The Scale of Cooperation

A guide to strengthen the cooperation in teams

The Scale of Cooperation

For teamtrainers and teamcoaches that support teams, and managers and team leaders who want to help their team move forward.

Table of Content

Preface

Society is closely focused on the individual. This is reflected in freedom of choice, freedom of opinion and the right to say whatever you like. All of these are rights. But are there also duties? Does a well-functioning society depend on cooperation, and reaching agreements that everyone is willing to abide by?

We could not live, or indeed survive, without cooperation. Teams that work together – i.e. cooperate – are crucial to every organization. Besides substantive details, procedures and results, successful cooperation is far more important than many of us realize.

But what does successful cooperation involve? What does it require, and how can we tell quickly what helps and what does not? Living and working together is incredibly complex, given the group dynamics in teams – so how can we make it succeed? Given not just all our visible but also our invisible behaviour, how can we ever get a clear picture of things? The Scale of Cooperation is an attempt to answer these questions. Whatever part we play in the organization, we can use the Scale to find our way through all this differing behaviour. It is not the whole truth, but a road map – not the territory, but a signpost.

So now there's a handbook on the Scale of Cooperation for managers, trainers and coaches. What should it include? There is so much to be said, written and drawn about the Scale that it can never be complete. And insights into it will continue to evolve. By working with groups, talking to colleagues and continuing to study relevant literature, we can continue to develop the model. So there will certainly be new versions of this handbook, and any feedback you can give us on the contents will certainly be appreciated.

Something we want to mention first of all about this English version is that we have made some deliberate language choices in the Scale that do not always correspond to correct English grammar. We often use verbs where a noun might be better. But we believe that cooperation is behaviour, so we want to use verbs to emphasize that you can change your behaviour and thus the way in which you and your team

cooperate. So our apologies to all English readers that appreciate correct grammar. We have done it for a reason!

The main focus of the handbook is on the use of the sheets. We feel this is the most effective way to apply the Scale when working with groups. However, the insights and knowledge it provides can be used in many ways. A PowerPoint presentation at a live or online meeting, a drawing on a flip chart, a bookmark in a coaching session – whatever your method, the handbook can give you plenty of ideas and background information. But as you read it, you will notice that the focus is on the use of the sheets. Feel free to translate these into your everyday practice.

Pieter Schoe & Floor Vullings
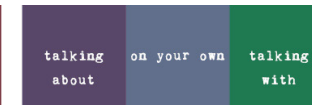
Chapter 1
The Scale of Cooperation

Struggling			Avoiding			Cooperating		
fighting	conflict	criticism	talking about	on your own	talking with	feedback	consolidate	flow

1.1 Why a Scale of Cooperation?

We believe cooperation has an extremely positive impact, providing energy and eventually giving everyone valuable tools to work with. Yet some teams are very negative or cynical about it. 'Cooperation? What does that mean in a team like this?' Some people can't see any point in it – and may even see it as a kind of cop-out.

So it is not just some ready-to-use idea.

During our years as team trainers and coaches we have noticed that, although every team 'cooperates', the way in which they do so, and the effect it has, may vary considerably. We have observed three 'worlds of difference', and given them names that each refer to a kind of behaviour: Cooperating, Avoiding and Struggling. The result is the Scale of Cooperation. At one end of the Scale is the positive experience we feel when there are shared goals and we help each other achieve them; and at the other is what can happen when interests collide, leading to conflict, fighting and even hostility, whether or not openly expressed. Even this involves working together – for we only stop doing so when there is no longer any relationship, task or interest to defend.

Fortunately we are all familiar with times when cooperation really gives us energy; but there are also times when we work against rather than with each other. And, for whatever reason, we may decide to avoid both of these 'worlds' – to avoid working either for or against each other. The result is a Scale based on three 'worlds': Struggling, Avoiding and Cooperating.

Whole bookcases have been written about successful cooperation. And libraries are also full of books on conflict management, degrees of escalation, and escalation versus de-escalation. But there is not much literature on avoidance. And – as far as we are aware – seeing and treating these three worlds as part of a single scale is new. And it is important, for even conflict may lead to successful cooperation. Seizing an opportunity in a conflict does not have to end in tears.

This handbook is about how to support cooperation in teams. In it we are pleased to share our 15-year experience of supervising groups.

● **Note:** The Scale is not 'the truth', but a reflection on our years of working with groups. We see it as a road map that can help teams cooperate more effectively and enjoy it more. But it is not reality in all its complexity. For more on this, see section 1.4.

1.2 Every crisis or change has its winners

'Survival of the fittest' is a term coined by the economist Herbert Spencer in 1864 after reading Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species. Whereas biologists nowadays talk of 'natural selection', 'survival of the fittest' is still in common use in market economics. Whatever you may think, there is such a thing as competition. Darwin would later say that it was not the strongest that survived, or the cleverest, but the 'species' that was able to respond fastest to changing conditions.

In March 2020, the Dutch government decreed a 'lockdown' in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other things, all restaurants were ordered to close – a previously unknown restriction in the Netherlands. Restaurant owners responded within a matter of days. Although they could no longer serve customers on the premises, they could build a temporary counter in the doorway so that people could collect takeaway meals to cook at home. Fortunately the government provided financial assistance for all the businesses that were forced to close, so it was not a complete disaster for them; but some people's creative response to changing conditions was striking.

As team trainers we are particularly interested in examining teams where all the members and other individuals involved experience gains. Such restaurant owners could only respond so quickly because they had a team that was keen to support them – and then the sky was the limit! Everyone set to work in a Covid-proof manner; new packaging and other materials were purchased, working hours were changed, websites were overhauled, interviews were held with the press, new menus were produced, and instructions were provided on how to cook

the takeaway meals at home. And areas outside the restaurant were marked with arrows and lines so that people knew where to wait at a safe distance.

The knowledge and insights of teams that respond well can be used to help teams and people that are not so good at cooperating successfully. Sometimes there is too much focus on problems, people lose sight of the big picture, or the pressure of work becomes too great. The Scale of Cooperation can then help people see how a team can again start cooperating effectively.

1.3 Winning teams and how they work

Winning teams say that 'cooperation' is what has brought them to where they are now. Every leading sports club has a 'golden generation' from time to time – 'something' happens to make the team a great success. Is this coincidence – or does something happen that can be transferred to other teams seeking that 'something'? We think it can – but it is by no means self-evident. Ask a winning sports team what the main factor was in their success, and the answer is always *'We were a team!'* This may sound obvious, but it means so much: paying attention, being aware that you can contribute, lots of practice, talking to each other, dealing with things you are challenged about, and above all cooperating as much as possible. And perhaps even more important: talking to each other in a way that provides energy, and above all appreciating things that are going well. Building blocks that help turn that 'something' into something great.

Over the years we have incorporated our many insights into the Scale. We will present these insights in 'layers'. Right now there are eight of them.

1.4 The Scale in eight layers

The Scale is made up of eight layers. These are visually displayed on page 72 and 73.

1. Three worlds
2. What kind of behaviour is created?
3. Nine positions
4. Direction of view
5. Typical behaviour in each position
6. Twenty-seven action cards
7. Keys to the three worlds
8. Features of the three worlds

1.4.1 Three worlds

The first layer shows the division into what we call the 'three worlds'.

• Struggling
• Avoiding
• Cooperating

→ **How to use this layer:** This division is usually the start of a presentation. We talk of 'worlds', and also 'a world of difference'. Behaviour in each of these three worlds works like a magnet. If you trust others, you are more likely to be seen as trustworthy. If you blame others ('sow the wind'), you are more likely to get into arguments and be contradicted ('reap the whirlwind'). And if you avoid others, they are less likely to approach you.

● **Note:** We use the words 'struggling', 'avoiding' and 'cooperating' as verbs, knowing that this is not always grammatically correct. But we very much believe that cooperation is behaviour, and so you can change it by changing your behaviour. You are not 'in avoidance', but you display 'avoiding behaviour' (for a reason) and you can change that. So you are never fated to be in one of the three worlds - you and your teammates can behave differently, which means you can shift to a different world of cooperation.

1.4.2 What kind of behaviour is created?

The second layer shows what is increased – what is 'created' – when you are in each of these three worlds. You can often choose, and show by your behaviour, which of the three worlds you want to be in. It is sometimes useful to realize what cooperation leads to, and whether your spontaneous reaction will get you where you want to be:

- • Struggle behaviour creates resistance
- • Avoidance behaviour creates distance
- • Cooperation behaviour creates trust

→ **How to use this layer:** This layer supports the first one – in a way, it summarizes its effect. The explanation in Layer 1 can be confirmed by the summary in Layer 2. The reverse is also often true: trust opens the door to cooperation ('which comes first, the chicken or the egg?'). This is worth mentioning: a process of cooperation creates trust creates cooperation creates trust and so on. It is useful to realize that an Avoiding or Struggling group will never cooperate more successfully by continuing to avoid or struggle. As a trainer, coach or manager, you will also have to display cooperation behaviour!

1.4.3 Nine positions

The third layer shows what kinds of behaviour you mainly find in each of the worlds:

- • Struggling:
- - Fighting
- - Conflict
- - Criticism

- • Avoiding:
- - Talking about
- - On your own
- - Talking with

- • Cooperating:
- - Feedback
- - Consolidate
- - Flow

→ **How to use this layer:** These nine positions illustrate the kinds of behaviour we find in the three worlds. This shows the things people do when they are Struggling, Avoiding or Cooperating. We use these positions to help people recognize where they are on the Scale, *and* also to put things in perspective. It is important to explain clearly what the various terms mean, for they involve deliberate linguistic choices. Chapter 2 explains in more detail the order in which you can discuss the nine positions. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explain in more detail what the nine positions entail.

● **Note:** We make a distinction between 'criticism' and 'feedback'. Some people prefer to distinguish between 'feedforward' and 'feedback', and others between 'positive criticism' and 'negative criticism'. This is fine, but it can also be confusing. We have decided to distinguish between 'criticism' (talking to others from a sense of irritation) and 'feedback' (talking to others from a wish to improve and grow); and ultimately this means much the same thing.

1.4.4 Direction of view

The fourth layer concerns people's mindset, or what we call their 'direction of view'. You can't just adopt one of the nine positions – what also matters is your direction of view:

Focused on difficulties: there is then often a conflicting goal, a perceived lack or shortage of something, behind the difficulty. The other must be persuaded to adopt a different direction of view in order to overcome the difficulty. If the other does not share this insight, cooperation will cost energy.

Focused on possibilities: there is then often a shared goal, that gives you energy and direction. Thinking in terms of possibilities will then generate energy: 'I'm up for it!'

→ **How to use this layer:** After the Scale has been introduced with the sheets on the ground, the fourth layer provides insight into what we call people's direction of view. It is very effective to show this literally with your position and direction of view on the scale made of sheets.

The 'difficulties' direction of view is from right to left, with Fighting as the last position and Cooperating behind you.

The 'possibilities' direction of view is from left to right, with Flow as the last position and Struggling behind you.

In each position you can ask the question *'Am I focused on a difficulty, a lack or shortage of something, or can I focus on possibilities?'*

Get someone to describe a problem he or she is facing. Together identify the position on the Scale where the problem is located. Get the person to stand there and ask him, thinking about the problem, which direction he was mainly looking in – difficulties or possibilities? Then ask him, thinking about the problem, if it is possible to look at possibilities and redefine the problem in terms of them. What does this do to the person's energy?

Discuss the following two descriptions of a situation:

'Things are really bad, our market has collapsed, and we can't assemble the team we need to develop a response that will get us back on our feet.'

'We clearly face challenges if we want to get back on our feet. But the fact that the market has collapsed gives us the time, technology and energy to find new markets and quickly build up a presence there.'

These are descriptions of one and the same situation. They are both completely accurate and valid. But put yourself in a listener's shoes, and ask yourself how each description will make him feel. A description can have an impact on what happens next. Changing your direction of view is also called 'reframing' or a paradigm shift.

● **Note:** Difficulties are not a matter of good or bad, but of recognition: people readily recognize possibilities (which are supposedly 'good'), but not always difficulties. *'Surely it's better to think in terms of possibilities?'* they will say. When facing difficulties it sometimes helps to realize that a difficulty is always connected with a lack or a shortage of something – and the lack or shortage is not always objectively measurable, but is perceived subjectively. It may not be what you want, but it is not necessarily good or bad. Using the words 'difficulty', 'lack' and 'shortage' together in an explanation may help people realize that difficulties are part of life, and that *recognizing* a lack or shortage of something is one of the *keys* to reconnecting with whoever raises the difficulty, from a wish to solve the difficulty together and cooperate more successfully.

● **Note:** We have chosen to distinguish between 'difficulties' and 'possibilities', whereas 'problems' versus 'solutions' might have seemed more logical. However, in conflict situations the terms 'problem' and 'solution' can sound negative: *'The problem is you'* and *'The solution is that you go and I stay'*. A solution has a freezing effect, is set in stone and gets bogged down in conflict – whereas the term 'possibilities' is gentler, and provides more space to make choices even in conflict situations: *'Even if you don't like the idea, it is a possibility'*. Possibilities create more space for brainstorming, whereas solutions rule it out.

1.4.5 Typical behaviour in each position

The fifth layer is numbered, and describes the most frequent features in each position. A summary:

Struggling:

1. Trouble starts, escalation follows. [Fighting]
2. Conflicting parties, are you for us or against us? Us and them. [Conflict]
3. It's someone else's fault, people feel personally attacked. [Criticism]

Avoiding:

4. Complaining about each other, a process of resistance. [Talking about]

5. Everyone works by himself. [On your own]
6. Talking with each other, making non-committal suggestions. [Talking with]

Cooperating:

7. Everyone acknowledges his share, is open to feedback. [Feedback]
8. Working through commitment. [?]
9. Top team, ready to perform under pressure. [Flow]

→ **How to use this layer:** This layer is really a more detailed version of the previous four. It can be used when people are still completely unfamiliar with the Scale, for instance in a marketing presentation, to give a quick first impression of it. However, we also use this layer to provide people with a summary or reference work. And the link with the nine numbers provides all kinds of ways of working that may help teams make progress.

● **Note:** We have also printed this layer round the outside of a mug. This makes clear that people in one of the positions only have a limited field of vision. If they are in Conflict, Cooperation is literally 'out of sight'. And they no longer even choose to Talk to each other, 'because talking doesn't help'. The same thing happens when people cooperate successfully. Trusting each other makes Conflict or Fighting an unthinkable – and invisible – option.

1.4.6 Twenty-seven action cards

The 27 action cards are behaviour options that correspond to the nine positions in combination with direction of view. In most positions there is thus behaviour that can be seen when direction of view is focused on difficulties, and behaviour that can be seen when it is focused on possibilities. There is often also behaviour that makes sure you stay in the position you are already in. This creates three possible behaviour options in each position. They give more depth to behaviour in each position, and help people shift from 'recognizing where they are' to 'exploring what they can do differently'.

In Chapter 6 you can find from p. 43 onwards a detailed description of the 27 actions, and some examples of commonly used combinations of the cards.

→ **How to use this layer:** As soon as you turn over some of the 27 cards, there is a puzzled reaction: *'Hey, wait, there are lots more!'* We have learned from experience that the cards work best if you only use four to six of them in each training session. This provides depth, and is easier for people to remember. Using more of them will be too much, and vague.

For practical and substantive reasons the cards are divided into two cards under the position card (the bottom cards) and one card above it (the top card). In nearly every position the bottom cards indicate actions that move you to another position on the Scale, marked by a colour. The top card indicates an action that keeps you in the same position, or is a word that gives a clearer picture of what is going on in that position.

We use the cards to support people in cases where they face a choice. The person concludes *'This isn't really Feedback, but Talking with....'* The cards under Talking with (p.54) can then provide insight into what the person believes in, and what Being honest will mean to him or her. In the explanation of what Talking with actually does to you, the top card may then be helpful, with Hints showing the difference from Feedback. A Hint leaves both of you free to choose *('See what you do with it')*, whereas a good feedback process leads to specific agreements *('What will you do, and what will I do?')*.

We mainly use the 27 cards when we spend time with a group and seek depth, but also when explaining the Scale to make certain examples more clearly visible. They can also provide support when explaining directions of view in the various positions.

1.4.7 Keys to the three worlds

We can get to each 'world' more quickly with the help of various 'key' behaviours. Layer 7 describes nine such keys:

Struggling leads to irritation – key behaviours are:

- Judgement
- Conflict
- Escalation

Avoiding leads to stagnation – key behaviours are:

- Consultation
- Consideration
- Stepping back

Cooperating leads to enthusiasm – key behaviours are:

- Appreciation
- Tackling things
- Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement means *'Yes, there's something I have to do'* or, when directed at someone else, *'Yes, I can see it, and understand that you feel ignored by this'*. Acknowledging that there's something you have to do can thus lead to appreciation of the other person; but appreciation/acknowledgement can also provide you with the energy to acknowledge what you have to do.

With Struggling, Avoiding and Cooperating, there is no particular order in the three corresponding keys. Each action may lead to one of the other two. Conflict may thus lead to escalation, but also to judgement; and consideration may lead to consultation, but also to stepping back.

The three actions in each 'world' eventually lead to something, summed up as irritation, stagnation and enthusiasm. These three basic terms can be worked out in more detail by the participants.

● **Note:** Some additional comments:

Irritation:
Reacting from irritation should be a red flag. It means you have overlooked an important step – somewhere underneath your irritation is an overall goal that you have almost lost sight of. Many roads lead to Rome – but Rome is always the goal. Surely it is better to respond to that goal and use arguments to find the right road, in preference to judgement, conflict or escalation? Feedback from irritation will nearly always be seen as criticism.

Stagnation:
Surely 'consultation' doesn't mean 'stagnation'? Yet that's what we will call it here. Consultation may lead to action, but it is action, not just consultation, that puts an end to stagnation. Avoidance may work well for a while, for all the team members are doing their own thing. But when pressure of work increases or the team faces new challenges, adjustment is needed to make progress. Otherwise stagnation will increase the pressure, and the team will eventually get bogged down in Struggling – or simply fall apart.

Enthusiasm:
If the shared goal is clear and team members realize that they want to achieve it together, this often creates enthusiasm – to find out what is needed to achieve the goal and tackle things, and because there is appreciation and growth.

1.4.8 Features of the three worlds

The eighth layer is a special one. We originally developed this layer from Layer 1, when there weren't yet any others. So we set out from Struggling, Avoiding and Cooperating to examine various things which had a different impact in each of the three worlds. For example, humour works differently in Struggling (harsh and cynically personal), Avoiding (ignoring the goal) and Cooperating (spontaneous, stimulating and edifying). This works in both directions: can I perceive humour as stimulating and edifying, or only as harsh and cynically personal? Do I feel undermined, or do I immediately learn from it?

Ultimately it is the recipient that decides whether this should be seen as Cooperating or Struggling. Saying *'Don't take it so personally, it was just a joke'* won't help, but will just turn it into Avoiding, so that the message and any feedback will be lost.

The example here was humour; but there are many more things that look different in each of the three worlds. We have done this with very many groups in the past, simply by asking them what behaviour they have seen in the team, and which world it belongs to. You can then group this into themes, creating a fantastic overall picture of behaviour in the various worlds. you will find an exercise with the most frequent themes in each of the three worlds.

→ How to use this layer:

• You can use the exercise at the end of the handbook while observing a group. This will help you to interpret its behaviour and gain insight into where it is on the Scale.

• You can also copy the exercise and have it completed by the participants in a training session. Ask them to think of a situation that bothers them. In which of the three worlds do they feel the others are? And where do they think they themselves are? They can then tick two boxes for each theme or line, one for themselves and one for the others. At the end they can add up the ticks in each column. The exercise offers Struggling teams a different way of working together for each theme or line, and can inspire them to use it more often themselves. You can download this exercise from us as a PDF file.

• Once we asked groups to list positive (desirable) and negative (undesirable) types of behaviour. The trainer then noted the responses on a flip chart in three columns for Struggling, Avoiding and Cooperating behaviour. This is still a very useful way of working – the group then creates its own exercise and can check it again later!

• Or else you cut the existing diagram into pieces and get people to match up the right pieces.

World	No.	Theme	Phrase	Description	Also
STRUGGLING — creates resistance	1	fighting	Trouble starts	Staff are allergic to each other. The working atmosphere is poisoned. Reorganization, and scape-goating; one person gets the blame. A succession of conflicts.	Also: fighting for your rights. Arbitration, with room for mediation.
	2	conflict	Conflicting parties	'Us and them' thinking. You're either for or against things. Personal attacks are denied, adding to the pressure. Professionalism is expected. A showdown.	Also: the under-lying problem is brought into the open.
	3	criticism	It's someone else's fault	Personal criticism. Mistakes are denied. People are blamed behind their backs. Gossip and slander. An unpleasant, threatening atmosphere.	Also: task oriented criticism could create under pressure learning opportunities.
AVOIDING — creates distance	4	talking about	Complaining about each other	Appeals for improvement don't get to the right person.	Also: Ask for advice on how to improve the communication with someone else.
	5	on your own	Everyone works by themselves	Passiveness is typical. If action is needed, look the other way until a superior does something.	Also: keep your distance and do your own thing. Observe.
	6	talking with	Talking to each other	Emphasis on individual freedom. Coordination is optional; people learn from mistakes individually. Not much willingness to change. Be nice rather than honest.	Also: people give hints rather than feedback, and hence space.
COOPERATING — creates trust	7	feedback	Everyone acknowledges his share	People learn from feedback together. There is growth, energy, trust and willingness to change. The result is a vital, open dynamic.	Also: Step by step, persistence is necessary to keep moving forward. A common goal is key to success.
	8	consolidate	Connection and commitment	This creates mutual responsibility in which trust is built up. The result is an open culture in which appreciation for each other abounds.	Also: There is room for everyone to specialise. Diversity makes you contribute stronger. What common goals and a strong believe in success.
	9	flow	High performance under pressure	This dream team gets it done! Learn on the go! Celebrates successes. People are eager to learn and perform.	Also: Coping with stress, based on common goals and a strong believe in success.

You've been reading the first chapter of
The Scale of Cooperation.
A full English translation containing all seven chapters
of the guide is in progress, and will be
available from mid-July.
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