



The 7 Principles of Conflict Resolution

How to Resolve Disputes, Defuse Difficult Situations and Reach Agreement

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Mediator Louisa Weinstein offers seven principles you can apply to confront and resolve any conflict. To deal with a conflict, she suggests, move beyond your feelings of anxiety. Don't let a conflict escalate; instead, try to diagnose the reasons behind it so you can help resolve it. How you use language can either accentuate a conflict or defuse it by using “deep or expansive listening.” Take a moment to consider people’s real meanings and to go beyond their immediate words so you can focus on the topics they’re avoiding. Much of Weinstein’s advice revolves around bypassing your initial defensive reflexes. Human resource practitioners and budding mediators, in particular, will find her advice useful.

Take-Aways

- To deal effectively with conflict, you must become at ease with it.
- Conflict, at its simplest, amounts to an argument or disagreement between groups, individuals or countries.
- A potent, carefully thought-out resolution process can transform a conflict into new possibilities, although most people in a conflict aren’t aware of that option.
- How you use language in a conflict can either defuse or accentuate it.
- Most people tend to adopt their friends’ perceptions about a conflict.
- People generally react instinctively and do not think through how they respond.
- You can never know what you will encounter in a conversation. However, if you prepare, you can be ready for a difficult talk.
- Create a context in which people can accept their roles in a conflict.
- Your success in helping other people deal with conflict depends in part on your awareness of how you handle conflict in your life.
- Carefully consider whether you have the financial and personal inclination to pursue a conflict.

Summary

Confronting Conflict

To deal effectively with conflict, you must become at ease with it and understand that you can manage it. However, if you seek to avoid or ignore conflict, you can create a dangerous situation. You, in effect, put a constraint on something that is already under high pressure.

“Critical to understanding and resolving conflict is the need to become comfortable with it as something that we might often encounter and that we can always overcome.”

Scientists suggest that seven “instincts” drive humanity: “seeking, anger, fear, panic, care, pleasure/lust and play.” Seeking drives you to investigate your surroundings to discover what you lack. If you want to create effective and innovative solutions in a situation of conflict, you need to keep this instinct alive. Be aware that extreme anxiety can disable the seeking instinct. To deal with a conflict, you need to move beyond feelings of anxiety. Play can help. Play lets you explore innovative ideas without having to select only one solution. You can explore different options without the pressure of having to get it absolutely right.

“Many of our conflicts could be avoided if we practiced deep or expansive listening with the other person.”

Conflict amounts to an argument or disagreement between groups, individuals or corporate or governmental entities. The roots of a particular conflict can stem from insignificant factors. If participants in a conflict don’t address small issues, the disagreement can become much more serious. Most people dislike and strive to avoid conflict; they also avoid people who don’t mind conflict. However, they don’t take into account that potent, carefully thought-out resolution processes can transform a conflict into new possibilities and reveal fresh options that might not have emerged if the conflict hadn’t arisen.

Regaining Your Balance

You could find it easy to differ with others, but be wary of unintended outcomes, such as having your dispute end up in court. Note that you might have inadvertently contributed to the conflict by ignoring a number of smaller, accumulating issues over time. If you want to change your tactics, you must make a deliberate choice. That shift could feel uncomfortable because you may not know the risks involved. Others could blame you or take advantage of you. Despite your efforts, you might not succeed in resolving the issue. The uncertainties these factors raise help explain why some conflicts continue unresolved for many years, despite both parties’ good intentions.

“Conflict is generally not a word that most of us like to apply to ourselves. We may want to avoid making something out of nothing.”

How you use language in a conflict can either defuse or accentuate it. Don't let a conflict escalate; instead, try to diagnose the reasons behind it so you can help resolve it. If you regard a conflict as a hard-to-penetrate conundrum, you might inflate it into something grander and more difficult than it needs to be. When you choose to deal with a conflict can make all the difference. If you address a conflict early in its gestation, you can create more space for a possible resolution. Remain alert to the possibility that disagreements simply sometimes work themselves out. With that in mind, take care not to blow an argument out of proportion.

Personal Coaching

Most people tend to adopt their friends' perceptions about a conflict. They might enroll on their friends' side and go to war with people on the other side. A "personal conflict coach" can assist people in a conflict and help them find a way out of it. Managers, team members or community members can act as coaches. How the conflict coach functions can vary depending on the context. The people in the conflict could choose to have a casual relationship with the coach or to ask the coach to guide them step-by-step through the conflict. Resolving the conflict is not the coach's responsibility. Instead, he or she should try to assist the process of resolution by helping everyone involved find acceptable options.

"When we seek to suppress or deny conflict, the simple fact is that it escalates in the same way as putting a lid on a boiling pan."

You can defuse conflicts by using "deep or expansive listening." Go beyond the most immediate utterances of the other people and the way they carry themselves. Instead, pay attention to the topics they skate over or avoid. Often, those topics turn out to be the true roots of the conflict. Appreciate other people's feelings and defer judgment.

The Importance of Mediation

In mediation, a neutral person seeks to help the parties in a conflict come to a mutually acceptable solution, but he or she does not provide guidance. The parties to the conflict must agree to mediation. Because of the voluntary nature of the process, the participants can reevaluate what lies before them and the options they have. Mediation requires confidentiality. This applies specifically to any discussion between the mediator and the parties involved.

Seven Principles

To resolve conflicts, heed these seven principles:

1. "Acknowledge the Conflict"

If you do not accept that a dispute exists, you risk letting it grow more severe. You can question yourself to see if you have accepted the existence of a conflict. Do you find yourself worrying

about the situation at night? Do you find yourself seeking to avoid someone? Do you find yourself gossiping about that person? If you find yourself answering yes to any of these questions, you could be embroiled in a conflict.

“The language we use in a conflict situation can determine the escalation or otherwise of that situation.”

That discovery does not mean you have to try to resolve the situation immediately. It does indicate that you should accept the conflict as a current predicament. Recognizing that you are in the conflict – whether you want to be or not – will help lift a likely cloud of indecision hanging over you. You will see things more clearly and start to deal with your conflict. Confronting a conflict requires courage. You need to discover what motivates you and respond in a mature way. You must recognize that your differences might come from trivial causes. You might take offense at something another person said, or feel that a colleague has gone on a holiday at an inappropriate time. Any number of factors might have set you off.

“Collaborating is an assertive and co-operative approach and is at the opposite end of the scale to avoiding a situation.”

You might not address a conflict in the outside world because the nature of the conflict highlights your need to resolve your own “internal conflicts.” Young people have aspirations for their lives. However, in time, these objectives can seem unrealistic because they conflict with demands such as earning money and supporting a family. This generates internal conflict. When you encounter a problem in the outside world, your internal conflicts can surface and determine how you respond. Once you begin to understand your own conflicts you can make more sensible decisions.

2. “Take Control of Your Response”

When you feel emotionally overwhelmed, try to control your reactions, especially if they begin to lead you in a harmful direction. Most people react instinctively and that typically means that they do not think through how they respond. And that may mean they will not act sensibly. If you decide to take action in your conflict, think clearly about what confronts you, your emotional predilections and the choices before you. First take a break. This gives you a moment to evaluate your position and decide how to act. In Eric Berne’s book, *Games People Play*, he sets out his ideas about “transactional analysis.” He describes the “ego states” of “parent, adult and child” that people pass through in dealing with others. If you can move into an adult state in a conflict you can see its issues in context and make the most thoughtful choices.

3. “Apply the Resolution Framework for Difficult Conversations”

To use the first stage of the resolution framework, prepare for the conversation and then gear up with the right tools for the conversation itself. Take these steps:

- **“Manage your physical and emotional response”** – By focusing on your bodily feelings, you can manage the situation you encounter advantageously. Listen to your breath and heartbeat. Breathe slowly to calm your body.
- **“Write down your initial fears, wants and needs”** – If you write down your apprehensions about a situation you reduce the need to discuss it with anyone else.
- **“Change perspectives and see the bigger picture”** – To deal with a difficult situation, accept responsibility for how you act and respond. That means accepting the consequences of your actions, so consider how you might act and what consequences your actions might provoke.
- **“Get your facts straight”** – Prepare yourself with correct information so you do not err when you enter into a conversation. Make sure your emotions don’t lead you to distort the facts of the situation.
- **“Identify and think through outcomes and options”** – A challenging situation could open up new territory. Think through the options that await you and the other person.

“Any difficult conversation will include a negotiation, and in any negotiation it is helpful to know the boundaries before we go in.”

You never know what you will encounter in a conversation. In the second stage of applying the resolution framework, practice expansive listening to make sure that you give the other person a chance to speak before rushing to premature judgment. Use “summarizing and paraphrasing techniques” to clarify the situation. This means saying back to other people in your own words what you think they just said. Then, if you misunderstood, you give them a chance to clarify. This also demonstrates that you are paying attention.

“The most effective agreements are generally those that have been carefully constructed rather than imposed.”

You can also attempt “reframing.” Try to present the situation using a new perspective. Inevitably, your own values could influence how you reframe. However, those who are listening will know if you distort what they intend to say. Go beyond listening and heed the words people use. Watch their body language and whether they seem uncomfortable about certain subjects. Give them time to reveal whatever is on their minds.

4. “Manage the Resolution – the Soft Mediation Assignment”

You can act as a “resolution agent” in situations where the conflicting sides have not become intransigent. A resolution agent undertakes many of the same activities as a conflict coach or a mediator. Unlike other roles in conflict resolutions, the resolution agent has an interest in helping the conflicting sides come to an agreement. The resolution agent needs to construct an environment in which the opposing sides can trust each other and the resolution agent.

“When we are empathizing with someone else’s feelings it is much harder to feel like a victim to them. They stop being a tyrant and become a human being.”

Deliver a speech to the discordant parties that sets out your approach. Explain your perspective and reinforce your neutrality. Set out the options you see so the parties to the conflict know what to expect from you. Help them set boundaries, set an agenda and arrange joint meetings. Help create “SMART agreements,” which are “Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-bound.” The parties will then subscribe to the agreements rather than accept terms under duress.

5. “Build a Culture of Early Conflict Resolution”

Create a context in which people can accept their role in a conflict and use the situation to educate themselves. With this approach, you can add versatility and efficiency to your firm and reduce emotional and legal conflicts. Implementing such an approach calls for organizational culture change. It means adopting new ways of thinking and new processes. This takes time and generates resistance. Be patient.

6. “Walk the Walk”

As you learn more about conflict resolution, consider how you deal with conflict in daily life. Your success in helping other people handle it depends on your level of awareness of how you handle it yourself. Use the “Can Inventory” to gain clarity about a conflict: First you can become conscious of conflict, then you can acknowledge it and then you can act to resolve it. Encourage your colleagues to learn to manage conflict resolution as a way of strengthening their leadership skills.

7. “Engage the Safety Net”

You may encounter situations where “informal conflict resolution” doesn’t work. Evaluate your options before you act. Get the best legal advice about the strength of your position. Consult with subject matter experts. Reevaluate your business objectives. You might decide to take legal action to reinforce the impression that you plan to take a tough position.

Setting Your Priorities

Examine your financial and personal priorities to see if you have the inclination to pursue a fight. Consider mediation as a way to deal with problems without having to resort to the legal process. Though typically informal, mediation presents a path to resolution. Decide if it might work in your situation. For mediation to work, the person on the other side of the conflict must communicate with you readily. Success depends on using the tools of conflict resolution to attain clarity and to make sensible decisions.

About the Author

Experienced mediator and trainer **Louisa Weinstein**'s background is in corporate and private equity law, public sector consultancy and social enterprise.



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