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## MANAGING CONFLICT

*With More Success and Less Stress\**

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Conflict is tough. Even when we feel very confident, it's still tough. Many of us agonize over whether to engage the other party or let the situation pass. And, if we decide to engage, we agonize over how to approach the situation. This is because engagement almost always means a difficult conversation - a conversation about something we care about and in which the outcome is uncertain. It's often a conversation in which we feel vulnerable or awkward, in which our self-esteem is on the line.

Sometimes we wonder if we can be so tactful, so overwhelmingly pleasant, that everything will turn out fine. But will it? Will we be taken advantage of? Will we feel like doormats? On the other hand, we wonder if we should tell them what we're really thinking at the risk of starting a fight. We worry about what it will mean to our on-going relationship?

We need a way out of these dilemmas. We need a way to handle difficult conversations more effectively and with less anxiety. We need a way to deal creatively with tough problems while still treating people with respect and dignity. The key to successful conflict management is, in part, *how we think* about the conflict and, in part, *how we conduct ourselves*. What follows are the elements of an approach to conflict management designed to help you to do it better and with less stress.

### Three Conversations in One

The Harvard Negotiation Project Team believes there is a common structure to all difficult conversations. They contend that there are actually three conversations going on simultaneously, and that the art of engaging someone about a conflict is the ability to operate effectively in all three realms.

The three conversations are:

#### 1. What Happened?

Generally we have a conflict because there is disagreement about who said what, who did what, who's right, who meant what, who's to blame. There are almost always things we don't know about the situation, and particularly about how the other person views the situation. In fact, we don't know what we don't know. Yet we so often assume we know it all. That is a fatal flaw in approaching any conflict.

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\* Much of this is drawn from an excellent book called *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Really Matters*, written by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patten, and Shelia Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. They have also produced a four-tape cassette on the same subject.

## 2. Feelings

Having a conflict without feelings is like holding a musical without music. Conflicts evoke all kinds of emotions. We feel anxious, threatened, vulnerable, angry, and frustrated. Our internal conversation goes something like this:

- Are my feelings valid?
- Should I acknowledge them or deny them?
- Should I put them on the table or check them at the door?

We are also concerned about the other person's feelings. What if they're hurt? What if they become angry with me? I don't want to inflame them? There's a part of us that says: "Just leave it be". It is useful to remember in situations like these that feelings follow thought – the story we tell ourselves about what happened. As Roger Fisher and William Ury note: "Ultimately conflict lies not in objective reality, but in people's heads."\*

## 3. Identity

Because our self-image is on the line we fear how a difficult conversation will make us feel about ourselves. What if...

- I'm rejected?
- I'm not taken seriously or dismissed?
- I'm viewed as inadequate, incompetent, not up to the task?

We conduct an internal debate on whether we're competent or incompetent, a good person or bad person, worthy or unworthy. This determines whether we feel balanced or off center.

### The "What Happened" Conversation

This is the vitally important diagnosis phase of managing a conflict. It's about gaining insight into how we and the other party perceive the situation. Perception is everything. There are a few things that get us into trouble in this phase.

#### 1. The Truth Assumption - Who's right?

- Conflict is almost never about getting the facts right. It's about conflicting perceptions, interpretations and values.
- "The Truth" is simply one more argument
- In reality there is "my truth" and "your truth"

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\*Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*

- We both have our own stories...we see what we want to see; we pick out those things that confirm our preconceived views.
- We can manage conflict better if we understand the other person's story well enough to see how their conclusions make sense within that story, and then help them to understand our story.
- The only way we can understand the other's story is to be **curious**, to **listen**, to ask questions, to probe.
- Understanding their story doesn't mean we have to accept or reject it just means learning about what they mean.

## 2. **Intentions** – Who Meant What?

- We often assume we know the intentions of the other party when we don't.
- As the Harvard Negotiation Project Team says: "The truth is intentions are invisible. We assume them from the other person's behavior...we invent them."\*  
For example:
  - We feel diminished...we assume they are trying to put us down.
  - We feel left out...we assume they are intentionally excluding us.
- There is a very strong tendency to assume the worse about the other person. Moreover, we take it up a notch. We not only attribute bad intentions, but we start to believe that he or she is a "bad person"...or "on a power trip", or "selfish".

## 3. **Blame** - Who's at Fault?

- When we try to affix blame, the assumption is that we can't resolve the conflict until we determine who is at fault - a very faulty assumption. The authors contend that, "talking about fault is similar to talking about truth – it produces disagreement, denial and little learning"\*. The person being blamed spends great amount of energy defending himself or herself.
- Another way to approach conflict is to consider the **contribution** each of us has made to the situation.
- This means finding out how our actions have contributed to the other person's thinking and actions.

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\*Stone, Patten and Heen, *Difficult Conversations*.

## Techniques for Engaging

The following are some guidelines for engaging the other party about the conflict (having that difficult conversation). The order is important, but not crucial.

1. **The Opening** – There is a tendency to simply jump into conversations. When we do this we typically begin inside our story. We present the problem from our perspective, triggering the very kinds of reactions we had hoped to avoid. Here's an example of an opening of a tense conversation between two brothers:

*"Paul, if you contest Dad's will, it's going to tear the family apart."*

What's the implicit message being conveyed here? "Your selfish, ungrateful and don't care about the family." We trigger the other person's identity conversation from the very outset, and what we get is defensiveness. The author's suggest beginning from the *Third Story*. The Third Story is one that a keen observer and an impartial third party would tell, someone who sees both sides as having valid concerns. But we don't have to be a third party mediator to start with the third story. Going back to the dispute over the will, the opening might go something like this:

*"Paul I'd like to talk to you about Dad's will. You and I obviously have different understandings about what Dad intended, and of what's fair to each of us. I want to understand why you see the things you do, and to share with you my perspective, and my feelings. I have strong fears about what going to court would mean for the family, and I suspect you do too."*

Openings using the Third Story include both perspectives and invites joint exploration.

Another way to open the conversation is to begin with an *acknowledgement* of the other person's situation. It is simply trying to state what it must be like for that person. The intent is to empathize, to convey that you care about what they are dealing with. For example:

*"I would guess you must be under some real pressure to meet the needs of a client that can't quite make up its mind..."*

2. **Stop, Listen, Learn**. When you start with the Third Story or an acknowledgement you need to be ready to listen, to understand their story, their struggle, their intentions, and what you (or others) might have done to contribute to the situation. This is learning about "What Happened". There is an overwhelming tendency to tell them your story first, and a fear that if they get theirs out first, it will influence the outcome of the conflict. This is where you need to show great patience. Listening first can change the whole tenor of the conversation.

3. **Speak for Yourself With Clarity and Power.** While it is essential that you understand the other person, that person also needs to hear your story. You need to give your perspective by going to the very heart of the matter – what matters most to you:

“For me, what this is really about is...”

“What’s important to me is...”

The authors suggest a few rules for speaking directly and with clarity:

- Say what you mean: don’t make them guess
- Avoid easing in – e.g., “Do you think you’ve really done as much as you could have?”
- Don’t present your perspective as *the* truth
- Let them know where your conclusions come from
- Don’t exaggerate with “always” and “never”
- Ask how they see it differently, and why

It also helpful to ***Explain the Impact*** their actions are having on you (or others).

*“Here’s the dilemma from my point of view...if the design is late, it means the team will need to spend the weekend doing all the details. When they’re under the gun like that, they inevitably make mistakes. And, if those mistakes aren’t caught, it makes us all look inept in the eyes of the client. It is also very frustrating for the team.”*

4. **Jointly Solving the Problem** – This requires seeing the conflict as a problem to be solved, jointly – as if we were sitting side-by-side, not across from each other. The goal is to invent an option that meets both their interests and yours. It often means trying out several options before you arrive at one that works:

*“Here’s what we might do...”*

*“Here’s one option...”*

5. **Coming to an Understanding** about next steps. It is important to restate any agreement on what each of you are going to do and when it will be done. This is a check both for clarity and commitment. If there are still points of disagreement, it is helpful to name them and pick a time when you can get back to discussing them. But very likely there are actions you agree on.