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What to Do When Thinking Matters

DO YOU EVER WONDER WHAT TO DO? ARE YOU EVER CONFUSED about how to proceed? You are not alone. Most of us puzzle about important matters. Often it is hard to know what to do about important issues at work – or even how to think about them. These issues may involve customers, clients or service users; employees, professional groups or unions; suppliers or distributors; bankers or funders; or any of a large number of other stakeholders. Issues at home or in the community may also take serious thought before a satisfactory solution can be found.

The world is often a muddled, complicated, dynamic place in which it seems as if everything is connected to everything else – and that is the problem! The connections can be a problem because while we know things are connected, sometimes we do not know how, or else there are so many connections we cannot comprehend them all. Alternatively, we may not realize how connected things are and our actions may lead to unforeseen and unhappy consequences. Either way, we would benefit from an approach to problem solving that helps us understand just how connected the world is, what the effects of those connections are, and what might be done to change some of the connections and their effects.

Causal mapping is an approach that can help. *The purpose of this book is to help you understand and use causal mapping to make sense of challenging situations – and to get more of what you want out and less of what you don't want out of them.* We will show how mapping can be used to help an *individual* understand a situation better and act effectively on it, and we will also show how *groups* can build

understanding and create effective action. The focus is on management challenges and how to manage them.

Causal mapping is a simple and useful technique for addressing situations where thinking – as an individual or as a group – matters. *A causal map is a word-and-arrow diagram in which ideas and actions are causally linked with one another through the use of arrows. The arrows indicate how one idea or action leads to another.* Causal mapping makes it possible to articulate a large number of ideas and their interconnections in such a way that people can know *what* to do in an area of concern, *how* to do it and *why*, because the arrows indicate the causes and consequences of an idea or action. Causal mapping is therefore a technique for linking strategic thinking and acting, helping make sense of complex problems, and communicating to oneself and others what might be done about them.

When can mapping help? There are a number of situations that are tailor-made for mapping. We find mapping to be particularly helpful when:

- effective strategies need to be developed, either at work or at home;
- persuasive arguments are needed;
- effective and logical communication is essential;
- effective understanding and management of conflict are needed;
- it is vital that a situation be understood better as a prelude to any action.

These situations are not meant to be mutually exclusive. Often they will overlap in practice.

Perhaps the most important situations are the ones where *effective strategies need to be developed*, either at work or at home. For example, you might be focused on work-related concerns such as the following:

- How could I make my job more satisfying?
- What might we do to create more satisfied customers?

- How should I prepare for a job interview?
- How do I get more resources for my department?

Another category of situations occurs when *persuasive arguments are needed*. For example, you might be concerned with the following questions:

- How can I make an effective case for funding an important work-related project?
- How can I write a better report?
- How can I communicate my needs in such a way that people really listen, instead of hearing only what they want to hear?
- How do I persuade my boss to give me a raise?

Or you might be in a situation where persuasion is not so much the issue, but certainly *effective and logical communication is needed*. For example, you might wonder:

- How do I give clear directions to my staff?
- How can I better understand what people are saying? How can I improve my listening skills?

Sometimes the challenge is that *effective understanding and management of conflict are needed*. The conflict can be internal, interpersonal or inter-group in nature. Consider the following situations:

- What is bothering me? Making me anxious? Making me fret? Keeping me awake?
- How can I understand and deal with conflict with people who are important to me?
- How can I address a conflict with an employer, supplier or contractor?

Finally, you may simply *need to make sense of some situations*. You need to work out what is going on in order to figure out what you can or should do about it, if anything. For example, you may wonder:

- How do I know if Person X is making sense? They just offered what they say is a "real deal", but how do I know if it is? How do I know what questions to ask to understand more clearly what they are saying?
- All hell just broke loose in this meeting. How do I figure out what happened?

In each of these situations, *clear and logical thinking matters*. The questions are *important*. They involve *complex, interconnected issues* in which everything seems to be linked to everything else. Often they call for *careful exploration* of *values*, *goals, issues, strategies* and *actions to address the issues*. The answers are *not necessarily obvious*, and careful thought might even lead to *surprising outcomes*.

As we noted above, the purpose of this book is to introduce you to causal mapping and get you to use it to address questions like these. In causal maps ideas and actions are linked to one another in a way that makes sense for purposes of understanding and action. Depending on the circumstances, the connections may be causal, inferential, sequential, temporal or logical in a philosophical sense.

Causal mapping makes it possible to articulate a large number of ideas and their interconnections in such a way that we can better understand an area of concern. Causal mapping also helps us know what to do about the issue, what it would take to do those things, and what we would like to get out of having done so. Causal mapping is therefore a particularly powerful technique for making sense of complex problems, linking strategic thinking and acting, and helping to communicate to others what might or should be done. When an individual uses causal mapping to help clarify his or her thinking, we call this technique *cognitive mapping*, because it relates to his or her own cognition. When a group maps their own ideas, we call it *oval mapping*, because we often use special oval-shaped cards to record individuals' ideas so that they can be arranged into a group's map. Sometimes an oval map is called an *action-oriented strategy map*.[1]

Of course, there are plenty of situations where the problems and issues are not complex and we do not need any special help addressing them. This book is not about such situations, but instead

focuses on those issues where help is necessary to get our thinking straight.

An Example

One of the best ways to learn about mapping and its power is through examples. So let us start off with a real example where a small *informal type of mapping* helped improve a situation where clear thinking mattered.[2] The example involves a conflict between one of the book's authors, Chuck Finn, and his wife Mary. While the issue was personal, the conflict they experienced was typical of many that take place at work, home or elsewhere. And the way they used mapping to resolve the conflict shows how it can be employed. Read their story and see how they used mapping to resolve their conflict.

When Chuck arrived home from work – late as usual – he was met by a sullen silence from his wife, Mary. It was clear to him that something was bothering her, but he had no idea what. He recalled that they had parted amicably that morning – or at least he thought they had. As a courtesy, he had called and left a message that he would be late. And he really did not think he was *super*-late. So he was genuinely puzzled why Mary was so angry . . .

But Chuck had a bad feeling about Mary's anger and decided he'd better take a quick "time out" to gather his wits. So he headed for their bedroom to change into casual clothes – slowly. When he returned, he asked, "What's the matter?"

Her reply was short and to the point: "You never do anything around here!"

Chuck immediately recognized the opening line in a recurrent argument that always left both of them feeling angry and helpless. Even worse, the argument never got resolved, so it happened again and again.

With a sense of foreboding, he replied, as he typically did, "I do help out with things, like fixing the car and other big jobs, but I never seem to be here when you think most of the work needs to be done."

The return salvo was practically scripted. Mary said, "I have to do everything and you don't help even when you are around."

Chuck replied, "I often have to work late, or I'm out of town, and you need to give me credit for the things I do."

Soon the argument was full-blown and each partner retreated to angry silence. Chuck then made efforts to accomplish additional chores, but often had to ask Mary for help, which did not improve her attitude at all.

If the past were any indicator, the result of this argument would be that Mary would continue to do the majority of the work with little or no help from Chuck. And she would resent that. And Chuck would continue to contribute less than he probably should, and he would feel guilty and helpless. And he would nurse his own sullen anger, because he really did think he *was* contributing in other ways. Mary would "let it pass," but of course it really never did . . .

They both knew they were stuck in a trap. They even remarked about the fact that they could almost predict the exact words each one would use in the argument beforehand! As they both loved each other, the issue clearly was not big enough to pull them apart. On the other hand, not resolving the issue meant it continued to fester and they were routinely unhappy at very predictable times – times when they otherwise might be enjoying each other's company.

Chuck had used mapping for years in his classes and strategic management consulting practice. Later that evening it dawned on him that it just might be of benefit here. He was ready to try anything that would assist Mary and him with getting out of their trap. He started thinking that mapping at least might help him "prove his points". After all, weren't his positions logical and defensible and maybe mapping could help Mary understand how right he was? Therefore, he suggested that they explore their conflict by jointly mapping what was going on and what they might do about it.

Mary was suspicious, as Chuck had quite a reputation for trying new things on the family that most often did not work – or only worked for him! Chuck prevailed this time by assuring her that the

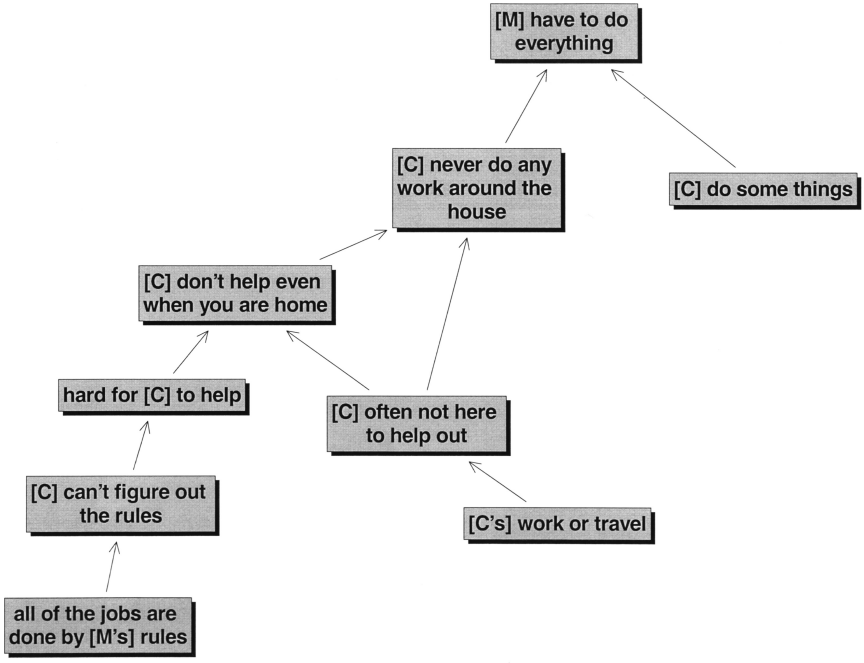
technique was very simple and that any subterfuge would be quickly apparent. Mary was still reluctant and said she would only proceed if she were an equal participant. Chuck assured her she would be.

So, with a ''cease-fire'' of sorts in place, and hoping finally to put this recurrent conflict behind them, they agreed to begin the exercise in the dining room. Chuck assembled some necessary supplies, while Mary cleared the dining-room table. Chuck brought the following materials:

- A flipchart sheet.
- Several colours of $2'' \times 2''$ (5 cm × 5 cm) Post-it® pads.
- A number of felt-tipped pens.

They put the sheet of flipchart paper on the table and began to map the basic argument, which was relatively easy since the parts were so predictable and had been so well rehearsed over the years. They wrote each statement on a separate Post-it using a felt-tipped pen. They then put the Post-it notes on the flipchart sheet and drew in the arrows that indicated the flow of the argument. The basic argument is presented in Map 1.1. The arrows from one concept to another mean that the first's ''causes'' ''may lead to'', ''might result in'' or ''may influence'' the second. Alternatively, lines rather than arrows were put in where the intention was simply to show a connection. Chuck had used mapping before and inserted a minus sign on the end of the arrow from his ''doing some things'' to ''Mary has to do everything'' to indicate that because he did some things Mary couldn't be doing everything!

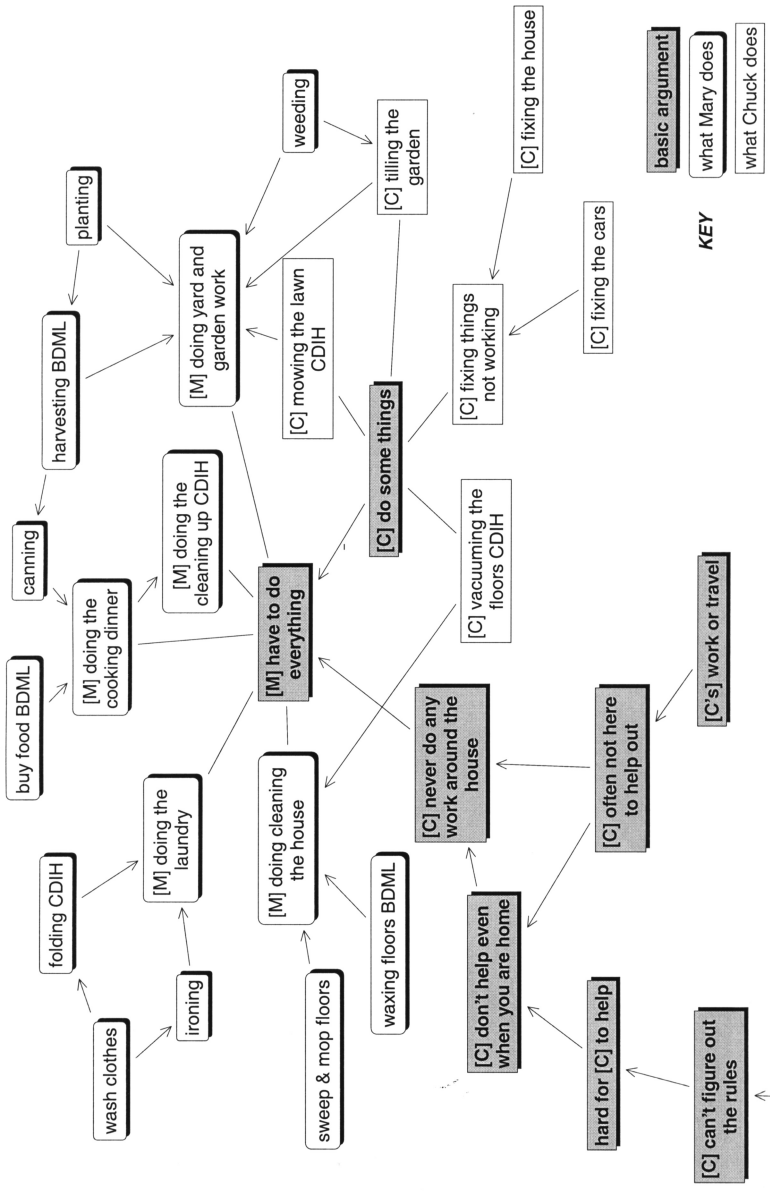
When Chuck and Mary looked at the map, their first surprise was how little content there actually was to the words they exchanged during the argument. Essentially, they made a few statements and proceeded to repeat them over and over, while becoming ever more angry. Mary would say, as she had this evening, ''You never do any work around the house, even when you are home, which means I have to do everything.'' Chuck would respond, as he had this evening, ''I do some things, but I'm often not here to help out, because of work or travel.'' Chuck would add, ''Besides, all of the jobs are done by your rules, which I can't figure out, so that makes it hard for me to help.''



Map 1.1 The heart of the matter.

They considered what this simple map was telling them, argued some more and generally "vented". The emotional discharge helped, as did the almost shocking simplicity of the argument when it was put into map form. The map and venting seemed to "disarm" them.

They continued to map: As the argument typically unfolded (see Map 1.2), they decided to state all of the tasks each of them did. So that these would show up easily, Mary used blue Post-it notes and Chuck used white ones. Mary would list a few of the things she did (such as the laundry, cleaning up, cooking dinner, cleaning the house, doing yard and garden work). She would assert, "You don't help even when you are home." Chuck would respond by listing a few of the things he did (such as fixing the cars, fixing the house, vacuuming the floors, tilling the garden, mowing the lawn). And so on. He then reasserted that it was hard to help when all of the jobs seemed to have to be done following Mary's rules, which he couldn't figure out.



Map 1.2 What I mean when I say . . .

They decided to really focus on what Mary meant when she said she had to do ''everything'', and what Chuck meant by saying he did ''some things''. He now knew why he was feeling guilty. Mary clearly did do more of the work around the house. Mary perked up: she was beginning to like mapping!

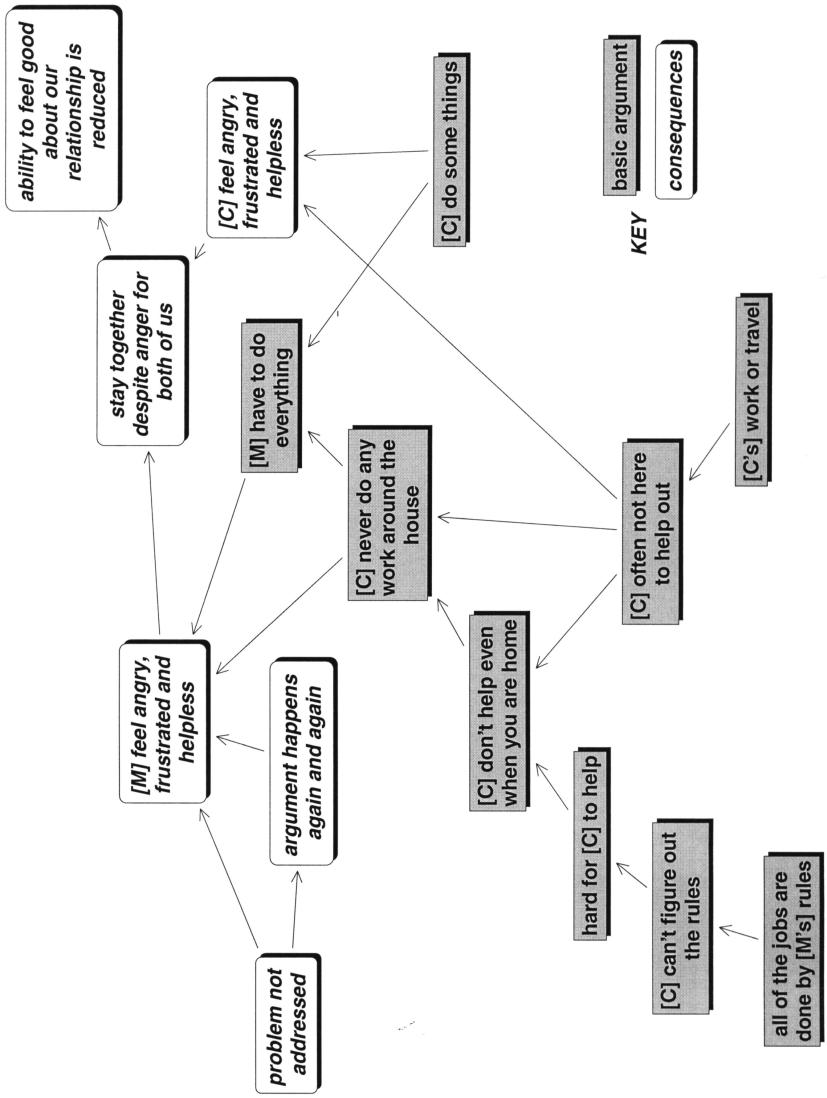
At the same time, the map helped both Chuck and Mary understand more about each of their arguments. First, they saw that the household chores were clustered into five general areas: laundry, meals, cleaning, fixing things and the garden. Second, they began to understand the circumstances in which each of them did what they did around the house. Specifically, Mary's activities were largely those that had to be accomplished on a regular basis and in a coordinated way, if the household was to function well. Chuck's tasks, on the other hand, were those that Mary did not want, and also were projects that could be done pretty much any time.

As noted, at this point Mary was feeling pretty good about Chuck's new process, as it amply demonstrated that she indeed did do pretty much ''everything''! But Chuck was starting to feel pretty good too, since it was becoming clearer why he was not doing as much as he might. He also was beginning to see more clearly what the situation was like from Mary's point of view. Nevertheless, understanding each other's point of view did not solve the problem.

Both Mary and Chuck could see some justification in each other's positions, but neither was happy with the outcome of the conflict. Mary could say, ''I can see your point, but that does not deal with my having to do all or most of the work around here!'' Chuck could say, ''I can see your point, but what can I do about it?''

Exploring the consequences of their situation was an even more sobering activity for both of them. They mapped the consequences using some pink Post-it notes. The consequences are presented in Map 1.3.

The map of the consequences made it abundantly clear that nothing good would happen if they did not agree to do things differently. More importantly, the map allowed each of them to understand more about the pain and frustration they both felt. Mary said that as a result of ''doing everything'' and ''Chuck not doing any work'' she



Map 1.3. The consequences of remaining trapped are not good.

felt ''angry, frustrated and helpless''. Chuck claimed that because he was ''often not here to help out'' because of ''his work or travel'', he was only able to ''do some things'' and he felt ''angry, guilty and helpless''. Their inability to get beyond their emotional responses meant that ''the problem was not addressed''. This meant that ''the argument happened again''. They ''stayed together despite the continuing conflict'', but their ''ability to feel good about their relationship was reduced''.

When they both acknowledged the consequences of their recurrent conflict and saw how much it hurt them, they both felt motivated to find a real and enduring solution. After all, they were smart people and loved each other very much; it was foolish to stay stuck. Besides, now that they had a better understanding of the problem and a tool to help them find a solution, they felt confident they could find a way forward. In addition, whatever they came up with would probably be better than the current situation.

So Chuck and Mary returned to the map and the list of tasks that needed to be done. They decided to look at these tasks and what seemed to go wrong – or right! – with each task. They started with vacuuming. Look again at Map 1.2.

Both claimed to do the vacuuming, but it quickly became evident that Chuck only vacuumed when he was around and was told to do so. This explained why both of them could say they were doing the job, because there were times when each did. They found that the same thing occurred with mowing the lawn, washing clothes, folding clothes and cleaning up.

As they explored this situation further through dialogue, it became clear that Mary often vacuumed, mowed and washed and folded clothes as a way of getting some physical exercise and mental escape after getting home from a mentally demanding but rather sedentary desk job. When Chuck got home – which was almost always after Mary – she was busy doing chores that she would much rather do herself, like cook dinner, and also resenting the fact that Chuck had nothing to do. As they talked further, they agreed that this meant Mary was doing these chores about 75% of the time, and that Chuck only did them on weekends when Mary had not got to them during the week. At the same time, these were jobs Chuck could do

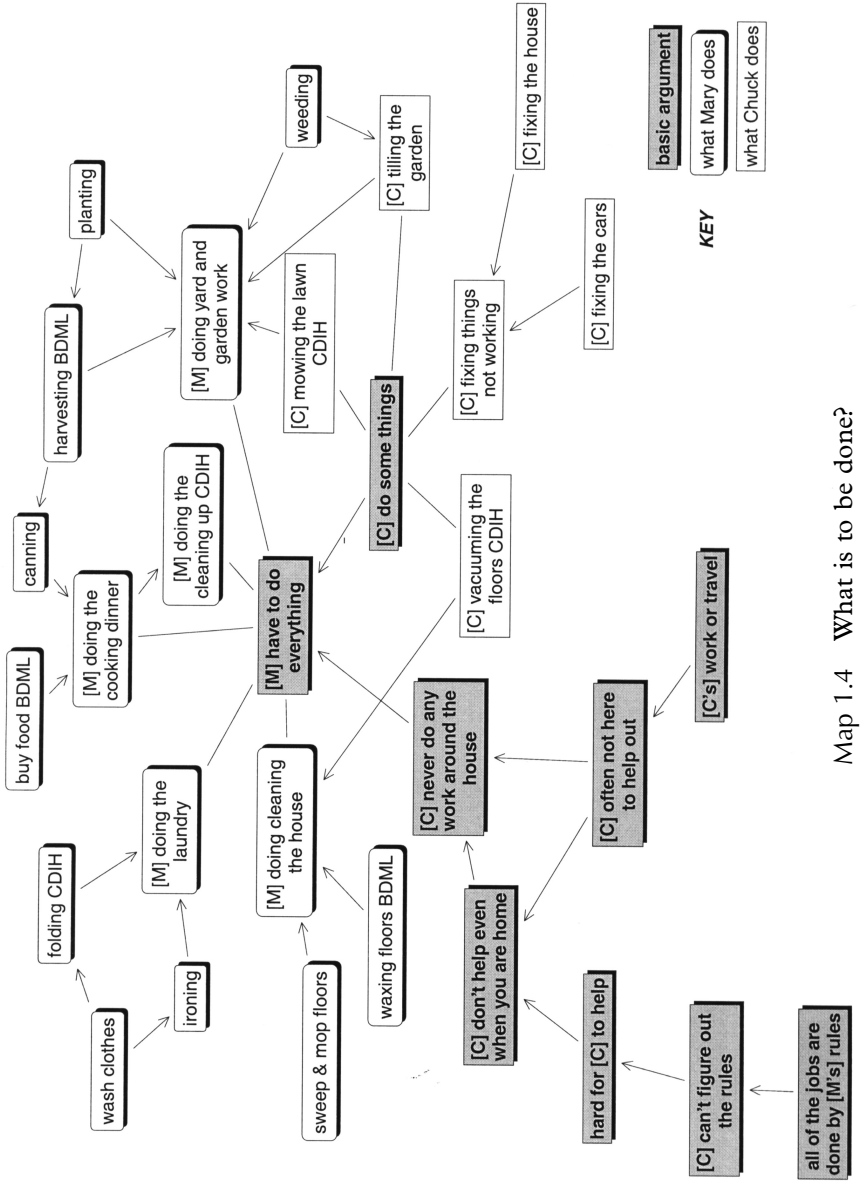
whenever he got home, and they both agreed that these were already his responsibility to do when he was available. The result of this pattern of behaviour was that Mary was doing these tasks most of the time and did not need to, and Chuck got blamed and resented for not doing things he was willing to do when he got home.

A light bulb went on for both Mary and Chuck and they agreed to a new rule to govern their behaviour. The new rule was: *When Chuck was not travelling or kept super-late at work, he was expected to do certain jobs (vacuum the floors, mow the lawn, wash and fold clothes, and clean up after dinner). Mary was only to do those jobs when it was obvious that Chuck had very good reasons for not getting to them.* Chuck and Mary wrote "CDIH" – for Chuck Does If Home – on each relevant Post-it on Map 1.2. They decided this was an excellent way to work things out, even though Mary was a little cynical regarding Chuck's good intentions. She also understood that the agreement gave her legitimate grounds to raise hell with Chuck when he did not follow through! A new plan was taking shape.

The map also helped them both understand that there were a set of jobs in which Chuck would have to take Mary's lead, as she was far more of an expert than he was (such as buying food, waxing floors and harvesting the garden). In doing those tasks, Chuck and Mary would have to negotiate a time to work together, or at least to consult regarding what needed doing and how. They wrote "BDML" – Both Do, Mary Leads – on each of these additional Post-it notes.

As a result of the mapping exercise, Chuck discovered how he could do his share of household chores following a set of rules that gave him guidance and some relief from anger, guilt and helplessness. Mary had a set of rules that would result in her doing less work; experiencing less anger, frustration and helplessness; and thinking that she and Chuck had more of an equal partnership when it came to housework. These were desirable consequences and led them to revisit the map to clarify exactly what the consequences of doing things differently were and how they related to one another.

Chuck and Mary decided to revise the map and clearly articulate their new plan. They took off the Post-it notes that described the original argument. They then mapped a new set of consequences



Map 1.4 What is to be done?

onto the ''what doing everything means'' map (Map 1.2) in order to create a plan for the future. They used CAPITAL LETTERS for the new – and more desirable – consequences. Mary added ''Mary's workload is less''. Chuck added ''Chuck helps out where and when he can''. Both agreed that they ''both appreciate what they bring to the relationship'', their ''regular argument is no longer a fruitless topic'' and ''life together is easier and better for both''. Their new plan (Map 1.4) was something they both could support and they certainly liked the new set of results they could anticipate from following the plan.

Mary and Chuck sat back in their chairs, looked at each other and smiled. They had worked together on an issue that had troubled them for quite a while. They had affirmed their relationship through taking one another's issues and concerns seriously. They had discovered some solutions that addressed the issue and satisfied each partner. They had found a tool that helped them with the current issue and they realized could help them in the future. In other words, not only had they dealt with the problem at hand, their future problem-solving capacity had been enhanced. A wink from each indicated it clearly was time to forgive one another, promise to abide by the new rules, and share a well-deserved glass of wine!

In effect, in this case an informal type of mapping played the same role that a wise friend or counsellor might have played, but without having to organize or pay for third-party help. Mapping helped Chuck and Mary sort out the many aspects of the issue that bothered them, and also helped them create a new plan that addressed the issue and produced much better results for both of them.

Conclusion

We have argued that *mapping* is what you should do when clear thinking matters. At their most basic, maps are simply word-and-arrow diagrams. They are textual statements linked by arrows that indicate what causes what, or what actions lead to what outcomes. The basic idea behind mapping is very simple, but also very powerful.

As the example with Chuck and Mary shows, mapping can be used to deal with important questions that involve complex interconnections and emotions. Maps allow exploration of issues and answers through assisting and clarifying the content and logic embedded in discussion and dialogue. Indeed, mapping prompts mappers to articulate what they think and why. And, as in Chuck and Mary's case, mapping can help people articulate preferred goals, strategies and actions for getting out of difficult situations.

Said differently, maps can help make the obvious – as well as the not so obvious – apparent. They can also take the heat out of an emotional situation, while illuminating the nature of the situation and its consequences and possible avenues toward effective solutions. Maps acknowledge that solutions may need many actions rather than a single action.

The family argument example also shows how maps can become tools for building relationships. Chuck and Mary were building – or reinforcing – their relationship while negotiating meaning and creating understanding and action. Their map was a ''transitional object'', ''facilitative device'' or ''ritual structure'' that allowed them to move together to a much better place cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally.[3] Mapping helped them articulate the current ''problem story'' that was causing difficulty for them, and then to create an ''alternative story'' that was less problematic, more motivating and generally more satisfying. The new story was created in part out of aspects of the situation that were already present, so the flow from problematic past into more desirable future was facilitated.[4]

When can mapping help? We think it can help whenever thinking matters. In particular, and to recap, we think that mapping can be particularly useful when:

- effective strategies need to be developed;
- persuasive arguments are needed;
- effective and logical communication is essential;
- effective understanding and management of conflict are needed;

- it is vital that a situation be understood better as a prelude to any action.

As we noted, these situations are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, in order to deal with their conflict, Chuck and Mary needed to understand their situation better, develop an effective strategy, persuade each other, communicate effectively, and understand and manage their conflict better. Mapping helped them do all of these.

We hope that the potential management applications of the tool are becoming clear. Chuck and Mary's argument took place at home, but issues like theirs are common in the workplace, and so is the need to develop effective strategies for dealing with issues of many sorts. In the next chapter, we present another example and talk through in more detail how and why mapping works.

Notes

1 C. Eden and C. Huxham (1988) Action-oriented Strategic Management, *Journal of the Operational Research Society*, **39**(10), 889–99.

2 The type of informal mapping introduced at this early stage of the book could be described as a combination of mind mapping (T. Buzan and B. Buzan (1993) *The Mind Map Book: Radiant Thinking, the Major Evolution in Human Thought*, London: BBC Books) and causal mapping. The map's informality makes it less amenable to construction of more complex maps and to formal analysis. Nonetheless, as will be seen in the example, this type of informal mapping provided valuable insights that led to changed behaviour.

3 Chuck and Mary's map acted as what psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott calls a ''transitional object''; that is, a device that helps someone make a move from one way of thinking, doing and being to another; see D. W. Winnicott (1953) Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, **34**(Part 2), 89–97. Similarly, the map acted as what Arie de Geus calls a ''facilitative device'', which does for groups what transitional objects do for people; see A. P. de Geus (1988) Planning as Learning, *Harvard Business Review*, March–April, 70–4. The process of mapping provides what John Forester calls a ''ritual structure'', a patterned and purposeful way for a group to figure out what to do, how and why; see J. Forester (1999) *The Deliberative Practitioner*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

4 See G. Monk, J. Winslade, K. Crocket and D. E. Epston (1997) *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, for a discussion of problem stories and how they can be developed into less problematic alternative stories.