

THIRD EDITION

RESOLVING CONFLICTS AT WORK



TEN STRATEGIES
FOR EVERYONE ON THE JOB

KENNETH CLOKE JOAN GOLDSMITH

Foreword by Warren Bennis

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RESOLVING CONFLICTS AT WORK

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FOR EVERYONE ON THE JOB

KENNETH CLOKE • JOAN GOLDSMITH

Foreword by Warren Bennis

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Foreword

Conflict: An Opportunity for Leadership

In the midst of the recent financial crisis, it is clear that leadership has never mattered more. We are in dire need of leaders who can courageously confront and resolve the many conflicts that plague our organizations and threaten our well-being, who can address and resolve the conflicts that damage the very fabric of society, and who can openly and skillfully resolve conflicts that have an adverse impact on our daily lives.

We need organizational leaders who can release us from unrelenting conflicts and do not merely paper over disagreements and disputes. We have to resist the temptation to follow leaders with perverse agendas that undermine or distort the authentic resolution of recurring conflicts. Instead, we need to develop organizational leaders who are skilled in resolving conflicts, who seek solutions that address underlying causes, and who serve the interests of all involved.

If we look to one of the leaders of our early Republic, Abigail Adams, we see that she had it right when she counseled her son John Quincy that hard times are the crucible in which character and leadership are forged. "It is not in the still calm of life or the repose of a pacific station that great characters are formed," she wrote to him in 1780. "The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulty. Great necessities call out great virtues." The spirit of this wife and mother of two founding presidents inspires us to consider our own era as a time when leaders

can imaginatively create environments in which conflict resolution strategies generate a viable, collaborative new future. This future will be created by leaders who can cope with rapid, uncertain change and address social strains, psychological tensions, and chronic conflicts in cultures that foster collaboration, open and honest communication, and conflict resolution.

The first skill of these leaders is a capacity to exercise good judgment by making the right decisions in the midst of confusing and frightening conflicts based on knowledge, wisdom, and an ability to remain true to overriding values.

A second skill of these leaders is the ability to enlist others and motivate them to seek resolution to seemingly insurmountable conflicts. This skill flows from what the psychologist Daniel Goleman calls “emotional intelligence,” the capacity to understand and connect with the hopes and fears of those who are in conflict and to find common ground in the values they share.

A third skill of these leaders is respect. Respect to those in conflict signifies that they have been seen and valued for who they are; disrespect signifies that they are invisible and do not matter. People in conflict often engage in destructive habits in order to gain respect. The debilitating dispute that seems unbearable and never-ending can evaporate when a leader affords respect to all involved and enables each person to experience being valued and included.

This new breed of leader creates respectful, ethical, innovative, and productive work environments where everyone is encouraged to invent solutions to ongoing conflicts. The characteristics of these leaders include widespread *alignment* based on a commitment to deal with conflict in a straightforward manner; *empowerment* of all parties to identify and resolve the conflicts they encounter; and *transparency* that allows conflict to be viewed openly

and honestly so that inquiry, integrity, and reflection are generated and prized.

Alignment

Leaders align those who work on all levels of their organizations to perceive and accept common understandings of the causes of organizational conflicts. They inspire a commitment to resolve disputes by articulating shared values and goals. This alignment has a great deal to do with spirit and a team atmosphere. A shared understanding of the sources of conflict in the everyday organizational life aligns everyone to achieve a higher purpose and uplifts and harmonizes their aspirations. Each person is then able to view conflict as an opportunity to learn and one that can lead to improvement in work, in products, and in a shared future.

Empowerment

Empowerment means that everyone believes they are at the center of the organization rather than at the periphery, and they make a difference to the success of the overall effort. Empowered individuals take the risk of acknowledging the conflicts they generate or encounter. They *know* that what they do has significance and they take responsibility for surfacing conflicts, learning from them, and achieving lasting resolutions. They exercise discretion and responsibility and create a culture of respect in which everyone is encouraged to openly confront disputes and disagreements and to develop methods to resolve them, without having to check through five levels of the hierarchy for permission to take on contentious issues. Leaders who empower their organizations generate and sustain trust and encourage systemwide effective communication.

Transparency

When inquiry-based reflection and transparency are at the heart of organizational culture, learning opportunities and useful information flow unhampered. In these cultures people are open to problem *finding*, not merely problem solving. In these adaptive, values-based learning organizations, staff on all levels find, identify, and resolve conflicts before they generate crises. Leaders encourage the free discovery of ideas and the sharing of information to solve problems. They are not afraid to test their ideas, even if full disclosure threatens to reveal deeper conflicts. A learning and inquiring organization, in which transparent exchanges of information are a matter of course, allows everyone to reflect on and honestly evaluate their actions and decisions.

Thus, postbureaucratic organizations generate leaders who value meaningful interactions, healthy conflicts, and active dissent; who are not averse to risk taking; who support learning from their mistakes, rather than blaming others for them. They develop informal leadership in cross-functional teams and they actively listen to the ideas of colleagues and support the talents of others. They create organizations that are decentralized into autonomous units in which decision making is shared. They demand self-discipline and emphasize individual responsibility, collaborative relationships, widespread ethics, and open communication that resolves conflicts when they emerge.

This subtle yet profound and perceptible change taking place in our philosophy of leadership creates organizational cultures that encourage the honest expression of conflict and candid discussion of differences. These changes include

- A new concept of humanity, based on an increased understanding of our complex and shifting needs, that is

replacing an oversimplified, mechanical idea of who we are

- A new concept of power, based on collaboration, reason, and synergy, that is replacing a failed model of power based on coercion and threats
- A new concept of values, based on humanistic-democratic ideals, that is replacing a rigid bureaucratic system that regards property and rules as more important than people and relationships

I now add a fourth change reflected in the central argument that Cloke and Goldsmith make in the pages that follow:

- A new concept of conflict, based on personal leadership and organizational learning, creative problem solving, collaborative negotiation, satisfaction of interests, and a view of conflict that can promote personal and organizational transformation. This creative model is replacing a limited approach to conflict that seeks to suppress, avoid, or compromise issues rather than resolve the underlying reasons that gave rise to them.

With this book, the authors offer wisdom, food for thought, and tools for those of us who seek to improve our abilities to address conflict and to create organizational cultures in which conflicts are openly and candidly addressed. Cloke and Goldsmith provide multiple strategies for addressing, resolving, transforming, and learning from conflicts. They challenge us to learn to live with ambiguity, to communicate more openly, to participate in conflicts with integrity, making a virtue of contingency, and finding unity in the issues that divide us. In doing so, they make a significant contribution to creating healthy organizations by providing methods for resolving the destructive conflicts to be found in this contentious era. I welcome the sound advice that follows.

Warren Bennis

Distinguished Professor of Business Administration
University of Southern California

This book is dedicated with love to our grandchildren, Orrin, Thacher, and Tallulah, in hopes they will gain wisdom from the lessons their conflicts can teach them.

Acknowledgments

Every effort to reach out to those with whom we disagree brings us all closer together, and this book could not have been written without the extraordinary courage and dedication of mediators and conflict resolvers who have joined us for over thirty years in improving our understanding of how to move from impasse to resolution in deeply entrenched conflicts, and how to create successful workplace collaborations.

We thank all of you for your unfailing support, your honest feedback, and your deep understanding.

We also thank the many courageous leaders who have joined us in experimenting, discovering, implementing, and improving the ideas we present here. It is only because of their courage and willingness to try something new that we were able to “field-test” our ideas, learn from our mistakes, and tell you their stories.

We especially want to acknowledge the many members and leaders of Mediators Beyond Borders (www.mediatorsbeyondborders.org) whose unflagging commitment to promoting peace and reconciliation around the world encourages hope and inspiration.

A special thanks goes to Warren Bennis for believing in us and supporting this book, and to our children and grandchildren, who have been our greatest teachers. We thank our editors, Alan Rinzler and Seth Schwartz, our talented indexer and friend, Carolyn Thibault, and our extraordinary assistant, Solange Raro.

Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith

Center for Dispute Resolution, Santa Monica, California

*We have thought of peace as passive
and war as the active way of living.*

The opposite is true.

War is not the most strenuous life.

*It is a kind of rest cure compared
to the task of reconciling our differences.*

*From War to Peace is not from the strenuous
to the easy existence.*

*It is from the futile to the effective,
from the stagnant to the active,
from the destructive to the creative way of life.*

*The world will be regenerated by the people
who rise above these passive ways
and heroically seek by whatever hardship,
by whatever toil
the methods by which people can agree.*

—Mary Parker Follett

Introduction

Ten Strategies for Everyone on the Job

The rules of the game: learn everything, read everything, inquire into everything.... When two texts, or two assertions, or perhaps two ideas, are in contradiction, be ready to reconcile them rather than cancel one by the other; regard them as two different facets, or two successive stages of the same reality, a reality convincingly human just because it is complex.

—*Marguerite Yourcenar*

It is nearly impossible to grow up in a family, live in a neighborhood, attend a school, work on a job, have an intimate relationship, raise children, or actively participate as a citizen in the world without experiencing a wide variety of disagreements, arguments, disputes, hostilities, and conflicts.

Much of our childhood is spent in conflict with those we love, with our parents, siblings, and playmates, who teach us the first and most difficult lessons of life, including how to respond to intense emotions and handle behaviors we find difficult to understand or accept. Our schools teach us hard lessons about rejection and compromise, about how to succeed and fail in a hierarchy, how to manage disputes with teachers and peers, and how to overcome shame, rage, and fear.

As adults, our most intimate family relationships are immersed in and deeply influenced by conflict. We learn how to respond to conflicts at work; in interactions with government agencies, schools, and companies; and in the

neighborhoods and communities where we live. We learn different skills in response to conflicts with our spouses, partners, children, neighbors, and coworkers over miscommunications, false expectations and assumptions, unclear roles and responsibilities, disagreements and rejections, changes and losses.

Our diverse societies and multiethnic, religious, and social cultures seem saturated with conflicts that scream at us from headlines, ads, and movies that, in their intensity, subtly shape our psyches and perceptions. Our communities have been deeply divided by racial prejudice, hatred of dissenters and those who are different, and conflicts over competition regarding the use of scarce resources to satisfy disparate needs and expectations.

Our workplaces and organizations are profoundly shaped by conflicts between workers and supervisors, unions and management, competing departments, and stressed coworkers. Our competitive economy, status-conscious society, and politicized government agencies reverberate with chronic disputes between ins and outs, haves and have-nots, us and them, powerful and powerless—all battling over the distribution of power, status, goods, and resources.

When we lack effective skills, our first response is often to avoid or suppress conflict, or try to make it go away, causing us to miss its underlying meaning. As a result, we cheat ourselves, our opponents, and our organizations out of learning, making it impossible to correct what led to the problem in the first place, prevent future conflicts, and discover how to improve our overall ability to resolve and transcend our disputes.

Yet, the pain, loss, and irretrievable damage that are suffered by individuals, families, organizations, and communities in conflict can also create miracles of transformation when people find new solutions, are moved

to forgiveness and reconciliation, and are able to reclaim peaceful lives, relationships, and organizations. These are the two faces of conflict, the destructive and the creative, the stagnant and the active, the aggressive and the transformative. Between them lies a set of strategies, techniques, and approaches for turning one into the other. It is these strategies that are the subject matter of this book.

Everyone is capable of seeing both these faces, though most of us, when we are in conflict, focus on the first rather than on the second. We have all learned how to fight and how to collaborate, how to run away and how to stand up for what we believe in, how to hide what we think and how to say what we really mean, how to resist change and how to embrace it, how to live as though no one else mattered and how to collaborate closely with others, how to get stuck in impasse and how to improve our lives and our relationships with those we love or respect.

In short, each of us has learned destructive as well as creative ways of responding to conflict. Yet in order to shift from the destructive to the creative, from the stagnant to the active, from aggression to transformation, we need to search within *ourselves* for the true meaning of our conflicts, and for the skills we need to turn one into the other. If we can become more aware of what we are contributing to our conflicts and start to listen and learn from our opponents, we can work together to improve the organizational structures, systems, processes, and relationships that generate *chronic* conflicts, and overcome the tendency to slip into negative or destructive responses.

Conflicts at Work

Most executives, managers, and employees face conflicts on a daily or weekly basis, spending from 20 percent to as much as 80 percent of their working hours trying to resolve

or contain them. If we simply quantify the time spent by the average executive, manager, and employee on unresolved conflict and multiply it times their salary, the result would far exceed the cost of in-depth training in conflict resolution skills.

Yet, with the right approach, most of these conflicts are entirely avoidable, unnecessary, or easily resolvable. Many workplace disputes arise from simple miscommunications, misunderstandings, seemingly irrelevant differences, poor choices of language, ineffective management styles, unclear roles and responsibilities, false expectations, and poor leadership that can easily be corrected through listening, informal problem solving, dialogue, collaborative negotiation, and mediation.

Unfortunately, few of us have been trained in how to resolve the many conflicts that come our way. Few schools teach it, and few corporations, nonprofits, or government agencies offer conflict prevention programs. They rarely train managers and supervisors in dispute resolution, or orient employees to collaborative negotiation, creative problem solving, peer-based mediation, and other conflict resolution methodologies.

When organizations *do* try to train their executives, managers, and employees in conflict resolution techniques, these classes are often far too brief and oriented toward elementary skills, or toward suppressing or merely settling conflicts and trying to make them go away. They rarely take the approach that conflicts point to issues, problems, or difficulties that can provide unique learning opportunities and lead to significant improvements.

Thus, we pay a heavy price for conflict—not only individually and relationally, but organizationally and socially—through litigation, strikes, reduced productivity, poor morale, wasted time and resources, unnecessary resignations and terminations, lost customers, dysfunctional

relationships with colleagues, destructive battles with competing departments, stifling rules and regulations, gossip and rumors, and reduced opportunities for teamwork, synergy, learning, and change.

Chronic Conflicts at Work

The deeper sources of conflict at work are *chronic* disputes that repeat themselves in various guises, but never fully disappear. The causes of these disputes often have little or nothing to do with the petty, superficial issues people commonly fight over, but go much deeper into the structures, systems, processes, and relationships in the workplace; the nature of conflict, the culture of conflict within organizations; and the ways work is organized, compensated, processed, and acknowledged.

Chronic conflicts can often be distinguished by the repetitiveness of their allegations, issues, and accusations; by their acceptance and tolerance for disrespectful and adversarial behaviors; by their low level of resolution, reescalation and renewal of hostilities; and by the seeming irrationality and incongruity between high levels of emotion and the apparently trivial issues over which people are fighting. For this reason, chronic conflicts are commonly mistaken for miscommunications, personality clashes, or accidental misunderstandings, yet on analysis reveal strong underlying similarities.

Simply defined, chronic conflicts are those that nations, societies, organizations, families, or individuals

- 1.** Have not fully resolved
- 2.** Need to resolve in order to grow and evolve
- 3.** Are capable of resolving
- 4.** Can only resolve by abandoning old approaches and adopting new ones

5. Are resistant to resolving because they are frightened, dissatisfied, insecure, uncertain, angry, or unwilling to change

How, then, do we resolve chronic conflicts at work? We can begin by recognizing that every chronic conflict contains at least two fundamental truths: the truth of impasse, that people are stuck with a problem from which they would like to escape and cannot; and the truth of resolution, that it is possible for them to become unstuck and move to a higher order of resolution or relationship. They can do this by understanding, at a deep level, that whatever it was that caused them to get stuck in the first place can also enable them, when they use the right skills, to transform the way they think, feel, and act about it.

We can also recognize that every organization, whether it is a corporation, school, nonprofit, or government agency, generates chronic conflicts. Each of these conflicts poses a challenge to the organization that it has not faced directly or in its entirety. Each chronic conflict thereby reveals a paradigm that has begun to shift, a problem that has yet to be solved, or an opportunity for improvement that has not been understood, seized upon, or implemented.

Indeed, every chronic conflict presents us with a unique opportunity to significantly enhance our personal lives, deepen our relationships, improve our processes, expand the effectiveness of our organizations, increase our work satisfaction, and release us from impasse. To reach these transformational outcomes, it is necessary to understand how and why we get stuck, and develop the strategies and skills that make resolution and transformation possible.

The Dark Side of Emotion in Conflict

When we are in conflict, we say things we do not mean and mean things we do not say. Only rarely do we communicate at a deep level what we really, honestly think and feel, or do so in ways that are empathetic. We seldom speak from our hearts or expose our vulnerability in ways our opponent can hear. Why do we fall into these traps? Why is it so difficult to do what we know is right?

Our conflicts have the capacity to confuse and hypnotize us, to make us genuinely believe there is no way out other than through combat. Conflict possesses dark, hypnotic, destructive powers: the power of attachment when it is time to leave, the power of demonization when it is time to forgive, the power of articulate speech when it is time to listen. Conflict alternately strokes and crushes our egos, fuels and exhausts our will, energizes and freezes us in fear. It speaks to a deep, ancient part of our soul that thirsts for power and delights in revenge.

When we are engaged in conflict, our emotions seem enormously powerful and overwhelming. When we are in the grip of strong emotions, they feel limitless and unstoppable, irresistible and all defining. Part of the seduction of strong emotions is that they allow us to present who we are and what we want in absolute terms. They force us to identify with the seemingly infinite power of our feelings and to surrender control to something larger than ourselves.

We have all experienced times in our lives when we lacked the skills we needed to communicate honestly and empathetically with others. We have all been aggressive, judgmental, and hypercritical, or passive, apathetic, and defensive. Our efforts at honesty have been misinterpreted as aggression and our empathy as weakness. We have not known how to temper our anger with compassion, how to listen to our opponent's pain when we were being criticized, how to discover what caused our opponents to act as they did, or how to take responsibility for our own