

Tackling Tough Conversations

A practical introduction to conflict resolution

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Conflict is part of life. In family, community, work and internally we pit ideas against each other. It is in the creative resolution of different ideas that progress is based. Many of our ideas, needs or wants are invested with emotion. Emotion gives us the energy to engage in achieving our desired outcomes. Sometimes it is in achievement of a goal and at other times may be in avoiding an outcome. When emotion gets in the way of improving clarity, understanding and compassion we suffer distress. Distress will destroy constructive conversation and creative solution-finding.

Getting into conflict is easy. Resolving conflicts is one of the most complex skill sets to develop. Those who develop these skills have an enormous advantage in life, leadership, management, marriage and coaching. In this introduction we lay out an approach and a framework for improving your ability to resolve conflict constructively and with minimal distress. Success is not a simple process of memorising bullet points. Good conflict resolution takes awareness, self mastery, empathy and years of practice.

We recommend working through these notes and, referencing conflicts you may have now or had in the past, explore the barriers and opportunities for better conflict resolution in each situation.

Successful conflict resolution requires maturity, patience and recognition that:

- Conflict is inevitable, normal and challenging
- Most conflict can be managed
- Experience, intuition and knowledge must be applied
- Not every conflict can be resolved
- Conflict is a great tool for personal development
- Conflict helps build robust and trusting relationships

Conflict is sourced in different ways. It is helpful to define the source of the particular conflict:

- Values which are set up early in life guide us in what should or should not be done. Value conflicts can quickly lead to war or dissolution of a working relationship. It is very useful to review and explore both your own and other's values. This is why "values alignment" is so powerful. Conflict over values is difficult to resolve creatively if people are intolerant.
- Conflicting objectives or goals will quickly present challenges particular when the stakes are high and people have invested significant resources. This is a key factor in business, negotiation and marriage.
- Competition for limited resources is a frequent source in modern organisations, family, social investments and sport.
- Poor planning or execution of complex, interdependent projects. This is frequently an issue if we set up expectations and one party fails to meet a critical input. The problem usually occurs when there is inadequate or dishonest communication. Regular and candid communication can solve this issue.

Five different forms of engagement are possible over a conflict:

1. Avoidance (Lose-lose)

Advantages: high levels of distress, need to cool down and plan, risk of break-down, skilled assistance needed

Disadvantages: lost time, frustration, fear, denial, creative opportunity lost

2. Competition (Win-lose)

Advantages: critical situations with high risk, leadership has to be established, don't care...

Disadvantages: others check out, trust and collaboration reduced

3. Accommodation (Lose-Win)

Advantages: lose battle to win war, importance to other party, allow others to learn

Disadvantages: looks like caving in, may be avoidance

4. Compromise (Trade-offs)

Advantages: helps find common ground, may meet key requirements, signal respect

Disadvantages: often temporary, must set limits

5. Collaboration (Win-win)

Advantages: maximum concern for issues and relationships, builds trust, creativity required

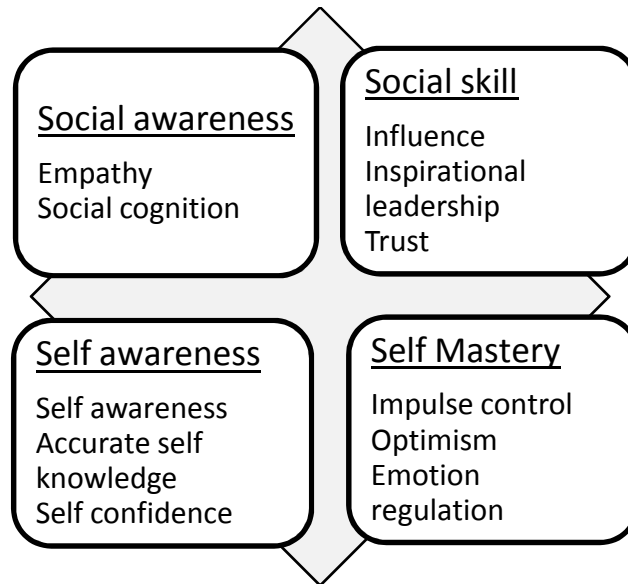
Disadvantages: requires courage, exploration, time and empathy

In the following sections we seek to lay out some of the important contributors to success conflict resolution. For each person the tipping point is different. As you work through each section see if you can evaluate which are strengths and which are development challenges. Aim to develop your own process that selects the most important components for you to include in becoming better at constructive conflict resolution.

1. Self development challenges

Being good at conflict resolution is the penultimate emotional intelligence competencies. However, to enter the terrain it requires some skill in each of the clusters of emotional intelligence. In the cluster of Self Awareness we need all the competencies of self awareness, accurate self knowledge and confidence. In Self Mastery we need impulse control and emotion regulation and in Social Awareness we need high levels of empathy and social cognition. Setting up the environment for conflict resolution requires influence, inspirational leadership and trust.

A course or extensive reading in Emotional Intelligence is strongly recommended. We will review these in the course. In each identified competence the higher levels of the competence need attention.



2. Understanding destructive conflict

The explicit cost of conflict is measured in loss of good team members, reduced support from your network, reduced performance, loss of trust and discomfort. Recent studies have shown that productivity is reduced around abrasive people. There is an increasing intolerance for this kind of behaviour. Civilised communities demand the display of more skill – particularly impulse control and empathy.

However, we have to be wary of avoiding conflict. It is absolutely necessary to have courageous conversations, tough love or candour if we are to communicate and work together productively. Avoidance, dishonesty and “boosterism” quickly corrupt relationships, trust and performance

Seems obvious enough! So, why is it so difficult?

The answer is simple. We evolved to kill or run for our lives in the face of conflict. It is only very recently that any form of conflict has become less than life-threatening. In some societies it is still very dangerous. In short, our biological defence and attack systems fire up very quickly when faced with a conflict that may affect our career, sport, marriage or health.

Depending on the situation and our defence systems we generally respond in three ways:

- Anger: we attack to defeat the threat to our self or ideas
- Fear: we retreat from the challenge or try to appease the other party
- Sadness: we avoid conflict and seek safe refuge, feeling disappointed

If these primal emotions take over from our more mature and thoughtful mind we are doomed to unhelpful behaviours in the face of conflict. The only solution is to learn how to calm and focus ourselves. This requires self awareness and training in impulse control. We must learn to maintain a calm, optimistic and compassionate stance in the face of challenging interaction.

This is perhaps the most challenging skill for most of us to perfect.

3. Prevention through clear expectations and courageous conversations

This is an easy win for effective leadership and coaching. It is particularly important in a high performance environment where people are stretched to the limit and the consequences of confusion or negative emotion increase the risk of failure and defeat. The coach or leader is responsible for creating a team or training environment where clarity of purpose, specific objectives and consequences are made clear repeatedly and reinforced by quick feedback loops.

Every coach must work at creating a team with purpose, clear expectations and defined consequences. An environment and culture where this is explicit liberates energy for the hard work of training, recovery and competition. Make sure to take enough time to involve your team or squad in developing a set of values to guide behaviour, clear performance objectives, specific consequences for performance or lack of performance and an understood process for resolving the issues that will arise.

This clarity in your training environment needs to be reinforced by quick feedback loops. Review behaviours, performance and athlete feedback on a regular – if not daily – basis. This is a discipline that marks high performance environments and allows for quick resolution of issues and reduces the doubt and anxiety associated with selection. This approach can be widened to include the athletes' families, administrators and funders.

Within your teams work at establishing a habit of honest, candid conversation based on facts. It is necessary to practice and set the tone on the small issues such as attending training on time, self care disciplines, effort and teamwork. As you develop a robust style of communication within your team, honesty, trust and energy will increase. This is the foundation of successful teams and leadership.

4. Empathy and social cognition

Successful conflict managers have an acute sense of the underlying dramas, personal styles and human signals that can so easily derail a difficult conversation. Based on our life experience and perhaps partly on genes we tend to default into preferential behaviour. These preferences tend to show up in conflict. It is useful to understand these styles.

People group into:

- **Aggressive:** this is a battle I must win and your issues are not relevant; dominance is the theme and the need to win can over-ride the actual issues to resolve; destroys teams.
- **Non-Assertive:** afraid to engage, low self esteem and confuses others; may expect others to guess what they want; unlikely to work in high performance environments.
- **Passive Aggressive:** avoids conflict but 'gets own back later'; acts non-assertive but feels aggressive; may collect bag of grievances and explode once bag full (final straw); important to address and point out when used; watch for it in yourself.
- **Assertive:** stand your own ground while being respectful of others; stays cool but confident; quick to acknowledge where others are and focuses on issues.

These styles can have an enormous impact on the outcome and experience. It is important to understand your style and to recognise the styles of those you work with. If not it can be an unpleasant experience and destructive outcomes are more likely.

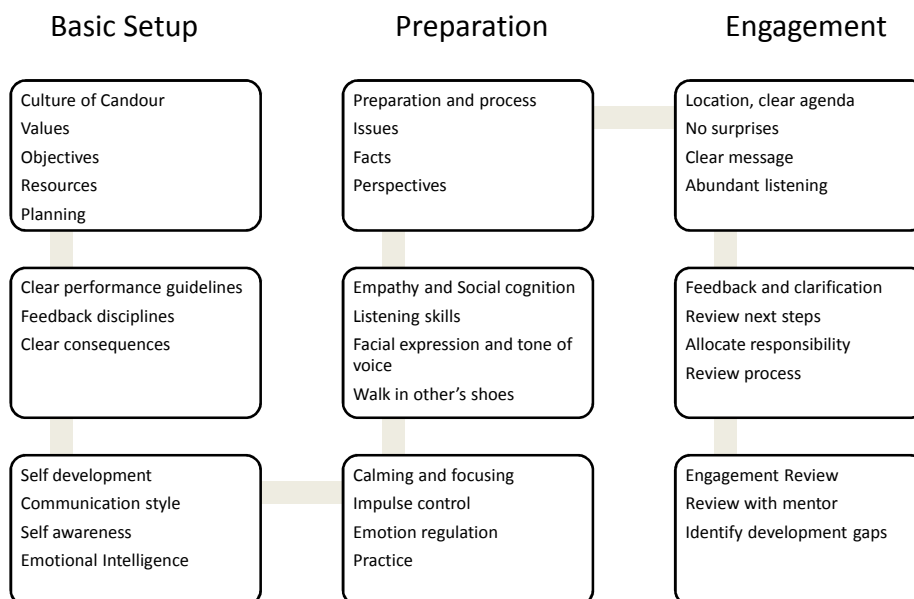
At a deeper level, listening skills become a huge advantage in working towards constructive outcomes. Our listening progresses through basic acknowledgement, silent attention, questions, paraphrasing and to reflective listening. These are disciplines that can be augmented by studying body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. The purpose of deepening empathy is to gain a deep understanding of the situation from the other party's perspective.

Recent work has also underpinned the need to connect with the basic emotional needs of the other party. When we meet these needs of appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status and role we are far more likely to achieve a collaborative win-win. The more we miss or violate these needs the less likely resolution becomes.

5. Preparing a process for conflict resolution

In a performance environment with limited resources and huge ambition some conflict is inevitable and we will have to address difficult issues such as selection and funding. When a difficult conversation is imminent make sure to prepare adequately. Define the issue, your concerns and your feelings making sure you are very clear about your role, status and objectives. Map out the situation from the perspective of the other party as best you can.

Get help from someone with experience if you need it and don't hesitate to rehearse the upcoming conversation with someone you trust. In the early stages it is very important to prepare in writing so that you have the issues, perspectives, facts and consequences clearly articulated in preparation for the conversation. Make sure you prepare yourself physically and emotionally.



6. Engagement in a difficult conversation

Much of the engagement will already be set up by the relationship you have established and the norms you have set up within your team. Remember though to give the other party clear expectations of what, where, why and how. Select an environment that is neutral and positive.

Be generous with introductions and establishing a comfortable rapport (affiliation and appreciation). State the purpose of the meeting and make sure that the other party understands. The more regularly you have locked candid feedback into your coaching the easier this is. Be specific with the expectations you agreed on and the feedback based on well documented facts. Define the gap.

It is important to give the other party time to absorb this information and respond. Ask for their ideas (status and role), explore their feelings and any suggestions they may have (autonomy). Work at holding your silence and practicing attentive listening. Be ready to hear alternative perspectives and solutions. It is very helpful to paraphrase what you hear to ensure that you have heard correctly and to signal that you value the other person's perspective (status and autonomy).

Develop a rough process for yourself and be flexible in adapting it to the specific situation and other parties.

7. Recovery, mediation, support, follow up and network maintenance

Remember that after a difficult conversation or open conflict parties may be left with considerable distress including anger, fear, sadness and perhaps resentment. To progress your leadership skills from conflict management through to conflict resolution and hopefully on toward regular courageous conversations that pre-empt conflict, it is very helpful to arrange a debriefing with the other party or to have a mentor to follow up with.

Once the decision is made choose an appropriate time to ask the other party questions such as:

- Do you understand how we have come to this decision?
- How do you feel?
- How did I do in that session?
- What can we learn and improve upon?

In working with your mentor it is important to describe the engagement fully. A good mentor will help you explore your own feelings and styles and perhaps help you pick up on the feelings and styles of others. An experienced mentor can be a rich source of examples and simple techniques.

The ability to manage complex human interactions so that they become a source of trust, collaboration, creativity and energy has become a large and sought after skill set. It is the subject of 10 separate executive education modules at Harvard. In a complex, idea-rich world those who can master the skill of courageous conversations and conflict resolution will naturally rise to leadership.

It is a long and challenging journey but one that will stretch and develop you like very few others. Break your journey down into bite-sized chunks and build a community or team around you that is committed to the benefits of high performance communication.