are – whether they can be trusted and so on. Children start to build up a view of themselves, of the specific people they directly relate to and ‘people out there’.

New employees equally get socialized into the culture of their new organization. ‘The people in finance are a waste of time’ or ‘The boss is great as long as you agree with him/her’.

The extension of the two-dimensional *I’m OK, You’re OK* to include the third dimension of ‘They’ offers a way to understand a person’s social context and accounts for differences in your sense of your own and others’ OKness. The Model can be used to work with an individual or a team to assist them in understanding their transactions with others and to put words to some of their experiences. It can also be used from the perspective of a manager, or colleague to help make sense of an employee’s responses in relation to others.

This Model has been successfully used in organizations with teams of individuals struggling to relate to each other in effective ways. The Model enables them to recognize the patterns they perpetuate, and this goes some way towards individuals making changes.

## An Example of 3-D OKness

In April 2005 The Rover group of companies had to call in the receivers. Several employees when interviewed for television news blamed the British public for buying foreign cars – ‘this is their fault’. Some commentators saw the possibility of the government putting in funding to prevent the closure of the company being misguided or even an immoral use of taxpayers’ money – their view was that the directors of the company had taken out large sums of money in bonuses. So the public and their buying habits were Not OK from some workers’ point of view, the directors were Not OK from the point of view of those who felt that they had exploited the company’s assets and others saw the government as Not OK because they were seen as bolstering the bosses by bailing out the company.

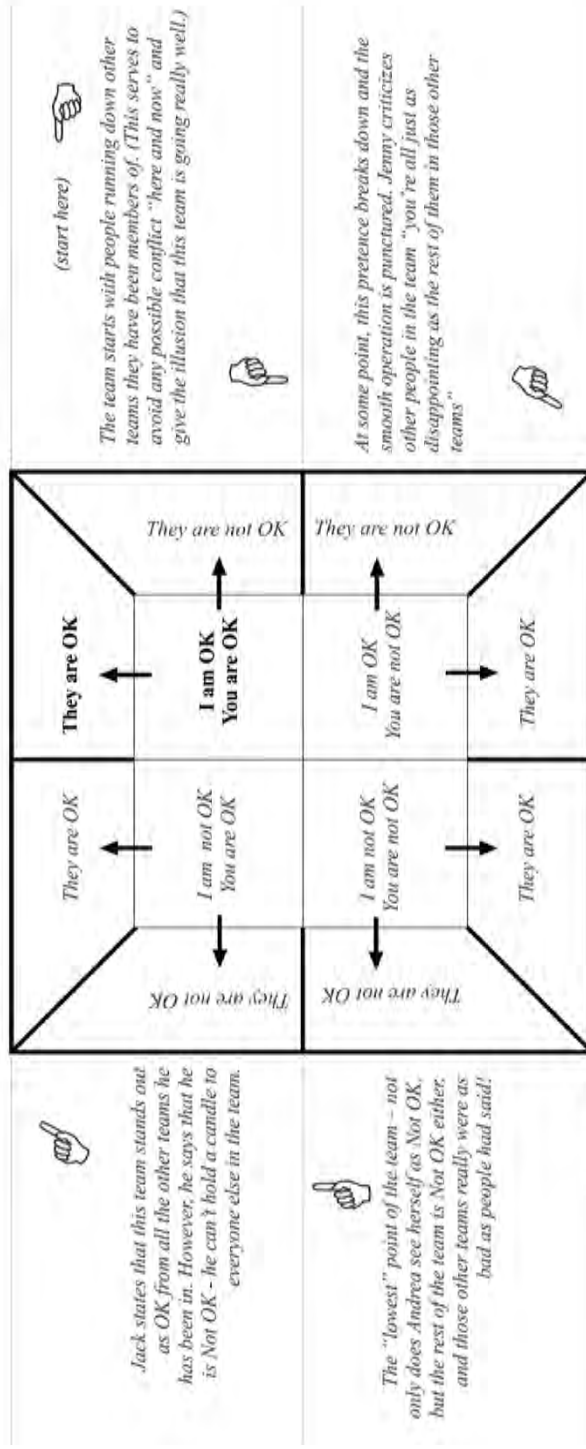
## Examples of 3-D OKness in an Organization

The following figure looks at some specific examples in each of the eight three dimensional positions. They do not represent a sequence – just a set of fictional examples that could arise from one situation.

It can be seen from the examples in the three-dimensional chart that it is really easy to fall into one of the negative positions. However, if a manager has a positive approach they are likely to be influential in changing a negative culture. However, if this were a real situation they are likely to need additional support – since maintaining resilience in the face of this level of negativity would be very difficult. Fortunately, in such situations there are usually others we can align with in an OK–OK way who will act as the ‘encouragement committee’.

Barbara continues Jack's theme by putting herself down. She argues, however, that teams are generally useful – that this team is doing well, but that she is “holding everyone back”.

The team reaches a balance in its development. Whilst there is scope for disagreement (indeed this is an important aspect of interaction in the team) and people do not necessarily “like” one another, there is an atmosphere of working effectively together and of problem solving rather than for instance “blaming”.



Jack states that this team stands out as OK from all the other teams he has been in. However, he says that he is Not OK – he can't hold a candle to everyone else in the team.

(start here)

The team starts with people running down other teams they have been members of. (This serves to avoid any possible conflict “here and now” and give the illusion that this team is going really well.)

The “lowest” point of the team – not only does Andrea see herself as Not OK, but the rest of the team is Not OK either, and those other teams really were as bad as people had said!

At some point, this pretence breaks down and the smooth operation is punctured. Jenny criticizes other people in the team “you're all just as disappointing as the rest of them in those other teams”.

Further in to the team's life, Simon suggests that it really is everyone in this team who is Not OK – including Simon himself – this is now moving towards the most hopeless position.

Albert comes in to the discussion and says that in fact it is the rest of this team who are Not OK – actually all those other teams he has been in were really rather good! Whilst this could be seen as an attempt to make some teams worthwhile (so that the whole business has some point) it serves to reinforce the view that this team is not getting on very well.

Figure 2.9 Examples of Three-Dimensional OKness within a Team



## OKness and Teams

OKness can be observed in everyday action in the continuing dynamic interplay between people – which can often change dependent upon the situation.

In teams where there is an absence of structuring and/or supportive leadership, not-OKness develops. Somehow in the vacuum of what people need, there is an out-of-awareness belief that something is wrong and so someone must be Not OK. The meaning that is attached to this is likely to relate to the person's Life Position. For example, if this is *I am Not OK, You are OK*, then they will be more likely to believe that something is wrong with them – this could be about who they are and/or what they do (or do not do). This may not necessarily be explicit in their behaviour.

The social situation can also be seen as a co-creative mix of what people bring to the situation, how others respond to them, and how this pans out. On a day when someone is in an especially good mood, they are less likely to take up other people's invitations to move to a Not OK position.

To develop a sense of OKness, you need to monitor your own internal reactions, which will be a mixture of your responses to deeply based beliefs about yourself and others and the invitations from people around you to move to different Life Positions. You are much more likely to remain effective in your communication with others if you stay in an OK–OK position. When you do this, apart from communicating clearly, you are inviting the other person to join you in the OK position.

## Factors Involved in OKness

The following table examines some of the factors that are linked to OKness.

**Table 2.1 Factors Involved in OKness**

Area	How this is relevant/important
Quality of Relationships	The quality of relationships which people experience in a team or an organization is a crucial variable in the level of OKness at a social level. This includes all permutations of behavioural OKness, both within a team as a whole, between individual members of a team and between the team and other teams within an organization.
Self-Esteem	People with low self esteem give strong invitations to others to move to <i>Not OK</i> 'ing them. Being held in low esteem by others may of course result in the same outcome but from a different cause. High self-esteem can be developed and maintained by positive colleagues and bosses, as well as ourselves. Ideally we start work motivated and this needs to be maintained.
Cohesion/ Belonging	The extent to which people experience a sense of belonging and cohesion is important, since it provides encouragement of OKness at a behavioural level.
Blame	One way of seeing the three <i>Not OK</i> positions is by looking at who is assigned 'blame' for the way things are (Davis – unpublished – see earlier in this chapter). High levels of blame in a team can be seen as a fairly obvious sign that people see themselves or others as <i>Not OK</i> .

**Table 2.1 Continued**

Area	How this is relevant/important
Openness to learning	This measure is more a gauge of how willing people are to consider change as a way of improving life in a team or an organization. Are they willing to let go of old behaviours or is the need to hold on to the old ways of doing things too strong?
Volatility	The greater the level of volatility there is in a team, the greater the chance that change can be effected. Where the OK positions are rigid and unchanging, the more likely it is that there are one or more individuals in the team whose negative, social level OK positions are strongly linked to their negative existential Life Position.
Management	The ability of management to provide a positive structuring and supportive environment within which people may work is a crucial inoculation against behavioural Not OKness. The lack of either structuring and/or support in the style of the manager (or the management structure as a whole) leads to a vacuum in which Not-OKness becomes the explanation for why all is not well.
Hope	Hope is a way of focusing on the future, rather than the present. We all need to maintain a sense of hope to enable us to remain emotionally stable in the present.
Investment	What has each individual got invested in this situation (either positively or negatively)? If their primary energy is elsewhere (home, hobbies, friendships) then they may not be willing to invest energy, time or short-term discomfort to resolve the team situation – indeed, they may not experience themselves as being particularly affected by it.
Resilience	Much has been written about resilience in relation to children and their ability (or otherwise) to ride through difficult experiences. Increasingly, this same term is being used in relation to managers' ability to hold the tension during the process of change (see Conner, 1998).

## Summary

We have looked at the many aspects of OKness in the workplace, in both one-to-one relationships and the larger networks within an organization. Whilst there are undoubtedly situations in which problems in relationships seem more intractable, this chapter has proposed that many, if not most, difficult situations between people can be more easily understood than is commonly believed. That understanding can then be used to find a solution to the situation.

## EXERCISES

### EXERCISE 1

When you get stressed, or when things go wrong, are you more likely to look to yourself or to others as the cause? Relate this to the Life Positions. Having worked that out, decide what you could say to yourself to enable you to shift back to the positive OK-OK position. Who could you receive support from to do this? What could you do in future to maintain the OK-OK position?

### EXERCISE 2

- Think about someone from an identified group (or a specific person) whom you regard as OK. What would this person need to do for you to see them as Not OK?
- Think about someone from an identified group (or a specific person) whom you regard as Not OK. What would this person need to do for you to see them as OK?
- Consider what this tells you about:
  - how stable or fragile your views of yourself or others are
  - how likely you are to move people from one position to another
  - how the positions are about perspective and beliefs, not facts
  - your investment (or not) in any relationship and what kinds of factors make a difference
  - how other people may also be doing this with you and your actions

What will you do with this awareness from now on?

### EXERCISE 3

This exercise is useful when there is a need to develop understanding between teams or groups of people. It is particularly helpful to enable meetings to progress amicably. Make slips of paper for each of the first three descriptors (described below).

#### Descriptors

- You have high individual commitment. There's no real leadership and you individually do what you think is right for you and the organization. You believe in the approach of 'dog eat dog'. You do your bit so that you get on.
- You don't have any commitment and there's no one you respect at your level or in authority. Generally you don't think anyone knows what they are doing or why they are doing it. At your worst you believe everything is pointless anyway.
- You are in a top-down rule-bound organization with autocratic managers. You look up to others and when things are going wrong believe you can't get things right. At these times you feel pretty helpless about things.

### Final Descriptor

- Your organization involves you in the decision-making process. You are encouraged to go on courses and improve yourself. You get on with others and are happy to listen to their point of view. You are also happy for the final decision to be made by the team leader or manager if there is uncertainty about what to do.

### Procedure

- Ensure that each person has a slip with one of the first three descriptors on it, and ask them not to show it to the others.
- Then hold a meeting about a potentially real situation that could occur in your organization, such as making a decision about how to spend a certain budget. It will be difficult for the meeting to come to a resolution.
- Next give each person a slip of paper with the final descriptor on it, again without sharing what is on the piece of paper, and ask them to have a meeting from that position. The meeting should go more smoothly with greater listening on all sides, even if they disagree.
- Next debrief the exercise drawing up the Wickens quadrants (see page 21 above) and ask the group to read out and decide which each of the descriptors related to.
- Discuss how this relates to your organization and/or to each individual. This latter will depend on how much trust there is in the group as to whether discussing this is appropriate.

Feel free to develop other exercises based on this.