

# Divorce Conflict Information Series

## Understanding the Problem and Planning the Solution

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### Booklet III

## What's Wrong With This Picture?

By Kenneth R. Waldron, PhD and Allan R. Koritzinsky, JD.<sup>1</sup>

**“My greatest challenge has been to change the mindset of people.  
Mindsets play strange tricks on us.  
We see things the way our minds have instructed our eyes to see.”  
(Muhammad Yunus)<sup>2</sup>**

**Here's how our Game Theory journey began.** Those of us who have been working in family law for a long time intuitively have known that there is something about the traditional family law system that is at least a bad fit for families, and at worst, actually does damage.

Some years back, Ken was introduced to Game Theory by a friend who did not work in the family law system, but his discussion and demonstration of a few Game Theory principles sparked Ken's interest. This prompted him to learn Game Theory mathematics, to review Game Theory research and to analyze the traditional family law system from that perspective. Our analysis in this booklet is based on Game Theory principles, but we have gone to great lengths to avoid mathematics, jargon and research, doing our very best to use plain language.

Ken later joined forces with Allan to use Game Theory principles to design a Negotiation Model. The result of all this, after years of work, is presented in two books- our first book leans in the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the subject, you are encouraged to read the following two books written by your authors: ***“Game Theory and the Transformation of Family Law: Change the Rules- Change the Game. A New Bargaining Model for Attorneys and Mediators to Optimize Outcomes for Divorcing Parties.”*** Unhooked Books. Scottsdale, AZ 2015 and ***“Winning Strategies in Divorce: The Art and Science of Using Game Theory Principles and Skills in Negotiation and Mediation.”*** The latter is an online book only. See [www.unhookedmedia.com](http://www.unhookedmedia.com).

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Yunus is a Bangladeshi [social entrepreneur](#), banker, economist, and civil society leader, who was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) for founding the [Grameen Bank](#) and pioneering the concepts of [microcredit](#) and [microfinance](#).

direction of theory, and our second book is the more practical and pragmatic application of our Model.<sup>3</sup>

After years of work, our analysis led us to interesting conclusions:

- The most rational strategy for parties going through the family law system was to engage in competitive behavior that leads to escalating conflict.
- Parties who have an amicable divorce are behaving irrationally by resisting the gravitational pull to end up in intractable conflict.
- The people working in the system find high conflict parties to be the most time and resource consuming and the most distasteful of situations, while at the same time operating in a system that inadvertently promotes that same conflict. The paradox is striking.

Our third book, regarding divorce, is in publication, where we present a rational strategy to have a “sensible divorce.”

**Let’s start with “Mindset” as the threshold challenge for change.** The mindset of professionals in the traditional family law system has proven to be a challenge. Here are a few examples.

1. When a lone voice at a conference once asked, “*Why can’t one attorney represent both parties,*” the questioner was quickly “poo-pooed”.
2. When the rising rate of *pro se* divorces is discussed, the hypotheses put forth rarely hits the mark.
  - a. Some will say that family law attorneys have priced themselves out of the market, but people often pay multiples of the cost of a divorce for a wedding.
  - b. Parties who can afford to pay lawyers often elect to go *pro se* or perhaps use mediation without attorneys.
3. Many well-known and highly experienced family law attorneys no longer take a case to litigation. (This describes the Collaborative Divorce Model<sup>4</sup>.) Other attorneys provide mediation or settlement negotiations, but if those approaches fail, they withdraw from the case and refer the client to another lawyer for litigation.

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<sup>4</sup> We posit that this may also mean: “*bargaining in the shadow of losing your lawyer*”.

## What's wrong with this picture? <sup>5</sup>

### Part I: There are Weaknesses in the Current Family Law System

There are three major weaknesses in the traditional family law system: No Strategic Intention, No Value Proposition and Vague, Ambiguous and often Contradictory Standards. We start our analysis by discussing these three major general principles. We then drill down to ten “traps” (read on!), which seduce parties, and often their attorneys, into engaging in aggressive competitive approaches to the legal tasks involved in a divorce. <sup>6</sup> Those competitive approaches include dirty tricks (such as fictitious or at least exaggerated allegations), poor communication and dishonesty, and selfishness, which minimize healthy empathic compassion and concern for others in the family. After the final Judgment of Divorce, families are often left with a poor co-parenting relationship, the most important predictor of outcomes for children. Vulnerable parties often fall into the pit of intractable conflict in the process, and as one attorney friend put it, become “*frequent fliers*” in the judicial system.

In business planning, a boss or committee in the business develops a strategic intention for the business, a value proposition and standards by which to measure the success of the business. Strategic Intention is the goal of the business – what is the product or service that the business wants the customer to receive? The development of a Value Proposition is the focus on the experience of the customer going through the process of receiving the product or service. Standards are the axioms by which the outcome is judged.

For an example, let us look at a restaurant.

A. **Strategic Intention.** The intention of the business is to provide a good dining experience, which of course includes a good meal, but the Strategic Intention is focused on the entire experience, not just the meal. Part of the Strategic Intent is what people in the restaurant business call the restaurant concept. Do they want the dining experience to feel like being in Italy, or in Texas? Do they want exotic food or comfort food?

B. **Value Proposition.** The Value Proposition defines what the restaurant wants the customers to experience each step of the way, from the moment they make a reservation to the moment they leave the restaurant. This likely extends beyond the meal (e.g., even how easy it is to park) in order to achieve the Strategic Intention. The Value Proposition determines how staff is trained, staff clothing, what the physical ambiance of the restaurant is, what the menu looks like, what food is offered, timing of the food delivery, pricing and so on.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Sensible Divorce - Navigating Your Divorce Over Unfamiliar Terrain*. We expect it to be published in 2024. Ken and Allan also have a publication about marriage, *The Road to Successful Marriage is Unpaved: Seven Skills for Making Marriage Work*, an evidence-based book on how to improve marriages, which is available for purchase online at our website, [marriageanddivorce.org](http://marriageanddivorce.org).

<sup>6</sup> See later in this Booklet where we discuss the Ten Traps, which unfortunately continue to guide divorcing parties into self-defeating choices.

C. **Standards.** The Standard of success is that the dining experience was worth coming to the restaurant, which includes the logistics of getting there and the price. In other words, success or failure depends on the balance of price and experience. People will pay a lot of money if the experience is worth it. They will never come back, and will tell everyone they know not to go there, if the experience is not worth it. Restaurants thrive on repeat business and word of mouth advertising, and unless the dining experience was worth the effort and expense, the restaurant will not survive.

**What happens if and when we apply these three principles  
to the traditional family law legal system?**

1. **Strategic Intention.** The Strategic Intention of the traditional family law legal system appears to have more to do with the goals of the professionals, namely the legal outcomes on the day of the Judgment of Divorce, than the customers (meaning the divorcing parties). A Strategic Intention should, have at its core, the outcome for the customer, not the needs and interests of the service providers. The family law system inadvertently traps people, because it identifies legal outcomes as the Strategic Intention of the process. A customer-based Strategic Intention would be focused on lives, their experience and long-term goals after the Judgment.

What promotes this is that the family law system has a captive audience. To return to our restaurant example, to have a captive audience is akin to a prison cafeteria. We doubt that much thought is put into the dining experience of the prisoners. The cafeteria is the only place to eat. Repeat business is guaranteed. The considerations of the prison people would be food cost, nutritional value and safety, issues of importance to the staff, not the prisoners.

For people getting a divorce, they must go through the family law system. It is the only place to get a divorce, and so the temptation is to organize it around the interests of the professionals, not the parties going through the divorce. How many people who go through the family law system think that the experience was worth it? How well does the system prepare them for their post-judgment life with one another? These questions do not appear to be relevant to the lawyers, judges, psychologists, social workers and court-connected mediators. After the Judgment of Divorce, the assumption is that they will not be back, and if they do come back, they get labeled “high conflict,” and the system just tries to contain them.

The drawback to this reality is that although the system is unconcerned (though not consciously) with repeat business, there is still word-of-mouth. Just as a restaurant can develop a reputation that affects future business, the legal system has developed a reputation. As a colleague of ours once said, *“Divorce lawyers have a reputation problem.”* As a result, many more people go through the system without attorneys than with them, and this phenomenon is growing. Your authors think that is a shame. We believe that lawyers potentially have much guidance, information and support to offer divorcing parties that can optimize the parties’ post-divorce lives. However, to develop a reputation as being worth the cost of legal representation, the strategic intention must become focused on the parties going through the divorce.

2. **Value Proposition.** A divorce customer-based Value Proposition would be that from the beginning to the end of the divorce process, the parties will experience helpful education, courteous and respectful treatment, consideration for their schedules, help managing the

emotions involved, help preparing them for their divorced life and help planning so they reach their long-term goals. Customers should at the end feel that the process was helpful and the product was good for both of them. The traditional family law system does not address these values, except perhaps in token ways with a parent education class and trite truisms.

People pay a lot of money to go through the traditional family law system to a divorce. What is the product? What are they paying for? Is it good legal advice or a good plan for their futures? Is it increased losses and increased sadness and bitterness towards their once loved spouse? Or is it increased respect, empathic compassion and a mutually satisfying start to their divorced lives? People walk out of restaurants judging if their experience and the food were worth the money? How many people finish the traditional family law divorce process thinking that their experience and the product were worth the money?

Again, part of the problem is that the legal system has a captive audience. Divorcing spouses are required to go through the legal step of obtaining a Judgment of Divorce. This lulls the professionals into forgetting that they are providing a service- that there is a product to produce. By failing to focus on a customer-based Strategic Intention and Value Proposition, the traditional family law system can inadvertently trap people into making self-defeating choices. In addition, by having no clear customer focused Strategic Intent and Value Proposition, the traditional family law system robs people of the guidance that they need, and could receive, for their futures.

Worse yet, as previously mentioned, a large and increasing majority of divorcing spouses do not hire attorneys. Potential “customers” decide in advance that hiring attorneys for the divorce process will not be worth the money. In one study in one jurisdiction, only 40% of divorces included at least one attorney, and in only 17% of divorces, were both parties represented by attorneys.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, divorce lawyers do have a reputation problem. This is comparable to a restaurant where customers leave, vowing never to go back. Worse yet, they warn their friends not to go. The reputation problem is the result of lawyers working in a system having no clear client-focused Strategic Intention and Value Proposition. Blaming the lawyers is like blaming the waiters at the restaurant, or the flight attendant when the plane is late, where they had an expensive **and** bad experience. More could be done if there was a change of mindset within the current legal system.

**3. Standards.** The traditional family law system has vague, ambiguous and often contradictory Standards by which decisions are measured. The standards of the traditional family law system are based on legal outcomes, not the outcomes of the parties’ post-divorce lives. The standards are an “equitable” division of property, an “equitable” division of income, the “best interests” of children and a “fair” amount of child support. What does “equitable” mean? What does “fair” mean? Might divorcing spouses have very different ideas of what is equitable or fair? Is it any wonder that many divorcing spouses argue about what is fair in the division of property and income? What does “best interests of the child” mean? Just about any legal position on the

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<sup>7</sup> Dane County, Wisconsin.

legal outcome of a physical placement schedule could be justified as “in the best interests” of the child. Any reasonably competent attorney could make legitimate and perhaps even compelling arguments for just about any position on any aspect of a physical placement schedule or property division proposal. Having these vague and ambiguous standards inadvertently traps people into behaving irrationally during a sad and even emotionally painful time of their lives.

**The general functioning of the traditional family law system seduces divorcing parties into assuming that they have a dispute, triggering the natural human desire to prevail, focusing on legal outcomes instead of long-term financial and family goals, with vague, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory standards by which to measure outcomes.**

Within this climate, the system traps people into making irrational choices. Perhaps the most impactful of those choices is to see one another as rivals, beginning a lengthy divorce and post-divorce relationship filled with frustration and wrath. Divorced parties will often engage in open conflict with one another or avoid each other like the plague, even with children to raise. Ex-spouses, who might have been married for many years, and who have children together, might sit in the same room, or go to a child activity, acting like they do not even know each other. This is very sad and most unfortunate.

We recognize that people who are about to divorce enter the process with sometimes fierce conflicts with one another. They failed to achieve their hope and dream of a good marriage and an intact family, and they often blame each other for that failure. They fear loss of money, property and time with their children, and it is easy to see the other parent as the cause of those losses. They might be wracked with guilt and shame. These thoughts and feelings are natural, but the foundations for them are not necessarily true. However, people often meet unexpected life transitions with overwhelming negative emotion. The loss of a job, a serious illness or disability in the family, even the loss of a child throw spouses into a whirlwind of emotions, but, at some point, the healthy thing to do is accept the new facts and develop a plan to reach long-term goals. The divorce process in the current family law system fails to redirect spouses to a post-divorce goal-based plan, and instead, focuses them on competing for what might appear to be desirable legal outcomes.

One of the genius ideas in Game Theory, heavily supported by subsequent research, is that by cooperating with one another, people in competition can greatly increase value for both of them. It turns out that the best form of selfishness is when it is balanced with altruism.

- Rather than seeing one another as rivals for the distribution of property and income, people are likely to increase the value of their divorce by seeing each other as a team attempting to develop a Plan for both of them to reach important financial goals in the future.
- Rather than competing as enemies for time with their children, they can increase value for both of them by seeing themselves as parents in a family who live in separate residences, where they need to manage the logistics involved.

Look at the difference in the two following conversations:

1. *"I was always the primary caretaker. He hardly did anything. He was gone at work all day while I worked from home, took care of the children after school, took them to all of their appointments, helped them with homework, fed them and most of the time put them to bed. I should continue to be the primary caregiver. He was around on weekends, so he can have every other weekend."*

*"She knows I work every day, Monday through Friday and never had the flexibility in my work schedule that she did. Of course, she took the children to their appointments; that was when the doctors and dentists worked. I would have liked to go, but I couldn't. But, she is lying about when we were both home. I was just as involved after work as she was, and she often wanted me to take over so she could rest. I was very involved on weekends. I absolutely want 50/50."*

vs.

2. *"I can work from home and have a lot of flexibility, so I have always been the daytime caregiver."*

*"He would have liked to help more, but he did not have that kind of a job.*

*I would encourage him to be more involved after work, tell him I was tired, because I wanted the children to have a close relationship with him too. He was often tired too, but we worked it out. He was great on weekends. We often did things together with the children, but sometimes he would give me a break and take over. I would like him to be as involved as possible but I know I am going to be the school day parent."*

*"She is right that she did most of the parenting. I took that a little for granted sometimes. Now that we are divorcing, I want to be more involved. I am going to speak with my boss and see if I can at least get one afternoon off each week work, and I am happy to take some evenings after work, including making dinner, taking kids to activities and helping with homework. I have to leave early for work, and it doesn't make any sense to get the kids up really early because of that, so maybe I can bring them to her for bed."*

If the second conversation sounds like people who would plan like that if they were married, and that is the point. They are planning their involvement and responsibilities for the children, not competing over time, and even more ludicrous, overnights. Family circumstances change, and with those changes, parenting approaches change, but always with the long-term goals of raising competent, confident and independent children as the deciding factor.

For example, when a child reaches 5 years old, often over the frantic protests of the child, we put them in school. In doing so, we share the raising of our child with teachers and give up over 6 hours a day to do that. When our child moves to middle and high school, how we organize the family changes again, depending on the activities and social life of the child. When a parent who had been home with the child goes to work, or when a working parent is able to be at home, we re-organize our parenting roles and involvement. A divorce is no different. The logistics involved demand that we reorganize parenting.



The question arises: *“Why do spouses come into the divorce legal system already set to fight over money, and if they have children, fight over the children, even if they have not had any contact with professionals yet?”* The answer is that they already know the rules of the game and come to play by the rules as fierce competitors all too often.

Imagine that you are sitting down at a table to play poker. You know the rules, and you begin to behave like a poker player, even before the first hand is dealt. Once in the family law legal system, sadly, they find their expectations of the system confirmed, rather than dispelled, because the professionals in the system are also playing by the same rules.

**Summary. There are three general weaknesses in the traditional family law system:**

1. No clear customer-based Strategic Intention,
2. No clear customer-based Value Proposition to achieve the strategic intent, and
3. Vague, ambiguous and often Contradictory Standards.

These weaknesses guide divorcing parties into self-defeating choices, often including bitter conflict, and in many cases, post-divorce lives of intractable conflict. We pass that off as people with personality problems or just the ordinary conflict of divorce, but we should examine the degree to which the current traditional family law system inadvertently promotes what none of us want or like.

We will now focus on the ten specific Traps in the current family law system.

## **Part II: Traps in the Current Family Law System Promoting Self-Defeating Choices**

### **Ten Traps: Guiding Divorcing Parties into Self-defeating Choices**

**1. Trap #1: The parties are directed to and often pressured to focus on legal outcomes, not life goals.** Legal outcomes are not goals; legal outcomes ought to be initial steps for the parties to reach their goals. If focused on the legal outcome, it makes sense that a property distribution should be equal and/or equitable. It also makes sense that income should be shared in a manner that gives both parties a sufficient amount to live their lives. In addition, if focused on the legal outcome, it makes sense to identify who has what authority to make major decisions about the children and to establish a schedule for the child to be with each parent. Short-term thinking makes sense when focusing on legal outcomes.

However, if the focus is on the long-term financial outcomes for both of the spouses, the division of property and income should be one that increases the chances of a long-term positive outcome for both parties, whether or not that means an equitable or equal division at the time of the divorce. If the focus is on long-term goals for the children, such as that they have a positive experience of family life with separated parents, that they have good academic and social experiences, that they learn important life lessons and so on, then how decisions are made and how each of the parents will be involved with the child are the questions to ask and answer.



The focus should not be on what physical placement schedule and legal custody will control the family. The legal outcome might be a rigid physical placement schedule, when we know that positive long-term outcomes for children need flexibility in the schedule. A bitter competitive win-lose approach to a physical placement schedule makes sense if a favorable legal outcome is the focus, but we know that the quality of the post-divorce parental relationship is far more important to outcomes for children than the actual physical placement schedule.

**Focusing on legal outcomes leads to self-defeating choices.**

**2. Trap #2: The traditional family law system turns Non-Zero Sum games (e.g., raising children and financial planning) into Zero Sum Games<sup>8</sup> (e.g., dividing the children's time and dividing property, debt and income).** Zero Sum Games promote competition, a win-lose mentality, often accompanied by bitter feelings. Zero Sum Games also promote competition, dirty tricks and dishonesty as winning strategies, causing sometimes irreparable damage to the parenting relationship- and too often to their children. A Non-Zero Sum Game promotes planning and cooperation.

Let us give an illustration of this. In one situation, \$100 is placed on the table, and the two subjects are told that their task is to split the money. They have a limited time to decide on the split, and if they have not decided in that time, \$10 will be removed, and they must decide how to split \$90. This is a Zero Sum Game because any dollar one subject gets is a dollar that the other subject loses. Notice too that there is pressure on the players to decide quickly. If they don't, the transaction costs (e.g., lawyer fees) increase, reducing the size of the pot.

In another illustration, we have two subjects, and there is \$100 is placed on the table. This time they are told that the task is to decide on where both of them are to go for dinner together, with the \$100 to pay the bill. This is a Non-Zero Sum Game. This promotes open communication and planning, not competition. The goals of Zero Sum Games and Non-Zero Sum Games are completely different. When people are married, parenting and financial planning are not Zero Sum Games, but the traditional family law system inadvertently transforms those family activities into Zero Sum Games in the form of legal outcomes.

The \$100 situations above are real experiments, and post-experiment interviews with subjects reveal very different outcomes with their experience of their brief relationships with one another. It was the same amount of money, but the experiences and satisfaction rates were substantially different.

**Trapping people into viewing parenting and financial planning as Zero Sum Games promotes competitive battles and dirty tricks rather than cooperation and planning. Parties then take those bitter feelings into their post-divorce life.**

**3. Trap #3: The traditional family law system assumes that disputes exist and that the interests of the parties are in conflict.** This unquestioned assumption pervades nearly every

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<sup>8</sup> For those unfamiliar with Zero Sum Games, a Zero Sum Game is one in which the prize is a limited amount (e.g., 7 days in a week). A Non Zero Sum Game has no artificial limit (e.g., participation in a child's activities).

aspect of the family law system. Every question lawyers ask pounds this assumption into the minds of their clients. Even the paperwork reflects this assumption. In some jurisdictions, the name of the case labels the parties as in a dispute: the name of the case is so-and-so versus so-and-so. The language used reinforces this view: *“the other side,” “opposing counsel,” “the litigants,” “dispute resolution,” “settlement negotiations,”* and so on. What is the basis of this assumption?

The development of the legal system focused on the primary purpose of resolving disputes: innocent or guilty, where the property line is, who is responsible for an injury, etc. When the State took an interest in marriage, which previously had been a private and/or religious matter, it also took an interest in divorce and began to apply the same thinking – the assumption of a

dispute. Why do people not have to hire attorneys to have a wedding? They are taking a legal step that is changing their legal status, much like a divorce, but in reverse. Following the marriage, a set of laws that did not apply to them prior to the wedding now applies to them.

This trap is fundamental to the family law system and to the training of lawyers. This is their mindset. In fact, it is more than a mindset; it is their definition of reality. Transactional attorneys have a very different mindset. While they still focus on legal protections, representing one party to the transaction, they do not assume there is a dispute. They believe they have a deal to close, and they implement a Plan to accomplish this agreed-upon goal, which at least in principle is for the benefit of both parties. Why are family law attorneys not transactional attorneys, instead

are litigation attorneys? It is because of the fundamental assumption that the parties are in a dispute.

When spouses enter into the traditional family law system, quickly they are absorbed into the assumption that they are in a dispute. The difficulties in the marriage make spouses particularly susceptible to this temptation. They might even already see one another as enemies- as the reason that the marriage is moving to a divorce. Neither could prevail in their marital struggles, and now they can hire professional fighters (i.e., attorneys) to try to prevail over one another at divorce.

If we take the emotion out of the situation for a moment, do spouses really have a dispute? When we ask divorcing spouse what are their long-term goals for their children, there is rarely much difference. When we ask divorcing spouses if they would rather prevail on legal outcomes, even if that damaged the future of the other spouse, or if they would rather have legal outcomes that helped both spouses reach long-term financial goals, the answer is almost always the latter.

All this prompts an important question: what would the legal system look like if it did not assume a dispute? Are some of the disputes we encounter in the system the result more of a self-fulfilling prophecy endemic to the system than inevitable?

**Trapping people with similar long-term goals  
into believing that they have a dispute with one another  
leads to escalating conflict  
and poor post-divorce relationships.**

**4. Trap #4: Children are treated as property in the traditional family law system.** Historically, children were treated as property because for a substantial period of time, they were property.

It was only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that children began to be treated as a special class of citizens with legal protections. Rather than literally awarding children to a party, which for hundreds of years is what happened, our legal progress now awards time with the children to the parties. They receive custody awards, that is, where each parent is awarded children to control blocks of time.

This is like telling divorcing spouses that one gets the car on one day each week and every other weekend, and the other gets the car for the rest of the time. What impact does this have on the parents? Evolution selected traits in parents for the protection and training of children. However, distributing children like property triggers millions of years of evolution, wanting to do battle with the threat. The traditional family law system inadvertently identifies the other parent as the threat.

The trap of treating children like property, restricting the involvement and control of parents, flies in the face of fundamental instincts. These instincts might not even be part of the consciousness of the parties, but will drive the competition between them. If you doubt this, think about why we do not object to our children spending days in school, hours of soccer practice, music lessons, spring break with grandparents, sleepovers with friends and so on while married, but fight in court to try to get an extra day or two away from the other parent when getting a divorce.

**Trapping parents into viewing children as property  
to be distributed triggers battles  
based on unconscious evolutionary based instincts.**

**5. Trick #5: Selfish strategies permeate the traditional family law system.** Petitions and Affidavits focus on what parties want for themselves, not on what will be good for everyone in the family, including the other party. Lawyers often see their task as getting their client what the clients say they want. Having already been trapped into focusing on legal outcomes, parties often say they want what appears to be a favorable legal outcome, even when those outcomes, and the process of getting them, are self-destructive. How would “winning” one more day with the children or paying a little less spousal support compare to a miserable co-parenting experience for the rest of their lives and watching this damage their children?

Research demonstrates that a balance of narcissism (selfishness) and altruism (concern for the outcome for the other person) in the bargaining process improves the outcomes for both parties. In other words, the bargaining between parties should include each party focusing on what is good for both parties. Many attorneys ask their own clients about their goals, but few, if any, ask their client about the goals of the other spouse or make deliberate efforts to elicit the long-term goals of the other party, also trying to help reach those goals too.

**Trapping people into being selfish  
reduces the value of the outcomes for both spouses.**

**6. Trap #6: Winning on legal outcomes is most important.** Playing a game with someone is fun, win or lose, but it is more fun to win. Evolution selected humans who win and who have a natural desire to prevail, whether in enjoyable activities like tennis or serious activities like war. The legal system inadvertently promotes this desire to prevail in a family law case. Lawyers also get drawn into wanting to win desirable legal outcomes not only on behalf of their client but also on behalf of themselves. Not only can they pat themselves on the back if they get a “win,” but also their social status might improve and end up with more clients and more income. The proof that this is a fantasy is that fewer and fewer people are willing to hire attorneys.

Research on winning and losing provides an interesting twist to this trap. People experience losing with much more emotional intensity than they experience winning. For example, gambling research finds that winning \$100 is much less emotionally intense than losing \$100. In fact, winning is not what causes gambling addiction; losing is. The desire to “get even” is strong. As one quote goes, a gambling addict who played slot machines said, “*It is my money in there. I want it back.*” To draw a parallel, “losing” on legal outcomes might spur future battles, even future litigation, trying to even the stakes. People might become addicted to conflict with one another, like they do with gambling, because they feel like they keep losing.

**Trapping people into a win/lose mindset  
ignites the competitive desire to prevail and not to lose,  
which promotes continuing conflict.**

**7. Trap #7: Escalating anger and blame, rather than resolving sadness, permeates the traditional family law system.** A divorce is the culmination of the failure of spouses to give each other their dreams. We all enter marriage with an idea of what we think will make us happy. In the “honeymoon” stage of a relationship, we often think that we have a good chance of that coming into being. Sadly, over time, however, our spouse ends up being a real human being, and not a bit player in our movie. We start trying to get our spouse to give us our dream so that we can have a happy marriage, and the control stage of the marriage begins. In a successful marriage, the spouses manage to resolve many of the control issues, but they never get the whole dream. They learn to tolerate those losses because the rest of the marriage is worth it.

However, when people fail to get enough of their dream to make the marriage worth it, they move to divorce. The losses involved are very sad. The loss of hope and the dream of a happy marriage and an intact family are perhaps the saddest. However, most divorcing parties do not focus on the sadness; they focus on being angry at the other spouse for failing to give them

their dream. Simply stated: they “*fall in hate.*”<sup>9</sup> The family law system often fans the flames of anger rather than redirects spouses to focus on the sadness. Attorneys, thinking that they are being supportive, might inadvertently fan the flames of anger and even take action, like accusatory letters to “the other side,” which only increases the anger in the divorce relationship.

**Trapping people into anger and blame,  
instead of resolving sadness,**

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<sup>9</sup> This is the opposite of “falling in love.”

**promotes a dysfunctional post-divorce relationship.**

**8. Trap #8: Deductive decision-making is encouraged from the beginning of a divorce in the traditional family law system.** In **deductive decision-making**, bargaining begins with the big picture issues and then drilling down into the details. For example, “*every other weekend*” is decided on, without looking in detail at the start and stop times, which comes later, or even considering if that is the best way for the particular family to handle weekends. Holiday schedules are lumped together in a Template that the lawyers (or mediators) give their clients: one gets the odd years and the other gets the even years, without a look at whether or not that will provide the family with good holiday experiences. The decision is made whether the schedule will be 50/50, 45/55, 9/5 or some other distribution, before looking at the best way to arrange days. This is called Deductive Bargaining.

**Inductive Bargaining** produces a better plan. Inductive Bargaining builds a plan step-by-step, starting with a focus on the details. Using Inductive Bargaining, the parties might start with each holiday and any time off of school and work associated with each holiday. They develop a Plan for each one to optimize the experience for themselves and their child. Then they focus on vacations, with the same goal of optimizing the experiences. Then they plan summers, that is, the best ways to organize the summers to provide themselves and their children the best summers possible. Then they plan weekends and other days off of school. By the time they get to school days, they have already planned, depending on the school district, about 200 days of the year. Days can even be broken down into parts. After-school time might be different from evenings in a good plan. This is the process of building a physical custody schedule inductively, focusing on long term goals for each segment of the schedule instead of legal outcomes. When the attorneys write down and submit the schedule to the Court, they are submitting a Plan for the parties to reach long-term family goals.

**Trapping people into bargaining deductively  
ignores the long term goals of the parties, financially for their security,  
and as parents for their children.**

**9. Trap #9: The day of the final Judgment of Divorce is the end of the case for the parties, as well as for the attorneys, mediators, judges and other professionals involved.** Working toward the final Judgment of Divorce creates the illusion for parties that the day of the final Judgment will be the end of their relationship and that they will feel relief. The parties are often shocked, the day after the final Judgment, that it is not true. In fact, rather than getting relief, they often find that the divorce process made the relationship worse than it was before. The trite prescription that attorneys and judges give to divorcing parents, usually including some version of “*Get along with each other,*” does not pervade the process in ways that encourage parties to develop a sensible divorce relationship after the process ends. To the professionals, the case is over; to the spouses, it has just begun. We remind the reader that the divorce is everything that happens after the day of the final Judgment of Divorce, much like a marriage is everything that happens after the day of the wedding.

**Trapping people into focusing on the final Judgment of Divorce**

**as the end leads to the realization that this is a fantasy  
and leaves them unprepared for what follows.**

**10. Trap #10: The attribution of fault and blame has a long history in the traditional family law system.** Lawyers are sometimes referred to as “professional blamers.” This can fit like a hand in glove with divorcing spouses who, as we point out in Trap #7, are already blaming each other for the failure of the marriage to provide them with their dream. Fault and blame have little relevance to making a Plan for the parties’ futures. Focusing on sadness and focusing on planning for the future is critical. A good financial planner does not focus on blaming people for getting into financial trouble; the planner focuses on how to use current resources to have a better future. Parties could (perhaps should) do the same.

**Trapping people into focusing on fault and blame  
distracts them from focusing on sadness and planning for the future.**

### **In Closing**

Our goal in this booklet is to reflect on the current family law legal system in which we professionals play a role. We started by asking this question: Does the current system help or hurt people? To answer this question, we analyzed the current system using the tools of Game Theory. It was an enlightening journey, leading to the following interesting conclusion:

**As professionals, we posit that we have been inadvertent active  
participants in a system that sometimes does more harm than good.**

Some of you might have a mixed reaction to this conclusion, and think: “*The system’s not all that bad...*” Others might think that client demands are implicit in the family law system and are just “*part of the job*”. Ken has had attorneys, after disrespectful grilling in a deposition or in a trial, apologize and tell him they were “*just doing their job.*” What kind of a system promotes disrespectful behavior rather than respectful and cooperative planning? On the other hand, hopefully many of you might find our analysis interesting, perhaps even convincing.

Upon further reflection, when you find yourself meeting with a client who does not want to pay spousal support, or with a parent who wants equal placement, or with a party who is accusing the other of abuse, you might have further (positive) thoughts about your initial reaction and conclusion. It is so easy to do the same old thing over and over, and play our role in that system. It is so human to keep building a road that goes nowhere, even though we have such good intentions.

**Part III: With a Mindset Shift,  
the Current Family Law System Should be Ready for a Change.**

**The Bad News and Good News.** One of the more disturbing aspects of our discovery was to realize how easy it was for your authors, for so many years, to ignore our instincts that *something was wrong with this picture* and rationalize the roles we played in it. That’s the bad news. However, it does not take much to shift gears, even within current laws and the potential roles we can play. That’s the good news.

**The Mindset Shift.** We can make a shift in our mindset, meaning our understanding of exactly what we are actually doing. We discussed earlier in this booklet that this involves having a client-based Strategic Intention, Value Proposition and new Standards:

- where the parties' *Strategic Intention* is to have a post-divorce experience where the focus is on both parties' long-term financial and family goals and not on legal outcomes; and
- where the *Value Proposition* includes steps that treat the parties with respect, promotes high value outcomes through cooperation, manages emotions and helps resolve sadness, improves the relationship between separating parents and prepares them for the life-long task of raising successful children together and helps them develop legal outcomes that help them reach long term financial and family goals; and
- where the new *Standards* by which we measure success, is focused on both parties' long-term financial and family goals and not on legal outcomes at the time of the final Judgment.

**There is a Need to Recognize a “Dispute” for What It’s Not: A Dispute.** When a “dispute” comes before us, here’s what we can do:

- We can ask parents about their long-term goals for themselves and for those of their soon to be ex spouse?
- We can promote a negotiation process that elicits and makes public, the long-term goals of both parties and includes those goals, with a balance of selfishness and altruism, in developing solutions.
- We can ask when a party says he or she does not want to pay spousal support, what are your long-term financial goals, and what do you think are the goals of your spouse? We can assume this includes joint financial responsibility for the children.
- We can suggest something like, “*Wouldn’t you feel better if both of you reached your goals, even if that meant paying some spousal support in the short-term?*”
- We can ask when a party makes allegations of abuse, what would make for a safe family experience for the children?
- We can ask when participating in a custody study, that the focus be on what the parents want as a long-term outcome; how they want their children to look back on their childhood experience after their parents separated and how they want their children to be functioning when they are adults. The study can then be part of a plan.
- We can tell parties when they become selfish, that research tells us that the best outcomes for them are when both spouses have a good plan to reach long-term goals.
- We can tell the parties that it is better to start by growing the pie so that both spouses get bigger pieces rather than competing with one another from the outset.
- We can redirect the parties when they focus on who gets what overnights, to develop a plan for the involvement of both parents in the lives of the children, not where the children sleep.



**There is a Need to Recognize that there IS Something Wrong With this Picture.** Although our Negotiation Model is more complex than we can briefly outline in this booklet, a shift in mindset is essential and a good starting point for making a change. In a sense, we, as professionals, have also been trapped into a perspective on what happens when a marriage ends. We believe things that are not necessarily true. We play our roles in the system, knowing intuitively that something is wrong with this picture, and yet it seems so real.

**There is a Need to Recognize that One's View of Reality Might Not be True.** We are reminded of a physics example. Before Einstein, time seemed to be a constant throughout the universe. What was here "now" was what was "now" on a star 25 million light years away. The laws of classical mechanics seemed immutable. No one questioned this view of reality. Everyone, lay person and scientist alike, thought of time as a constant. Yet, the whole mindset turned out to be wrong. Time is different for different folks depending on the motion of those folks relative to one another. Most physicists did not accept Einstein's work initially because to accept it meant a universally accepted mindset was wrong. However, when scientists tested Einstein's assertion, he turned out to be right, and everyone in the world before him was wrong.

Another example from physics is the belief in the *ether*. When it was discovered that light traveled in waves, this posed a problem: wave action can only occur through a medium like water or atmosphere. A wave cannot travel through nothingness. So, the question was, how did light waves get to us from the stars and sun? The answer turned out to be the *ether*. The ether was an invisible substance that existed throughout space and was the medium through which light traveled. No one could see it, but everyone believed it because it had to be true. However, no one seemed able to come up with an experiment to prove the existence of the *ether*; at least not until two clever British physicists devised a clever device so sensitive that it was bound to measure the presence of the *ether*. When they measured, they were certain it would prove the existence of the *ether*. In fact, they proved that the *ether* did not exist. The mindset was wrong.

We can think of several social examples. For example, it was a long held belief that there were several distinct races of people. However, recent genetic testing and other metabolic measurements traced all of homo sapiens to one common race. We are all just somewhere on the continuum from light to dark based on where our proximate ancestors lived on the planet. We all began in a small village on the east coast of Africa about 250,000 years ago.

### **Did We Challenge You? Help You? Provoke You?**

Our goal in this booklet is not to offer definitive answers, although applying Game Theory principles in our two books, we do provide some answers. Our goal here has been to challenge our assumptions and provoke creative thinking.

With our goal in mind, we hope you find this booklet both helpful and disturbing. Our experience with family law professionals has been that nearly all of them want to do more good than harm. As a group, family law professionals are very good people and sincere in their work. However, it is disturbing to step back and look at a system in which we have worked that might actually have been harmful to the very people that we were trying to help.

### **Are You Ready for Change?**

Using our Negotiation Model, briefly stated, attorneys can start by doing the following five things:

1. Changing their Mindset
2. Supporting a new system that promotes a Strategic Intention, Value Proposition and new Standards
3. Avoiding the Ten Traps
4. Assuming that the parties are not in dispute, and
5. Focusing on both parties' long-term financial and family goals and not on legal outcomes.

The reality is that we have no control over the past, but have a great deal of control over the future. We can change the way that we work. We can offer a service and product that at the end of our involvement, people will think it was worth the effort and expense, especially where they believe that their attorneys added substantial value during the course of their engagement.

This is a lofty but a reasonable and attainable goal, if only we can change our mindset.