

## **MANAGING CONFLICT EFFECTIVELY**

### **Five Simple Strategies for Transforming Conflicts and Improving Relationships**

Although conflict is inevitable, there are strategies to keep in mind that help improve relationships and increase productivity. The actions you take at the very beginning of a conflict often determine the outcome. Relying on constructive behaviors before, during, and after a conflict can transform the experience from one that is filled with tension and frustration to one that is energizing and positive.

This guide outlines five simple strategies to help manage conflict more effectively:

**UNDERSTANDING**

**EXPLORING**

**COMMUNICATING**

**RE-ENGAGING**

**CONTEMPLATING**

# UNDERSTANDING

## ➤ VIEW THE SITUATION FROM A WIDER ANGLE.

*“We don't see things as they are, we them as we are!” –Anais Nin*

It's normal to view a conflict from your own lens and nothing else. Most people concentrate on how the conflict is impacting them, what the other person is doing that is annoying, and meeting their own specific needs. One of the most important skills for any resolver of conflict is to have a wider frame of reference. Realizing that well-intentioned people can see the same situation in an entirely different way is critical to moving toward a satisfying resolution for everyone.

## ➤ LOOK AT THE CONFLICT FROM THE OTHER PERSON'S POINT OF VIEW.

*“Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?”  
–Henry David Thoreau*

Perspective Taking is the process of putting yourself in another person's shoes and trying to see what the conflict looks like behind his or her eyes. In order to do this effectively, you have to have a mindset of authentic curiosity: “What is it like to be in the other person's place?” “What might their motivation be?” “How do they see things?” In addition to being curious about the other person's view, perspective taking also requires a non-judging attitude. Assume a positive intent. In other words, rather than thinking, “That's a crazy way to act!,” the goal is to imagine why a reasonable, rational person might behave as your conflict partner is behaving. Not only is it important to strive to understand the other person, but it's also imperative to demonstrate that understanding verbally by rephrasing and summarizing his or her points.

## ➤ EVALUATE THE CONFLICT BEYOND JUST YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE.

*“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” –Steven Covey*

To fully understand any situation, you need to adopt what Judy Ringer, Conflict Trainer and Coach, calls a “learning stance.” Usually, our perceptions aren't completely right or completely wrong; they're just incomplete. To fill in the gaps, get the full picture and truly listen to understand, be willing to ask open-ended questions or solicit examples to clarify issues:

- How do you see it differently?
- Say more about why this is important to you.
- What would you do in my shoes?

# EXPLORING

## ➤ CREATE AS MANY VIABLE SOLUTIONS AS POSSIBLE.

*“Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain—and most fools do.” –Dale Carnegie*

Many conflicts reach a standstill because both parties get locked into positions and feel as though neither side can get what they really want. Viewing conflicts as an exercise in creative problem solving rather than as an adversarial battle often results in fairer and more satisfying solutions for all parties.

The first step after identifying your own needs is to anticipate and discuss the needs of the other party. Then brainstorm every possible solution without evaluation. “Win-win” alternatives almost always exist if people can communicate with candor and not jump to conclusions.

## ➤ PRODUCE BETTER SOLUTIONS OVERALL.

*“The aim of argument or discussion should not be victory, but progress.” –Joseph Joubert*

Taking the time to identify each other’s goals, motives, and agendas helps define the problem more clearly. Getting all of these issues on the table sometimes leads to a quick and easy solution. If not, move forward by identifying points of mutual agreement and interdependence. This process might take a little longer, but the additional information invariably leads to a resolution that satisfies everyone.

## ➤ COLLABORATE TO GET MEANINGFUL RESULTS FOR BOTH PARTIES.

*“Do not find fault; find a remedy.” –Henry Ford*

Cultivating a trusting environment is more likely when both parties have a flexible and collaborative approach. If each person works at developing a solution that meets the other’s needs as well as his or her own, then the possibility of maintaining a long-term, cooperative relationship is increased. It is crucial to be respectful and courteous, expressing a real desire to work together toward a mutually satisfying solution. Also, be willing to compromise and/or collaborate because your goal is to have a solution, not a victory.

# COMMUNICATING

## ➤ AUTHENTICALLY

*“It’s very hard to get your heart and head together in life. In my case, they’re not even friendly.”*

*–Woody Allen (Crimes and Misdemeanors)*

Communicating authentically is the cornerstone of establishing trust in a relationship. Being yourself and letting people know your true emotions is a key factor to healthy communication during a conflict. Imagine the wasted time and frustration associated with not “being real.” Saying what we think we “should” say or what we think others want to hear only ensures that we miss out on a deeper level of understanding. Most of the time, a lack of authenticity leads to poor decisions and seriously erodes a culture of trust and collaboration in an organization.

## ➤ DIRECTLY

*“I know you believe you understood what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize, that what you heard, isn’t what I meant.” –Unknown*

One potentially destructive way a person can respond to conflict is by concealing his or her true emotions. Oddly enough, it’s almost impossible to totally hide your emotions because they “leak” out in voice tone, body posture, facial expressions, etc. Then there is the risk of the other party speculating inaccurately about the nature of the emotions, complicating matters even more.

Even worse, trying to contain emotions might lead to an eventual explosion of anger, or if directed internally, result in a stress-related illness or depression.

Wouldn’t it be better to just openly discuss real feelings from the outset? Providing this information to the other person indicates the issue is important to you, but, more significantly, that you care enough about your relationship with him or her to be direct.

## ➤ HONESTLY

*“Never apologize for showing feelings. When you do so, you apologize for the truth.” –Benjamin Disraeli*

One aspect of conflict resolution involves telling the truth. To have trust and collaboration, people need to feel it is safe to be honest and open with one another. Reasons for not being totally honest stem from being overly polite to fearing possible negative outcomes, but the backlash from avoiding the truth is often more harmful. A lack of candor is not an effective, long-term strategy for sustainable resolution or change.

## RE-ENGAGING

### ➤ ADMIT RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONFLICT.

*“No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.” –Stanislaw Lee*

One of the first steps to making amends after a conflict has occurred is to get the communication started again. One of the best ways to do this is to acknowledge your own contribution to the problem. In any conflict situation, both parties contribute to the misunderstanding, and even though the contribution may not be of equal weight, it's always good to communicate your part of it, no matter how small it may be. Doing this in a genuine way often enables the other party to do the same in a non-defensive way. At this point, the door is opened for further dialogue.

### ➤ MOVE THE RELATIONSHIP BACK ON TRACK.

*“You can't stay in your corner of the forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.”  
–Winnie the Pooh (A.A. Milne)*

The process to repair a broken relationship may start with a sincere apology, a request to work together to find win-win solutions, or a simple acknowledgment of the importance of the other's point of view. These kinds of gestures are appreciated by all of us, and, in many cases, they will produce a positive reciprocal response from the other party. Active listening skills are essential here because the other party may not be willing to move forward until his or her own point of view is recognized. The sooner you make an effort to re-engage, the less likely you are to permanently damage the relationship.

### ➤ CULTIVATE AN OPTIMISTIC MINDSET.

*“The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.”  
–Winston Churchill*

After a conflict has occurred, the road back toward reconciliation can be long and stressful. Having hope that this conflict can be resolved successfully—that it's not impossible—is a major piece of the puzzle. Staying in the moment, not speculating too far down the road, and avoiding “catastrophizing” are key. If you decide that the conflict is irresolvable, then it certainly is. Pessimism about the chances for success brings about a self-fulfilling prophecy.

# CONTEMPLATING

## ➤ CONSIDER THE BEST RESPONSE.

*“Sometimes you have to be silent to be heard.” -Swiss Proverb*

Not all conflict situations require immediate responses. Sometimes it is valuable to slow down the process, allow for some reflective thinking, and analyze the situation carefully from many angles in order to choose a positive response. Statements such as “Let me think about that before I respond” or “I haven’t looked at it that way before, so I’ll need to sleep on it” are useful when more time is needed to weigh the pros and cons or to craft an appropriate response.

## ➤ REGAIN EMOTIONAL BALANCE.

*“If you are patient in the moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.” –Chinese Proverb*

As mentioned earlier, conflict can be stressful. Sometimes it’s helpful just to take a time out so that you can focus on something other than the tension or frustration of the moment. Whether it’s going for a short walk, taking deep breaths, listening to music, or engaging in a favorite hobby, these temporary escapes allow you to distract yourself for awhile, calm down, and eventually regroup. Be aware of your own personal triggers that may signal the need for a time out. Are you raising your voice or re-stating the same point over and over? Does your body language (rolling your eyes or pointing your fingers) indicate you’re getting angry? Try to remind yourself of what you really want in this interaction. Often your true goals are the long-term types of issues such as improving the relationship or maintaining balance rather than the immediate incident at hand.

## ➤ ENCOURAGE FLEXIBILITY AND CHANGE.

*“Blessed are the flexible for they will not be bent out of shape.” –Michael McGriffy, MD*

While working through conflicts can be demanding, it’s advantageous to explore the positive aspects of the process. Is it bringing a dormant issue to light? Is it surfacing concerns that have been buried? Is it increasing the capacity for straightforwardness and the ability to solve other types of problems?

Being flexible and adaptable along the way increases the chance of a positive outcome. Asking yourself, “How do I want to be viewed after this conflict is over?” can help guide your actions.

# CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Changing your behavior to become more effective at conflict resolution can be challenging, and it may require focused attention over a period of time. Below are some ideas for you to consider:

**Keep a Journal.** Writing in a journal has many benefits. Not only can you record and celebrate successes, but you also can jot down new ideas, reflect on difficult challenges, and set priorities. Putting your thoughts in writing can help clarify your goals and expectations.

**Get Feedback from a Reliable Assessment Instrument.** The Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP)<sup>®</sup> is a valid assessment instrument which focuses on conflict behaviors. There are two versions of the CDP<sup>®</sup>: The CDP-I is a “self-report” (how you view yourself), and the CDP-360 is a full spectrum tool which also gives you feedback from bosses, peers, and direct reports. Both versions provide information on the constructive and destructive behaviors you exhibit during conflict and have thorough Development Guides with tips for coping with conflict and building strong interpersonal relationships. For more information, go to [conflictdynamics.org](http://conflictdynamics.org) or call 888-359-9906.

**Develop an Action Plan.** Whether you get additional feedback from an assessment instrument or not, you may want to establish two or three goals to be working on in the next few months to increase your conflict competence. Creating goals that are “SMART” (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely) will significantly increase your success.

**Involve Others.** Colleagues can be invaluable and a safe resource for you to tap into as you follow through on your action plan. If you are weaker in one area, find others who complement you. If you want to develop a certain competency, identify colleagues who excel in that particular area and model your behavior after theirs. Communicating to others what specific areas you are trying to develop and asking them for ongoing feedback can accelerate your progress.

**Seek Additional Support.** Consider getting additional training or securing the services of a coach (internal or external) to help you go further with your action plan. Coaches not only hold you accountable to the goals you set, but they also provide a fresh perspective, are encouraging as you experiment with new behaviors, and give candid feedback as to goals and priorities.

# CDP<sup>®</sup> INFORMATION AND SUGGESTED READINGS

## The Conflict Dynamics Profile<sup>®</sup>

The Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP)<sup>®</sup> is an assessment tool which examines how people respond to conflict. The CDP<sup>®</sup> focuses on behaviors, and conflict responses are designated as Constructive/Destructive and Active/Passive. The concepts contained in this e-guide correspond to the Constructive scales on the CDP<sup>®</sup>: *Understanding* (Perspective Taking), *Exploring* (Creating Solutions), *Communicating* (Expressing Emotions), *Re-engaging* (Reaching Out), and *Contemplating* (Reflective Thinking, Delay Responding, and Adapting). For more information, go to [conflictdynamics.org](http://conflictdynamics.org).



## Suggested Readings

### *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader:*

#### *How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively*

Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan | Jossey-Bass, 2012

### *Building Conflict Competent Teams*

Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan | Jossey-Bass, 2008

### *Conflict Resolution*

Dan Dana | McGraw-Hill Education, 2001

### *Crucial Accountability:*

#### *Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior*

Kerry Patterson and Joseph Grenny | McGraw-Hill Education, 2013

### *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler | McGraw-Hill Education, 2011

***Developing Your Conflict Competence:***

***A Hands-On Guide for Leaders, Managers, Facilitators, and Teams***

Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan | Jossey-Bass, 2010

***Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most***

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen, and Roger Fisher | Penguin Books, 2010

***Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time***

Susan Scott | Berkley, 2004

***Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In***

Roger Fisher, William L. Ury, and Bruce Patton | Penguin Books, 2011

***Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone***

Mark Goulston and Keith Ferrazzi | AMACOM, 2015

***Making Conflict Work: Harnessing the Power of Disagreement***

Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson | Mariner Books, 2015

***Managing Conflict Dynamics: A Practical Approach***

Sal Capobianco, Mark Davis, and Linda Kraus | Eckerd College, 2004

***Resolving Everyday Conflict***

Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson | Baker Books, 2011

***The Coward's Guide to Conflict: Empowering Solutions for Those Who Would Rather Run Than Fight***

Tin Ursiny | Sourcebooks, 2003



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