

HOW TO MANAGE CONFLICT: SIX ESSENTIALS FROM HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS TO THE BOARDROOM, THESE TIPS WORK

No. 1-18

Afraid of conflict? You wouldn't be human if you weren't. However, if you train your brain to openly face conflict and negotiate win-win outcomes, you will grow your leadership effectiveness enormously. Managing conflict will create stronger bonds in a team, encourage beneficial business partnerships and improve your ability to inspire and engage. It is also a key to generating the creativity and innovation necessary to lead in today's often turbulent markets.

As a hostage negotiator of over 45 years, my experience has taught me that [what works in an extreme situation like a hostage-taking also works in a business setting](#). Hostage situations can be dramatic and intense, but you don't hear about most of them in the news. That's because more than 95% are resolved peacefully, without casualties, and with the hostage-takers accepting the consequences. Wouldn't you like to enjoy this success rate in business?

Master these six essential skills to turn conflict into a constructive tool for individual and company success

1. Create and maintain a bond with your adversary

Conflict, by definition, is when a difference of perspectives is characterized by tension, emotion and polarization. It arises when human bonds are broken and people experience feelings such as loss, frustration and grief – real or anticipated. In a corporate environment, emotional pain may come at an individual level from, for example, a missed promotion; or a loss might be felt throughout an organization when a major contract is lost.

Creating a bond will enable you to avoid getting caught up in personal feelings about the other – the Achilles heel for many. Bonding defuses conflict, even in the most devastating circumstances. One

example from my experience is a [grandmother who created a bond with a night-time intruder](#), saving her own and her granddaughter's lives. Or, less dramatically, you may bond with a colleague to successfully leverage your differing viewpoints in a joint work assignment.

You don't have to like the other person to create or re-establish a bond. You only need what the eminent psychologist Carl Rogers called "unconditional positive regard." This is a fundamental skill of being able to accept anything as a starting point even if you do not agree. Acceptance and agreement are two very different things that are often confused. Treat the other party as an ally, not an enemy, and find ground for mutual respect, positive regard and cooperation. Being able to separate the person from the problem is a fundamental leadership skill – completely learnable – that makes it possible to avoid responding negatively to personal attacks. Maintaining this awareness makes it possible to focus on real issues and common goals.^{1,2} You will find yourself collaborating with the other party and genuinely wanting to help them as well as yourself towards a true solution to the conflict.

2. Establish a dialogue for conflict negotiation

Dialogue requires self-awareness and self-management. Your mind's eye will help you overcome your natural fear of conflict and see it in a different light. The mind's eye forms the way you view a particular situation and determines how you will act or react. The fear you feel towards conflict is real: It is shaped by experience. Many leaders facing conflict can become "hostages" to their inner fears, but it doesn't have to be so. Research suggests that we can change the way we perceive and behave in a situation.³ Just as an athlete can envision winning a race, you can train yourself, by creating an inner dialogue, to see something as an opportunity, not as an obstacle, or to see the "adversary" as a potential ally. You can change



George Kohlrieser
IMD Professor of
Leadership and
Organizational Behavior

your state of being from fear to courage and do what is counterintuitive: Go towards the person with whom you are in conflict and establish a dialogue.

Talking, dialogue and negotiation create genuine, engaging and productive two-way transactions focused on the common goal. You can harness the energy from the fearful situation and redirect it into dialogue. This means [talking – and listening](#) – without hostility or aggression.

This may seem like a tall order in some particularly intense situations. In hostage-takings, for example, negotiators are typically dealing with someone who is extremely hostile at the outset. However responding to aggression with aggression will not serve anyone's interest. [Connect with the humanness of the other person and they will be influenced to enter a dialogue](#), creating an effective dynamic for conflict management.

3. “Put the fish on the table”

Conflict is often messy. However, when you create a bond with the other person, you can face the difference together head-on. The expression “put the fish on the table” comes from a ritual I observed in Sicily, where the fishermen put their fresh catch on a large table and work together in a smelly and bloody mess to clean their fish. Their deep bonds and a clear goal make collaboration easy and enjoyable, even over this difficult task. I've actually experienced this ritual myself, invited by a group of fishermen to join them one morning. After getting through the bloody, messy job, we were rewarded by the excellent fish dinner we shared. We have to clean every fish to enjoy that great fish dinner.

Imagine if, instead, the fishermen left the fish under the table – no one willing to do their part. The stench would soon take hold. Something similar happens when a conflict (a fish) is kept under the table rather than being put on it. There's no opportunity to work through the mess of sorting it out for a mutually beneficial outcome. And to take this analogy a step further, you'll get absolutely nowhere if you go slapping the other party in the face with the fish!

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4. Keep in mind the cause of the conflict

The fish is on the table, you are ready to dialogue, but about what? What are the roots of the disagreement? Not only do you need to understand your own perception, you need to be aware of the other party's. Often a disagreement stems from people having a different set of goals, interests or values. There could be different perceptions of the problem, such as “It's a quality control problem” or “It's a production problem,” and this is often exacerbated by different communication styles. And, let's face it, there are simply some difficult people out there. If an individual is motivated principally by their own ego and thirst for power, conflict is likely to swirl around them. With such a person, your conflict management skills become all the more critical.

To address the conflict you are facing, it is helpful to ask yourself whether it stems from an interest or a need. An interest is transitory and more superficial, such as land, money or a job. A need runs deeper – identity, security, respect, for example. Many conflicts appear to be about interests, but in fact the behavior of the people involved is driven by needs. For example, a colleague passed over for a promotion may say they are upset about lost income, but the real wound is a feeling of lost respect or identity. When you know what is really bugging the other person, you can respond to that – instead of the words they may use – in order to resolve the conflict. Remember that loss, whether real, anticipated or imagined, is ultimately the root cause of any conflict.

5. Reciprocity works

The law of reciprocity is the foundation of cooperation and collaboration. You're likely to get back what you give. Reciprocity is a factor in empathy – the ability to re-create and understand others' experience, intention and feeling within ourselves. This isn't just social convention; researchers have shown that mirror neurons in the brain establish empathy and therefore reciprocity.^{4, 5, 6}

Mutual exchange and internal adaptation allow two individuals or more to become attuned and empathetic to each other's inner states. You will be most effective at using reciprocity if you master the technique of empathizing and managing how you express that empathy – both verbally and non-verbally. This social awareness allows you to make the right concessions at the right time. Once you have made a concession, it is likely

that the other party will respond in kind – in other words, reciprocate. And when you recognize a concession has been made, reciprocate with one of your own to move the negotiation forward.

6. Nurture a positive relationship throughout conflict

Maintaining a positive relationship means understanding, respecting and staying aware of the other person's perspective. Even – or especially – when you don't agree with a specific point or behavior, demonstrate your acceptance of them as a person. You will need to balance reason and emotion – because emotions such as fear, anger, frustration and even love may disrupt otherwise thoughtful actions.

As hostage negotiators know, it is more productive to persuade than to coerce. Communicate to the other person your own perspective, and reflect back your understanding of theirs. These are communication skills for conflict management that you can learn, practice and perfect. If you are able to help the other party maintain feelings of acceptance, value and worth – all basic psychological needs – throughout a conflict negotiation, you will help them also to stay focused on the goal of a mutually acceptable outcome to the conflict.

Capitalize on the conflict management opportunity

Business managers and companies that use these six essential skills for conflict management leverage great opportunity. The most important conflicts – the ones that lead to positive results when managed well – are the ones in which people feel personally invested in their

positions or are bringing something of themselves as human beings into the interaction. As diversity and interdependency in organizations increases, there is opportunity in the potential conflict. Dealing effectively with these conflicts enables a company to leverage the richness of diverse perspectives for innovative outcomes. In fact, conflicts are the lifeblood of high-performing organizations. Disputes, disagreements and diverse points of view about strategy and implementation create energy, stimulate creativity, help form strongly bonded teams, and bring about change. An organization will reap the benefits when the organizational culture fosters willingness to take the risk of embracing conflict.

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