WorkplaceWisdom

How to Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts in the Workplace:

Successful Approaches to Conflict That Strengthen Your Business

by Liz Kislik

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Introduction

Introduction

If you haven't calculated what conflict is costing your business, you're not alone. But it's a lot: One large, seminal study[1] estimated that U.S. businesses spend $359 billion annually on a combination of time waste, absenteeism, avoidance, and general disengagement caused by workplace conflict. A smaller, more detailed study[2] of "people problems" estimated losses of roughly $15,000 *per day* attributable explicitly to conflict.

Finding tools and techniques to reduce this negative impact ought to be highly desirable. But conflict is one of those topics that too many organizations consider just part of workplace life, where people have different needs and expectations. Plus, it can look intimidating to try to take it on.

Conflict may be an inevitable part of life, but it doesn't have to be so damaging. Instead, it can be harnessed and managed to improve both the workplace and business performance.

Decrease negativity, friction, destructive posturing, hiding, and interpersonal attacks.

Conflicts typically arise when individuals approach a situation with different opinions or attitudes, have different interests or needs, or prefer different processes for getting work done. Two individuals who perceive differences with each other in these areas may not automatically adjust. When they can't find middle ground, a conflict ensues.

Workplace conflicts severely hamper employee productivity. When people feel negativity towards each other, they often can't focus on their regular tasks. Negativity between two people can also easily spread to co-workers as well as up-and-down the org chart. If factions arise supporting the two sides, entire teams can find themselves in ongoing, mutually destructive conflict.

Some of these conflicts aren't merely interpersonal, though. When something goes wrong repeatedly between two people or groups, there's probably something structural holding them in place. For example, the way departments can act like functional silos or the way roles and responsibilities have been defined can create boundaries that employees feel they can't cross or barriers that they can't overcome.

And that's when people start to have problems with each other *on top of* the original structural problem. Most conflicts occur between nice people (bullies and intentionally mean people are only a small minority) who want their organization to succeed. But something gets in their way. They can't see or deal with the underlying structure, or they don't have the authority or the acumen to figure out the countervailing forces that are setting them against each other. So they end up interacting with each other in an unproductive way.

Conflict may be an inevitable part of life, but it doesn't have to be so damaging.

By nipping disagreements in the bud, you can decrease negativity, friction, destructive posturing, hiding, and interpersonal attacks, and then cultivate a workplace where everyone is united on the same side in taking on external business challenges. You'll foster a thriving environment that inspires long-term loyalty from employees, and accelerates your team's rate and effectiveness at knocking down the obstacles to success.

This field guide presents a series of chapters on identifying and resolving conflicts that demonstrate the value of productive disagreement, healthy debates, and valuable differences. Disagreements of some kind need to occur or the organization will not benefit from new experiences and differing talents, resulting in stasis and eventual weakening. So instead of trying to eliminate conflict altogether, you'll find recommendations for reducing the problems that cause the conflicts and for recovering from them when they happen.

At the end is a checklist to help you make your way through the crucial steps of dealing with interpersonal conflict. And if you'd like more information about resolving conflicts in your own workplace, email liz@lizkislik.com.

1. Consulting Psychologist Press, 2008:
    https://www.cpp.com/pdfs/CPP_Global_Human_Capital_Report_Workplace_Conflict.pdf

2. Putting a Price on People Problems at Work by Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson;
    Harvard Business Review, August 23, 2016:
    https://hbr.org/2016/08/putting-a-price-on-people-problems-at-work

Chapter 1

This is How to Get Started When You Notice Conflict

We all experience conflict on the job. Just the act of trying to coordinate activities with others — or actually any attempt at working together — can trigger conflict, even if everyone involved cares about the same things.

A great deal of interpersonal conflict comes from overreaction or acting out in response to actual or anticipated events. People who don't feel good have trouble behaving as if they do; oppositional and confrontational behaviors can be precipitated by feelings of insecurity or jealousy or by concerns about being unsupported, overlooked, or unappreciated.

It's surprisingly important to recognize that the person on the other side of the disagreement is not exactly like you and may not operate the way you do. That creates room for you to try to understand what they're really like and what they really want — instead of thinking that something is wrong because they're not reacting exactly the way you are.

And it's equally important to recognize that the other person isn't trying to harm you — they just want something you might not understand yet, and they want it in a way that might be uncomfortable for you. You have the opportunity to try and figure it out.

Identifying Conflict Styles

Conflict styles can be shaped by the way someone's parents handled disagreements, how their siblings fought, by the norms of the managers at their first job, or the techniques they learned at a seminar.

Some people fold their tents immediately when challenged and clam up as if they never had

a view of their own. Others argue and rebut as if they care more about winning than whatever the point actually is, as if giving in would mean giving up on themselves.

Passive-aggressive people pretend that they agree by giving verbal assent or nodding even though the rest of their gestures, side conversations, and subsequent negative stance show that they never really agreed.

People who don't feel good have trouble behaving as if they do.

Anxious people may micromanage as a way of reasserting their authority, snipe at project details, turn their noses up at lofty goals, or shift from criticizing the project itself to the people associated with it — picking on small imperfections and behaving in ways that range from ever-so-slightly to overtly disrespectful.

Folks who are anxious, or afraid that circumstances will cause their failure or disruption, sometimes channel those fears and anxieties into anger. Anger is often perceived as a stronger emotion. It's focused, assertive, and provides protective cover for fear and anxiety, which can be perceived as weakness.

Taking Steps Toward Conflict Resolution

To work toward a resolution to a conflict, **begin by observing the roles that people play in the organization**:

- Are they sharing opinions that are variations on a theme, or are they taking incompatible positions that require real reconciliation?

- Are they articulating diverging positions specifically because they want to go on the record?

- If that's the case, is it for the sake of holding the stage to be sure the opinion is registered, or because they really want something to change?

- Are they representing a constituency?

- Do they serve the group as the devil's advocate?

- Are they willing to take risks that other members of the group aren't?

When you notice someone's excessive reaction, you can try probing a bit: "Quincy, you sounded quite upset during our discussion about the new email campaign. Was there something bad going on that I didn't notice? Was there a significant problem that I overlooked? I'm concerned that you were so distressed when nothing struck me as being too terrible. Please fill me in."

Whatever motivated the participants to disagree, **it's naïve to think that reconciliation and resolution will take place without overt measures or targeted effort**.

In the next chapter, we look at what leaders should do when there's conflict within their teams. Playing the role of referee can present some unique challenges.

Chapter 2:

What Can Leaders Do When Their Team Struggles with Conflict?

Many leaders express surprise that it doesn't seem to matter what they tell their team members about working things out together and how they try to address the underlying structural problems that can trigger conflict among co-workers. Unhappy folks keep showing up in their office asking them to choose between the needs of one party and another.

You can call the shots, but you can't resolve conflicts by fiat.

Sometimes only excessive intervention will stop visible hostilities. But even the power play is not enough: The underlying tension among the parties is likely to continue, and it can turn into passive aggression, political behavior, and backbiting.

Okay, you're not Solomon. So what's an appropriate role for you to play?

You may already know what you want the outcome to be. And you could just announce your view of the situation and let the chips of the relationship fall where they may. But it will be better for your team and the organization if you can help eliminate angry, argumentative behavior.

It's a Desk, Not a Throne

Okay, you're not Solomon. So what's an appropriate role for you to play?

Please don't ever send people back to their offices to hash it out like two siblings sent to their room to figure things out between them. Even among adults, if you send adversaries away to seek resolution by themselves, you'll usually get the same result you typically get with siblings: The one with more power will generally win. Then you might see gloating from the winner and ongoing sniping from the loser.

And please don't ever tell subordinates what I've heard from some frustrated managers: "If you can't work it out, I can't help you." It's your responsibility to see the situation through. Plus, if you don't take an active part, you'll probably get results you didn't expect and don't want.

The Manager as Referee

A stalled conflict won't improve much until the participants learn to communicate directly and cooperatively with each other, so don't let them take turns telling you their side of the story in private. Be sure to hear them out together, and don't permit bad behavior in the discussion.

Some of the necessary feedback and coaching may have to be taken offline to help the individuals learn to change their ineffective behaviors through role playing and working out tentative agreements — but don't let them use those discussions as a chance to win you over to their point of view.

Instead, facilitate the early discussions for clarity and as a way to lower the temperature. Ask, "So you're saying *this*?" "And your most important goal is *that*?"

Once a conflict gets to the point that it must be refereed by a manager, opponents sometimes downright refuse to budge, as if they can only hear the voice in their own head. They may seem completely oblivious to any of your suggestions for interacting.

When that's the case, try this: "I'm concerned that you're hearing your own positions so loudly that you're not actually taking in any of my suggestions. Let's try to look at this from a different angle. Is there another way we can look at this?"

After Push Comes to Shove

It's an advantage when you already know the individuals as human beings and are familiar with what kinds of interactions are generally comfortable for them.

Does one person need to hear concrete examples rather than norms and conceptual approaches?

Does another need to understand the details and consequences of the brighter future or of the unpleasant present in order to move away from the latter and toward the former?

These are examples of facilitation that can **help them talk with each other, not just with you**. If adversaries are truly stalemated, at some point (not too early or you might inadvertently shut down the dialogue) you'll need to declare your own position as part of asserting and maintaining your authority.

Your position doesn't have to reflect theirs. It may be time to establish your own view of the situation and make it clear that you expect them to comply — and specifically why and how. No matter how fierce their opposition, if the participants are operating in good faith, with patience and good communication skills, in most cases you will help them achieve a workable reconciliation.

In the next chapter, we examine just how much bosses can do about workplace conflict. Before intervening, it's important to first check for structural issues that may be fueling the conflict.

Chapter 3:

What is the Boss's Role in Workplace Conflict?

Executives ask me frequently why they have to get involved in their subordinates' conflicts. Why don't employees just work things out themselves like adults instead of acting like they're in high school?

I explain that regardless of their age or experience, team members sometimes need a little help. Why do their headaches have to become your headaches? Because by working with them to resolve their issues, you can get a better result for everyone than they could get for themselves. It's up to you to ensure progress: By redirecting their attention and energy to the work at hand, you create the potential for more innovation and more productivity.

Structural Causes of Conflict

Before you intervene between or among the parties, **check for structural problems that could be feeding interpersonal tensions**. Look for a trigger or a set of underlying conditions — separate from the specific individuals involved, their personalities, and their behaviors. For example, just because several people are furious and fighting with Jane doesn't mean that she's actually the source of the conflict.

If you want collaboration instead of confrontation, you'll need to reexamine how people are evaluated and paid.

Jane might be behaving in annoying ways because the standard system reports don't generate the correct information she's supposed to give to customers, and she has to bother three other departments to get the right data. All three of those managers may complain to you that she's distracting and bugging their people and just won't quit. But this isn't really a problem with Jane.

Tribal-Style Conflict

Sales vs. operations and customer service vs. the warehouse are typical tribal-style conflicts: Their departmental needs and goals often appear to be directly at cross-purposes, and their managers may be at odds because they're representing their constituencies instead of the larger company's purpose.

Try cross-training employees so that each department understands the true difficulties and constraints of the others' work. This educational content should be followed by a discussion focused on "caring about what the other cares about and how it contributes to overall goals." These two steps will often alleviate much of the presumed need for conflict between departments.

Reward structures could be an issue too. If teammates are evaluated and compensated on meeting conflicting goals and draw on a limited pool of resources, they may end up fighting each other to be successful in their jobs. If you want collaboration instead of confrontation, you'll need to reexamine how people are evaluated and paid.

Too Many Cooks Stirring Up the Broth

A different source of conflict may exist if too many cooks are all trying to stir a single, small, congested pot. If your culture requires that everyone be invited to meetings or cc'd on every email, it's very likely that from time to time, people will weigh in on issues where they have only limited expertise or peripheral responsibility — but where they can also cause lots of trouble.

Who are the necessary parties? Who are the hangers-on? Is anybody throwing extra fuel on the fire? Some managers seem to make a practice of playing favorites or bringing up unrelated issues or problems from the past. Employees who are desperate for attention, particularly from the most senior person in the room, will often (consciously or unconsciously) incite some kind of disagreement or turmoil so they can commiserate with the power source later.

You can get a better result for everyone than they could get for themselves.

So limit meetings and information flows to those who have a genuine interest or value. If the group harbors an instigator, change the meeting or email structure to eliminate the chance for them to stir up dissension — or coach that person to ease off on the comments.

Once you've exposed and eliminated these structural problems, what's left tends to be the real interpersonal conflict.

Our next chapter presents ways to avoid the downside of sharing in the workplace. When sharing works, it's very effective, but when it goes sour, managers have extra work to do.

Chapter 4:

Avoiding the Downside of Workplace Sharing

It's not easy to share responsibility. Successful organizational examples certainly exist — from official job-sharing to collective accountability for corporate goals and outcomes. But getting a given job or project done well depends on having both the appropriate structural underpinnings and the correct combination of people — with the right meshing of values, commitments, personal strengths, and styles.

What Happens When We Share?

In day-to-day life, there are two primary kinds of sharing: In the first case, two or more people receive something with the express understanding that the item being shared will be jointly enjoyed or managed, such as a shared inheritance or bank account, or shared custody. In the second case, one person gives something away for another's benefit, for instance, sharing the last piece of cake or sharing the stage — or to another's detriment, as in sharing germs.

Sharing can evoke a sense of loss if you have to give something up or a feeling of community and mutual support if you and a suitable partner are managing well together. Most often, however, we think of sharing as a positive because it benefits a greater number of people or lets more participants handle a given task or responsibility.

Good Examples of Sharing

Sharing credit for a responsibility or project reinforces a sense of teamwork and mutual goals by emphasizing "we" over "me." The participants get to feel good about the joint accomplishment, and more energy is generated for additional cooperation and collaboration.

Job-sharing can help retain experienced employees who might otherwise not be able to continue full-time employment. Job-sharing can also make a team or organization stronger, more flexible, and more resilient — while maintaining good bench strength and forming a sturdier base for eventual succession planning. But it can't be set up easily or casually; it requires colleagues who work well together and a thoughtful approach to responsibilities, scheduling, information-sharing, and communication.

Getting a given job or project done well depends on having both the appropriate structural underpinnings and the correct combination of people.

Shared space is more common than ever in open office plans and co-working facilities that give members access to workspaces, attendant services, and privileges — so long as they comply with the rules of good behavior. The majority of co-working participants enter a pre-existing community and adhere to a well-established set of agreements; the upfront agreement helps enforce and reinforce the co-working community's rules.

When Sharing Goes Sour

Unfortunately, when workplace sharing is not structured well, it can create new disruptions. For instance, I had a negative sharing experience when I was a very new manager. Another junior manager and I were promoted to co-managers of a new function without any special planning or mentoring.

One of our first responsibilities was to fire a problematic employee who was the legacy of the previous manager under the old structure. We decided when and where it would happen, and who would say which things.

At the appointed time, the employee and I showed up in the conference room, but my co-manager did not. After an awkward wait, I handled the termination alone. Subsequent co-managing with my colleague did not go much better; thankfully, we were eventually reorganized into new roles in which we both had individual responsibility and authority.

More generally, shared workspaces, where co-location is not by choice, can also be problematic.

In many organizations that have multiple shifts — call centers, warehouses, or even salons or kitchens — different groups of workers use the same space, and difficulties often arise when adjusting settings or locations for tools, supplies, and furniture. There can be significant variance in the occupants' preferences, and standards for how things should be set up and put away often vary widely, so the "sharing" system inherently includes great potential for friction.

Successful Sharing Starts with Careful Planning

How can we get the best value out of workplace sharing while minimizing the typical chafing and strife? There's no easy answer, because what we share is amorphous, subjective, individual, and personal. You can't just legislate it and expect immediate or thorough compliance. The details of agreements, schedules, and assignments won't be enough to eliminate friction and awkwardness if there isn't a deep and mutual commitment to goals and values.

People are different, and they like different things. They don't usually want to give something up, whether that means the placement of the desk equipment or their choices about how to do their work. But if they are dedicated to achieving joint outcomes that are beneficial to all participants, they may be able to negotiate and experiment their way to mutual satisfaction and success.

Looking ahead, Chapter 5 reveals some surprising truths about gaining consensus.
(It's not always positive.)

Chapter 5:

The Surprising — and Disappointing — Truth About Consensus

Consensus sounds so nice: Everyone agrees and moves forward together. "Kumbaya" seems like a good thing, right? But here's how one client described the way his company practices consensus (with my italics):

"We have to take all these teeny little baby steps to get to consensus, one painful meeting after another. So by the time we get close, we're all bought in, and we smile and swallow the Kool-Aid, *even if it tastes like battery acid*."

A Common Drawback to Consensus Management

In this client company, new decisions may only be taken after everybody gingerly and repetitively tests the waters. Managers ask themselves and each other: "Where and how have we been the most successful? Where will our leaders be comfortable enough and perceive the least possible risk of failure, confusion, and dissension?"

My client describes a current initiative as "pretty vanilla, but we're trying to make it extremely digestible so it's easy for people to try."

In "groupy" companies like this one, where there's a high value placed on avoiding conflict and getting along, there can be significant penalties for raising challenges, even if those challenges could strengthen decisions or initiatives. People with opposing views who speak up are often made to feel as if their comments — or they themselves — are a problem.

Another Consensus Predicament

Consensus is a core value in many start-ups and family-run or privately-held businesses. Some founders and owners declare that every employee's opinion matters. Unfortunately, this claim can translate into an expectation that every voice be heard equally on every subject, regardless of knowledge, skills or expertise.

Where there's a high value placed on avoiding conflict and getting along, there can be significant penalties for raising challenges.

Too many people just like to hear themselves talk, and some even use their personal anxieties or hesitance to hold back an entire group. Anyone who's willing to be the most difficult, oppositional, or critical can win in the end, even if their view is ineffectual or outright wrong.

Yet more dangerous is when cultural norms dictate that the group will not move forward until all participants are comfortable. This can become a formula for the group's weakest links, or its least satisfied or least agreeable members, to assume de facto leadership.

When it comes to business decisions, all opinions are not inherently equal — and they don't all need to be formally expressed as part of the decision-making process. Insisting that "everyone holds hands" may be a dodge to shield individuals from personal responsibility or blame for mistakes.

Are You Experiencing the Downside of Consensus at Your Company?

If your organization expends more effort on reaching consensus than on making good decisions, you've probably noticed some of these ill effects:

- Reduced creativity and suppressed innovation — even when leaders say they want it;

- An inherent lack of diversity of thinking, which leads to a stunning lack of diversity in people;

- Lots of wasted time caused by procrastination, extra meetings, and delays — leaving everyone overly busy while initiatives stall;

- Fear and anxiety about giving offense;

- Dread of backroom deals;

- Shallow, superficial thinking;

- Passive-aggressive behavior and communication at all levels;

- Turnover of the best and brightest once they figure out what's really going on.

If a requirement for consensus is holding your company back, you risk never moving forward with important organizational initiatives. In these cases, try moving toward agreement or alignment instead.

To follow up on the concepts in this chapter, Chapter 6 presents the "dance of disagreement" some employees practice on the way to potential alignment.

Chapter 6:
Here are New Steps to the Dance of Disagreement

At a recent meeting, I observed as team members wrangled over what should have been a straightforward process discussion. Not only did their disagreements about "the way things are supposed to be done" get heated and acrimonious, but all parties were also adamant that *their* way was exactly what the group had previously agreed to.

This is a normal bias: Whether we think the procedure should include steps 2, 9 and 47 or steps 2, 8 and 50, we all tend to believe that the "right way" is, of course, the way we do it.

How can you deal with such an overt and public disagreement about what are actually only slight variances? You can cut through a lot of messiness with the right open-ended questions.

Breaking Down the Choreography

Start by taking the broad perspective and ask: **What's actually our purpose or goal? What are we trying to accomplish?** If you don't have agreement about the big outcome, it's unlikely that you'll be able to reach agreement on the specifics, and you're probably setting up an argument in perpetuity.

Assuming you have agreement on the goal itself, you can start the discussion of the best way to accomplish it. It's often worthwhile to review the historical practice, which helps get everyone participating: What has our practice been?

Try mapping or diagramming each action or stage, and testing it against the big goal: Will this action help or hinder our ability to meet the goal? If there are competing or conflicting beliefs about the process, put each variation through this review.

Then consider whether each of the steps is optimal: **Is this step the most effective and the most likely way to ensure the outcome we want?** And is this step the most efficient, because it uses the fewest resources and causes the least friction or disruption in the system?

Judging the Performance

Keep the crucial user experience in mind. Assess the impact of the individual steps on the customers, audience, or recipients of the process. If possible, ask directly: As we've mapped it out here, will this procedure work for your constituents? You may have to sort the constituent population into sub-groups if they have differing needs or preferences — and test to see if the approach provides more or less value to each sub-group.

You can cut through a lot of messiness with the right open-ended questions.

Finally, circle back to the dynamics and process of the group. You'll want to find ways to deal with the acrimony and sense of hurt between the members and see if there's a way to work more in concert with each other and not in attack mode — but that's a different dance altogether.

Chapter 7 discusses how to create alignment by finding agreement when two people come from opposite sides.

How to Find Agreement When You Come from Opposite Sides

I'm very lucky to experience much less disagreement or outright conflict on the job than most people. Although my clients' views may differ from mine in many ways, it's implicit in our relationship that we're mutually committed to figuring things out together and coming to the strongest possible joint solutions.

But some of the folks I work with get involved in dozens of crucial disagreements every week as if disagreement is explicitly one of their job responsibilities. In fact, I often coach or counsel people who've been having the same long-running disagreement or underlying conflict for — I hate to say it — years.

There is a useful technique that can open a pathway to dialog.

I've observed and analyzed numerous disagreements as part of my consulting role and have helped people work through many of them. It's quite clear that **logic isn't enough to ensure collaboration**. Two equally-logical people can hold such completely different beliefs or represent such different positions that it feels like they'll never come to any kind of useful agreement.

Making the First Move

So how can you make a start when you truly need to accomplish something together but don't see eye to eye? Sometimes **it helps to work on the relationship itself, along with the issue**.

There's no way to force people to be comfortable as collaborators, and directing them to like each other is absolutely ineffective. But there is a useful technique that can open a pathway to dialog. It comes out of couples' and relationship counseling, so it's not usually identified as a workplace tool.

This couples' counseling approach won't overcome structural barriers, lack of competence, or bad intent. But it has workplace application when both sides are operating in good faith yet still can't seem to broach the wall that exists between them.

Creating a Connection

"Making a bid for connection" is how Dr. John Gottman — a psychologist renowned for analyzing the behaviors and expectations that make marriages and other intimate relationships successful — describes the process. One of the parties initiates a connection, tentatively, with a tiny action or communication to **try to establish a small but affirmative interaction**.

The other side may "turn away" by ignoring the bid, "turn against" in an attack, or deliver the desired outcome by "turning toward" and reciprocating with another genuine, positive communication or action. Whenever one person turns *toward* the other's bid for connection, both people are on stronger footing without necessarily having expressed anything at all about the content of the conflict.

It's usually best to start with the smallest, lowest risk bid you can. Make the hurdle so low that it's almost impossible not to at least accidentally clear it. "Can you believe the game last night?" is a very small bid; "Want to get a cup of coffee and discuss this?" is a larger one.

Raising the Ante

Once you've established tacit agreement that both sides are going to try to engage constructively, you can be more direct. At the first airing of a potential disagreement, make a stronger bid by asking kindly, "May I share a different perspective?" That gives notice that you do, in fact, disagree, but that you're willing to do it in the most respectful way possible, letting your opponent create the conditions for sharing. Plus, it sounds less threatening and more willing than "I disagree!" or "That's not the way it is!"

If you're getting a negative reaction to your input, you can make a slightly different bid: "Would *you* like to share a different perspective?" That makes clear your respect for the other party as a human being as well as your desire to hear what they have to say.

Patience is required to take these very small steps. But the more frequent and the larger the bids, the more likely it is that, over time, the relationship will develop, permitting other techniques for conflict resolution to begin taking hold.

In our next chapter, we examine four ways that team decision-making can derail. Finding a balance between rushing and over-thinking decisions is easier said than done.

Chapter 8:

Watch Out! Team Decisions Derail Under These Four Conditions

Conflicting assumptions, incompatible needs, differing work styles, and individual stressors can have a negative impact on group process, particularly when it comes to making decisions.

Some people need to come to a resolution so quickly and so urgently that they'll just try to get it over with — unless a colleague or leader takes pains to emphasize the big picture or the decision's long-term implications. Others like to spin out the possibilities so far that most decisions seem to linger, permanently.

Keep in mind that **whoever sets the ground rules for the discussion of the decision also effectively sets the framework for the decision itself**, as well as the parameters of its potential outcomes. So if you have a different view of what the decision should be about, you may need to sponsor a discussion that's a kind of prequel — "deciding what we need to decide."

Yes, it can be torturous to go over the same ground again. But if you don't, you might think that the issue has been put to rest — only to discover later that other participants believed different things about the decision and have taken conflicting actions based on those discrepant beliefs.

Here are four examples of common decision-making derailments:

1. Missing Context

If the process for decision-making is muddled — either because there's no clear leader or the leader isn't skillful at structuring or sponsoring the process — then the decision can happen at the wrong organizational level or at the wrong depth. People may focus too much on the trees — or worse yet, the details of the tree bark — instead of on the paths out of the forest.

2. Mismatched Frames of Reference

Junior or inexperienced team members sometimes have access to data that indicates a particular result, but more experienced senior team members may look at the same data and say, "No, no, that's not how it plays out. It actually will come out like *this*."

Whether "*this*" is a better or a worse result, the juniors are likely to assume that their seniors don't care about making data-based decisions. The juniors will also assume the seniors will just "go with their guts" if the seasoned people don't explain what other data they're using — statistical, experiential, historical, or subjective.

Several negative circumstances could follow: The junior people might start withholding crucial data that the seniors actually need to inform their experienced gut instincts; or worse, the juniors might start making gut decisions too. But since their guts aren't seasoned yet, their decisions may be wrong. Worst of all, the juniors may not trust the seniors or their decisions altogether if they believe the seniors are ignoring the data.

People may focus too much on the trees — or worse yet, the details of the tree bark — instead of on the paths out of the forest.

3. Worn-out Team Members

During periods of growth, change, or disruption, it can be exhausting to manage a comprehensive decision-making process that's expected to generate numerous decisions in short order. The team can be under too much pressure to produce.

One real-life example is a forum in which research was brought to bear and serious discussions took place as 42 different ideas were explored, fully vetted, and declared flawed. At the 11th hour, the group went with the 43rd idea. Did they agree to it because it was truly the best choice? No, they agreed because they were tired and the clock was ticking. The 43rd solution was probably no better than the previous 42 ideas, but the group had run out of steam.

4. Missed Signals

Even when the context has been clear and the decision process has been thoughtful, it can happen that insufficient care is taken to report out both the big concepts and the details of what the group said and meant. Although the decision might be the right one, its value can be severely undercut if the context and intent are not fully conveyed to the people who are expected to carry it out. The failure is typically blamed on the faulty implementation, without recognition of the lack of communication that caused it.

There are also numerous other forms of decision derailment. But not putting problems on the table is even more problematic. In the next chapter, we cover how — and how not — to handle that stage of discussion.

Chapter 9:

6 Ways Not to Put a Problem on the Table

Let's say you've identified a problem in your organization — something that's not working well or isn't working at all, something that you know should be fixed or changed. And let's say you've already analyzed all the costs that the organization will incur if the problem continues and what the benefits will be if you can eliminate it.

You really care about making the situation better, so you plan to raise this issue with the group of people who have the knowledge and understanding as well as the authority, the involvement, and the skin in the game to do something about it. But these folks are also likely to have *feelings* about the situation.

Focus on identifying the problem instead of whose behavior, conduct, speech, or attitude contributed to it.

So **how do you describe the problem without leveling accusations, ascribing fault, or laying blame?** And how can you create a supportive environment *around* the problem so that the crucial people can hear and accept what you're saying, incorporate your input into their worldview, and move forward to make changes or present alternative, realistic views of the situation?

Errors That Should Be Omissions

Here are some things to avoid when presenting the problem:

1. Do not talk about the people who have caused or perpetuated the problem and what's wrong with them.

2. Do not talk about the rank stupidity of the situation and how mind-boggling it is that it has been permitted to continue.

3. Do not question anyone's commitment, intent, or capability.

4. Do not make insulting statements about people "deserving what they get" as a way of responding to others' dissatisfaction.

5. Do not claim to represent all your colleagues who have ever complained about the same problem.

6. Do not claim to be the only one brave enough to bring this issue to everyone's attention.

In addition, do not pretend that you know all the answers or have never been at fault. If you think that you do have all the answers or that you've never been at fault, you are already making a big mistake, so go back and review your facts.

Instead, Be Part of the Solution

We all want to feel that we are relatively safe in, and have some control over, whatever our circumstances happen to be. If you've been making any of the errors listed above, you've effectively announced that you don't believe your listeners have control over their circumstances, or that if they once had control, they've messed it up. This will make them feel unsafe — and you'll have created exactly the conditions that undercut good listening or sound, thoughtful thinking.

- So stay neutral and calm in your communications and concentrate on process and structural causes.

- Focus on identifying the problem instead of whose behavior, conduct, speech, or attitude contributed to it.

- Explain the impacts of the problem and sketch out what outcomes would be more desirable than the current ones. If you can, connect the dots to specific unnecessary costs or the undermining of the mission in ways that allow everyone to see the impacts.

- Point out the limitations in structure, process, and procedures.

- Ask the big questions: What other impacts are there? What are the gaps between current conditions and desired outcomes? What are the levers that could create the change necessary to reach the desired outcomes?

Here are some more detailed factors you could share:

- The particulars of the situation — who, what, when, where, how, and how much — without focusing on the why, because the meanings are likely to be different for different people;

- The cost, timing, frequency, duration, and number of cases or incidents;

- The opportunities of low-hanging fruit vs. opportunities of greatest impact;

- The possible future impacts of the situation if it continues as is, and how any of the other factors may play out;

- The potential impacts of individual action vs. systemic change and the pros and cons of each;

- Any additional risks or exposures that could occur vs. the benefits of relief or improvement.

It's crucial to **encourage your audience to participate** in sharing new facts, contributing to assessments of loss or gain, and suggesting alternatives. Their involvement shifts the situation from one in which you're dumping a messy problem on the table for everyone to clean up, to one in which you've placed a puzzle on the table so you can all work on it together.

In Chapter 10, find out how to avoid the mortal combat of personal criticism. How you structure confrontations plays a key role.

Chapter 10:

How to Avoid the Mortal Combat of Personal Criticism

It's normal to be "conflict-averse." Most of us tend to try to avoid creating bad feelings among people. We shy away from anything that seems like it can't be helped, or isn't worth getting worked up over, because "It's not anything personal" or "He's just that way; he doesn't mean anything by it."

It's possible to express disagreement — even deeply-held, long-felt disagreement — without drama, if drama is not your style.

Plus, virtually nobody likes the way conflict looks — the reddened faces, the raised voices, the awkward aftermath in which no one meets anyone else's eyes — so we just *know* we don't want to go there.

But even when we suppress our conflicting views and feelings in hope of keeping the peace, or when we "go along to get along," we often create bad feelings anyway.

Don't Criticize — Complain Instead!

It's possible to express disagreement — even deeply-held, long-felt disagreement — without drama, if drama is not your style. Stick to conversation about facts and ideas, and avoid talking about people or personalities. Theoretically at least, facts and ideas can be introduced as concepts and hypotheticals, and then discussed with some neutrality.

Once you start talking about people — "the way they are" or "what's wrong with so-and-so" — you divide the world into *for* or *against* instead of bringing it together in a community of interest through *what if* and *how about*.

So rather than criticizing a situation or a person outright, try to position your negative content as complaints or objections. Here's the difference. By definition, criticism points out something that's unsatisfactory about the other person or what they do. Criticism is binary: It declares, "I'm right and you're not: You've been judged and found wanting."

But a complaint is the real "It's not about you, it's about me" conversation. A complaint describes the impact *on you* (or someone else) of something that is happening and *your* (or someone else's) reaction to that impact. A well-positioned complaint permits a much wider range of interpretation and response, and therefore feels much less like an attack than direct criticism does.

Ways to Structure Confrontation

When you're trying to hold a respectful confrontation, it's hard to craft language that feels natural and still gets your point across. Here are a couple of suggestions for opening the conversation. They give the other person plenty of room to explain and consider other approaches as well as preserving everyone's dignity:

- "You might not be aware that when you do X, it has a negative impact on me, my department, or the things I'm responsible for in the following way...Can you find another approach that won't create this problem?"

- "I was disappointed with the way X worked out...or my expectations really weren't met...or this didn't come out the way I expected. So it's possible that I wasn't clear enough...or I'm wondering if I wasn't clear enough when I explained what I wanted. Please hear me out."

Confrontational Alternatives

No two conflicts are the same, so your tactics should vary accordingly. Consider these alternative starting positions:

- *Feedback* — "Have you noticed X?" or "I need to make you aware of X."

- *Suggestions or recommendations* — "Here's something new for your department to consider

or try" separate from any judgments about current practice.

- *Options* — "Do you want to do X this way or that way? Here are some of the pros and cons of each…"

Remarkably, even *directives* from an appropriate authority can feel better than criticism: "Here's what we need in this situation. Here's why. Now go to it."

So long as there is no implied attack — "What's wrong with you that you didn't already know this?" — these alternatives can be used without damage to either party.

Next, we look at practical ways to disagree productively so that colleagues can elicit non-defensive, open-minded, thoughtful responses from each other.

Chapter 11:

These Tactics Will Make Disagreements More Effective

Disagreements and conflicts occur in every organization, no matter how high-functioning the team, how clear the mission, or how lovely the people. Unfortunately, **conflict-averse executives** who withhold their true opinions to avoid near-term discomfort usually end up **coping with bigger problems** in the long term. It's much more practical to learn to disagree effectively.

Skillful disagreement takes both thought and practice. Here are four different tactics for removing some of the risk, discomfort, and potential wastefulness of disagreement and conflict:

1. Avoid Good-Guy/Bad-Guy Classifications

Don't make types out of people, and don't apply stereotypes to them. It's easy to prejudge how people will behave or how things will go based on your past experience or personal taste. But everyone involved is a unique human being in very particular circumstances, so don't close your mind to the possibility that things could go very differently from your expectations.

Examine your perceptions and logic. Imagine having the same problems with *other* people: Would the conflict feel the same way? Your perceptions of an individual's standpoint may be based on your own assumptions about that person rather than their actual positions and behavior. Be conscientious about not grouping people into types or roles based on your notion that they agree or disagree with you.

2. Practice Fact-Checking and Value Check-Ins

Are your facts in conflict with someone else's facts, or is it your interpretations of those facts that don't match? Both sides may have the same data, but interpretations can vary based on the process used to gather information and the lens used to review the situation. You might even be using the same terms while ascribing different expectations, beliefs, and meanings to them.

To have a productive discussion, you may need to go back and forth, checking on the consistency of your mutual goals, the values that underpin your beliefs about how things should be done, and even your data — just to ensure you're all working in the same direction.

3. Establish an Etiquette of Disagreement

People sometimes avoid disagreement because they're afraid of how truly upset they'll be if they can't come to a mutually beneficial resolution. Or they may fear that one side will triumph and the other will lose abjectly. Instead of being resigned to an ongoing deadlock or stalemate, structure a procedure that everyone agrees to use for ascertaining the crucial elements of the conflict and reaching an outcome that has mutual benefit:

Conflict-averse executives who withhold their true opinions to avoid near-term discomfort usually end up coping with bigger problems.

- Articulate the nature of the problem in a factual, measured way, without accusations or moralizing.

- Identify the preferences, goals, and data underlying each position.

- Discuss which aspects have the greatest impact and highest priority for both the organization and the individuals involved.

- Find the elements of the situation on which both sides hold the same view — or at least can see each other's points of view.

- Have all parties collaborate on constructing a resolution that accommodates everyone's crucial needs.

Remember that what *feels* like conflict might really be either or both parties worrying out loud about what could go wrong and what the implications could be.

4. Attend Carefully to Language and Tone

Some situations require great tact. In other cases, blunt candor can actually be appreciated. Consider the actual opening lines below, each used by a different person trying to re-engage with others after having been in disagreement. Without knowing the specifics, which of these approaches would you expect to be the most effective for maintaining a productive dialog?

- "You didn't get what I was saying yesterday…"

- "You and I were talking at cross purposes when…"

- "I'm sorry I wasn't clear in our earlier conversation. What I wanted to get across was…"

If your language declares your judgment that the other person was dead wrong or too stupid to understand (the first example) or even that the disagreement was as much the other party's fault as it was yours (the second example), it can be much harder to elicit a non-defensive, open-minded, thoughtful response from the other side. And that kind of response is exactly what you're after!

Now that we've covered practical ways to disagree productively, the next chapter specifies the steps to clarifying assumptions in a conflict.

Chapter 12:

Why and How to Clarify Your Assumptions in a Conflict

We may talk about the importance of not making assumptions, but we all make them automatically, all the time.

We tend to believe that other people are more like us than not. This explains some of why we feel so outraged in a conflict situation or when other people don't do things the way we do. People may also feel outraged when other people don't want, feel, speak, behave, or care in approximately the same way.

Making assumptions explicit doesn't mean using them as weapons.

It's normal to assume that other people are the same as we are (despite the fact that they're disagreeing intensely), and then wonder what's wrong with their reaction. What's wrong with them — because the "right" view is so clear to us? But this line of thinking leads to entrenchment of views and accompanying attacks or withdrawals.

Operating Under the Assumption

Here's some of the faulty logic that operates just below consciousness:

- We're both good people; we both have good intentions; so naturally we both think (roughly) the same thoughts despite our apparent differences in upbringing, job, religion, personal taste, etc.

- I've just declared the way I look at something as the normal/correct/right way.

- Despite our thinking the same thoughts (see above) and therefore both knowing the normal/correct/right way, this person is thinking/doing something else! What's wrong with them?

- I can't let this go on. I must bring them back to the right path.

If both sides are reacting like this, they become more fixed in their opposing takes on the situation.

So when you're explaining your point of view, it helps to **think of the person you're having the conflict with as someone from another culture**, because in a sense they are. You're not assessing things the same way they are, and you're not living out the same expectations set; instead, you're manifesting uncomfortable differences. Once you recognize that the other person is different from you, the need to make your underlying assumptions explicit becomes easier to recognize, too.

Show Your Cards

Making assumptions explicit doesn't mean using them as weapons ("I assume you never cared about X"). It means using them to make sure the other person can understand where you're coming from ("I'm concerned that you might not have known about my view of X"). If you explain well, and the other person is open and listens well, then they may be able to see things from your perspective.

Here's a way to approach this kind of conversation as a respectful partner (use your own words, of course):

1. Here's what I want and why (concrete description).

2. I also want you to understand my thinking so you can incorporate it into your view, although I don't expect it to take precedence over your view (respectful request for attention and understanding).

3. Here are all the built-in assumptions I carry around that have convinced me that I should be able to have it this way (full disclosure about your own beliefs and prejudices).

4. Now that you've heard my behind-the-scenes thinking, in what ways are you or are you not convinced? (Probe to see if you're making yourself clear and if there's any progress.)

The process might seem a little stilted, and it is — that's because it's artificial. It takes a lot of practice to make it feel more natural.

This alternative approach runs through the same stages but frames them a little differently:

1. Here's an example of how I think things could work and the assumptions that are behind my request.

2. Are you comfortable with my example? Did it make sense to you?

3. Are all my assumptions clear?

4. So what's your reaction to the approach I'm taking?

The funny thing about really clarifying your assumptions: Every once in a while you may find that you don't need to make the point that you thought was so important when the confrontation began, or that you don't really need the outcome you were previously convinced you absolutely had to have. **Sometimes our assumptions are faulty or incomplete** — even when they're about ourselves.

In Chapter 13, we discuss how to use shared values and empathy to defuse conflict and attempt a kind of reconciliation.

Chapter 13:

How to Use Shared Values and Empathy to Resolve Conflict

In Chapter 1 on workplace conflict, we looked at the impact of personal differences and style as well as the roles that different individuals might take in instigating or sustaining a conflict. The next step in bringing people closer together is to look for what the antagonists have in common and find the relevant purpose that they share.

Too often, workplace conflict results in a binary outcome or a zero-sum game: There's one winner and everyone with a divergent viewpoint loses. But you can aim for an alternate result: one that benefits the greatest number of people or creates the greatest good while making sure no one suffers unnecessarily.

Identify a common purpose even if you don't yet have any clue about how to reach it together.

The goal is to have and to express differences of opinion, even extreme differences of opinion, and still come out whole at the end — even if the eventual resolution does not go your way.

Is There a "Greater Good" in the Situation?

All sides need to have reconciliation as a goal, not just their own best interests, and the participants need to realize that reconciliation *is* in their own best interests. Once that commitment is present, specific aspects of communication can come into play.

It's usually possible to identify a common purpose even if you don't yet have any clue about how to reach it together. Just look for the values and ideals the participants share as part of their mutual affiliation with the organization.

Sometimes they share a common set of values that are relevant to the organization's mission or vision. For example, the overarching desire to ensure a seamless customer experience can serve as a launching pad for figuring out how we wish to treat each other: If we don't collaborate well

internally, the customer may be ill-served. Or, the organization may have a declared value about being a superior place to work.

Creating a Basis for Communication

It's important to **remember that the people you disagree with are not you and don't feel the same way you do**. If that's too hard to adopt as your operating premise, just try being intentionally curious. You can simply wonder why a reasonably decent and intelligent person would want or be thinking something that seems so contrary to you.

Logic dictates that, if the people you're in conflict with are not evil or wholly stupid, they must have a good reason to think the way they do. Or at least, they must have what looks like a good reason to them. So it's your job to try to find out what that good reason is.

Because you and they are not the same, your intuition may not be enough. You may need to ask directly what's going on: "I'm sorry, I'm probably not seeing this from your point of view. Could you please explain more about why that issue is so important to you?"

Listen for specific requests, fears, and desires — not just for people positioning themselves in absolute terms ("because that's the kind of person I am").

Practice empathy for your opponents and their points of view:

- "I may not want what you want, but I can see why you want it."

- "I may not want what you want, but I hope there's a way you can get it (without my losing anything/even if I have to lose something)."

The combination of curious listening and empathetic speech will help dispel the negative, damaging atmosphere that conflict can foster. Respectful communication, no matter how tentative, creates an opportunity for building — or rebuilding — a more positive sense of relationship and a bit of optimism about continuing the dialogue.

Read on for a checklist and additional encouragement to help you handle the conflicts in your workplace.

Chapter 14:

A Road Map to Help You Move from Conflict to Collaboration

Throughout this guide, we've assumed that the opponents in each conflict were working in good faith. But not all conflicts are straightforward disputes that can be resolved merely with extra focus and new data. Some people may take the attitude that they absolutely cannot work together amicably.

Before you fall into the abyss of frustration and stress that comes with being a permanent umpire, try to work things out the old-fashioned way — through collaborative communication and a commitment to the higher ideals of the organization. This checklist will help you retrace your steps through the process of managing and resolving conflict:

❏ Remind opponents that they're not the same — it's okay to see the situation from different vantage points, and they should be sensitive to these differences in each other.

❏ Restate the highest purpose of the organization, team, or project to create common ground; identify as many shared values as possible.

❏ Articulate the facts of the conflict to give participants another chance to resolve or disavow it.

❏ Help the opponents in the conflict verbalize what they mean and what they want — and remember that these things may differ from the positions they are taking.

❏ Invite or excuse other participants as necessary to streamline or amplify the content or process.

❏ Assess the various conflict styles and coach the opponents as necessary to ensure good behavior and clarity.

❏ Identify and resolve any structural or cultural barriers to an agreement.

❏ Clarify disagreements over facts versus beliefs or positions.

❏ Probe or facilitate to find areas of tacit or partial agreement to build on.

❏ List options or new approaches for each area where agreement does not yet exist, and look for new aspects that might form part of a larger pact.

❏ Help craft declarations of the steps for going forward in compromise or consensus.

❏ Give the participants concrete praise about their contributions to the agreement.

❏ Monitor implementation and continue praising; revisit any stage of the process as needed.

As you apply the concepts above, **try not to feel discouraged if the process is slow**. Dealing with people who can't let go of conflict usually takes more time than you'd really want to devote to it, but it's worth it if you can eliminate repeat refereeing assignments.

No More Benefit of the Doubt

Unfortunately, some people so desperately need to feel in control, or need attention so badly, that they're willing to act like the enemy. Some people like the excitement of fighting. These cases may require a greater application of raw authority.

Not all conflicts are straightforward disputes that can be resolved merely with extra focus and new data.

If a participant has a history of throwing up roadblocks by intentionally misleading or manipulating people or behaving passive-aggressively, you need a shift in tone and perspective. Instead of being generous and saying, "I'm sorry, I don't think I'm getting this from your point of view," toughen up a bit. Say: "I'm really not getting your point." In the face of self-serving, manipulative behavior, you have to be explicit about what is being said indirectly.

Rephrase their indirect or self-serving language to be as concrete as possible: "So you want Tony to give up A even though you're not planning to give up a single bit of B. Am I understanding you correctly? I may not be, because you already agreed to help find alternatives that both you and Tony could live with."

Letting Go

It's rare, but there are times when individuals are so convinced that they should have their way that you can't broker a peace or convince them to behave better. And it can happen that two wonderful employees, for foolish or rational reasons, just can't work things out together.

Be sure that you're not inciting any of these undesirable situations. Then you can consider the opponents' refusal or inability to collaborate successfully as negative performance information — the kind that has impact on their reviews, consideration for promotion, and ongoing employment.

It's unfortunate that sometimes the only way to end a conflict completely is when one of the participants is no longer in a role that permits their participation. But it's crucial to reach the point at which intentional conflicts can be resolved or at least reduced, both for the success of your organization, and also for the health of your employees.

About Liz Kislik

Liz Kislik is a management consultant and executive coach, and a frequent contributor to *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes*. Her TEDx "Why There's So Much Conflict at Work and What You Can Do to Fix It" has received more than a quarter of a million views. She specializes in developing high performing leaders and workforces, and for 30 years has helped family-run businesses, national nonprofits, and Fortune 500 companies like American Express, Girl Scouts, Staples, Janssen Pharmaceuticals, and Highlights for Children solve their thorniest problems.

Liz's work has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal's* Morning Download, the *Washington Post's* Work Advice column, *Business Insider*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Her articles have been included in Harvard Business Press books *Guide to Motivating People*, *Dealing with Difficult People*, and *Guide to Power and Impact*, as well as in *Entrepreneur*, the *European Financial Review*, and the *Forward*.

She is a member of Marshall Goldsmith's 100 Coaches initiative, which brings together the world's top coaches and thinkers; has taught at Hofstra University and New York University; and is a frequent podcast guest. She received her BA from Yale University and earned an MBA in Management from NYU.

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