

Resolving Conflicts at Work

Eight Strategies for
Everyone on the Job

Revised Edition

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Kenneth Cloke
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Eight Strategies for
Everyone on the Job

Revised Edition

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Foreword:

Conflict: A Leader's Challenge

"I curse you! May you live in an important time," goes that famous Chinese imprecation. No one would argue that we live and work in difficult and conflicted times. Especially leaders of complex, global organizations. Leaders today must be far more adept in resolving conflicts than ever before. We increasingly look to leaders for guidance in navigating through a succession of crises and conflicts, each seemingly more intractable than the last.

As change is now a constant, the conflicts that inevitably accompany it can be seen everywhere. These conflicts create a crisis of leadership that is reflected in the spate of recent corporate scandals that have undermined our faith in business leaders and created a revolving door at the top. As a result, CEOs appointed after 1990 are three times more likely to be fired than CEOs appointed before that date, and seventy-seven of the two hundred largest companies have ousted their leaders and hired new bosses in recent years.

These discouraging facts reflect the failure of leaders to listen and learn from the conflicts in their organizations, as well as the unforgiving personal blame we attach to them as soon as anything important goes wrong.

This growing mistrust of business and government, together with the emerging possibility of a serious global recession, the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Iraq, the acrimony seen in the last election, and increasingly fierce corporate competition, are some of the signs that our leaders are no longer able to guide us

toward a resolution of our conflicts and, as a result, that we are heading for trouble.

Resistance to addressing conflict in organizations is similar to the resistance that divides nations and communities. As organizations become more complex, they fragment and become more insular, creating tribal patterns and symbolic codes (secrets and jargon, for example) that exclude outsiders and exploit differences for inward gain, thereby sacrificing a fragile harmony for individual and group gain.

Recently, we saw in the case of Enron a complex and startlingly negative example of these destructive patterns, including an organizational culture based on secrecy, dishonesty, and aversion to resolving the conflicts that always arise whenever the truth is told. The courageous whistleblower Sharon Watkins, in her letter to CEO Ken Lay, warned, “Enron could explode in a wave of accounting scandals.” She took the risk all leaders with integrity must face—that of breaking with the regressive cultural norms of her environment. Yet, who in Enron took her warning seriously? Who was listening?

At Enron, simply talking about what was actually going on was off-limits. As one executive later told me, “You simply didn’t want to discuss ... anything important in front of the water cooler.” Employees were afraid to express their opinions or question unethical or illegal business practices.

Enron is only one example, albeit a dramatic one. Yet, the most difficult thing to do in any organization is to speak truth to power and to create the social architecture that permits, gives license to, and supports openness in communications. Without it, our organizations are doomed to failure.

Ken Lay's real crime was not his infectious greed or whatever malfeasance he may or may not have committed. It was his failure to create a culture and social architecture that were open to reality and willing to engage the conflicts that inevitably accompany truth telling. His primary failure was in not instituting reforms in Enron's organizational culture that would have encouraged employees to get at the truth whatever the cost. That is his greater failure.

The *Challenger* disaster during President Reagan's term of office reflected a similar problem. Those who built the space shuttle knew there was something wrong with the O-rings. The man who reported the problem was fired and later went around the country in a feckless chase trying to convince people that we have to create more open and honest organizational systems.

In 1991, Jack Welch faced a serious disaster at a General Electric plant in Louisville, Kentucky, that cost the company \$600 million because the equipment used to make refrigerators was faulty, and the people who were making them knew it. But the truth never came out, at least to the company's headquarters in Fairfield, Connecticut. To Welch's credit, he soon after created a "workout" program to make sure that such episodes will not reoccur. In conflict-adverse environments, the truth is suppressed, and the personal and organizational price paid for doing so, even in these few examples, is enormous.

Research has shown that effective leadership accounts for at least 15 percent of the success of any organization. In these organizations, good leaders make people feel that they are at the heart of things, that they make a difference to its success, and that their conflicts and differences can be overcome by communicating openly and working together to realize their common vision and goals.

Successful leaders engage their employees through compelling, tangible visions. Most important, they commit to these visions by generating and sustaining cultures that build trust, promote self-improvement, make work feel exciting, foster a sense of community, encourage open communications, confront and resolve conflicts, and support people in learning from their mistakes.

I believe subtle yet profound and perceptible changes are now taking place in our philosophy of leadership that are moving us toward the creation of organizational cultures that encourage the honest expression of conflict and promote candid discussion of differences. These changes include:

- A new concept of humanity, based on increased understanding of our complex and shifting needs, that is replacing an oversimplified, innocent, mechanical idea of who we are
- A new concept of power, based on collaboration, reason, and synergy, that is replacing a model of power based on violence, coercion, and threats
- A new concept of values, based on humanistic-democratic ideals, that is replacing a depersonalized, bureaucratic value system that regards property and rules as more important than people and relationships

To this list I can add a fourth change reflected in the central argument Cloke and Goldsmith make in the pages that follow:

- A new concept of conflict, based on personal and organizational learning, creative problem solving, collaborative negotiation, and satisfaction of interests, that is replacing an approach to conflict that seeks to avoid, suppress, or settle it rather than resolve the underlying reasons that gave rise to it and use it to promote personal and organizational improvement

Traditional power-based and bureaucratic approaches to conflict, as Cloke and Goldsmith point out, merely suppress useful information and discourage those who can make a difference from learning how they can use their disputes to expose what is not working and promote change.

The future we face will not necessarily be a “happy” one. Coping with rapid, uncertain change, operating in temporary work systems, grappling with global interdependence, and searching for meaningful relations all augur social strains, psychological tensions, and chronic conflicts, which can be either suppressed or used to reveal the challenges we need to address. Successful leaders value honest communications over power and bureaucracy that is fundamental to creating cultures of collaboration, open communication, and conflict resolution.

No organization can be honest with the public if it is not honest with itself. Creating cultures of honesty, like creating healthy balance sheets, is an ongoing effort that requires attention and diligence from the top.

Successful leaders support *reflective back talk*. They create environments in which people freely offer their honest reactions so that leaders are not taken by surprise. They value differences in perceptions, habits, languages, and styles and plumb them for their unique contributions. They generate trust so that employees feel comfortable communicating openly, honestly, and empathetically. In doing so, as Cloke and Goldsmith observe, they reduce the fear of conflicts and are able to turn them into opportunities for improvement.

It will not be easy to create organizational cultures in which conflicts are openly addressed and candor is routine. The problem of getting leaders to build organizational systems that encourage their colleagues to embrace and learn from conflicts is exacerbated by an increasingly

turbulent global economic environment in which greed and unethical competition are creating compound crises and a race for the bottom.

These troubled times call for the theories, strategies, and techniques identified by Cloke and Goldsmith. The core leadership competencies, organizational systems ideas, day-to-day prescriptions, and high-level skills that are presented in the strategies that follow can support each of us in transforming our workplace conflicts into learning opportunities.

The authors of this book offer wisdom, food for thought, and tools to those of us who want to continue improving our abilities to address the conflicts that come our way. We can all become better at learning to live with ambiguity, communicating more openly, participating in conflict with integrity, making a virtue of contingency, and finding unity in the issues that divide us.

Cloke and Goldsmith provide us all with multiple ways of addressing, resolving, transforming, and learning from conflicts. In doing so, they make a significant contribution to organizational health by providing us with methods for resolving the destructive conflicts that plague our era and those that, if we do not heed their message, will be sure to follow.

Warren Bennis
Distinguished Professor of Business Administration
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*This book is dedicated to our families,
from whom we have learned both the pain of conflict
and the joy of resolution: to Dick, Shirley, Bill, Angie, Elka,
Nick,
Erin, Orrin, Kristen, and Glen; and Leonard, Miriam, Steve,
Pravina, Sam, Shetu, and Tinku.*

Preface

Philosophers have written that a universe can be found in a single grain of sand. This book is our effort to describe the universe we have found in the sands of conflict, which we have studied, sifted, and reshaped professionally over the past twenty-five years. In the process, we have helped thousands of people in workplaces around the United States and the world resolve their disputes.

We have observed firsthand the pain, loss, and irretrievable damage that have been suffered by individuals, organizations, and relationships as a result of conflict. We have also seen miracles of transformation, people moved to forgiveness and reconciliation, creative solutions revealed, and hundreds of lives, relationships, and organizations reclaimed. These are the two faces of conflict, the destructive and the creative, the impasse and the transformation. Between them is a set of strategies, techniques, and approaches for turning one into the other.

Everyone is capable of seeing both faces of conflict, although most of us focus more on the first than 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 matters and how to challenge ourselves and improve our lives and relationships.

In short, each of us has learned destructive and creative ways of responding to conflict. To shift from the destructive to the creative, from impasse to transformation, we need to search within ourselves for the true meaning of our conflict, become more aware of what we are contributing to it, and

decide to listen and learn from our opponents. We need to improve our skills and resist our tendency to slip into negative or destructive responses.

Few of us have received training in how to work collaboratively to resolve conflicts. Few schools teach it. Few corporations, nonprofits, and government agencies have created conflict-prevention programs or orient their employees to constructive approaches to conflict resolution, despite the fact that nearly all organizations and their employees will confront a number of serious conflicts during the course of their working lives.

While some organizations train their leaders or managers in conflict resolution, classes are usually brief and oriented to suppressing conflicts or trying to make them go away. Yet most of these leaders and managers face conflicts on a *daily* basis, spending from 20 to as much as 80 percent of their time trying to resolve or contain them.

When we merely suppress conflicts or try to make them go away, we miss their underlying meaning. As a result, we cheat ourselves, others, and the organization as a whole out of learning from them, correcting what led to them in the first place, preventing future conflicts, and discovering how to improve our ability to resolve and transcend them.

About This Book

We wrote this book to assist everyone who works: employees, leaders, managers, teachers, principals, union representatives, and workers of all kinds in corporations, nonprofits, schools, and government agencies. *Everyone* can increase their skills, not just in making conflicts disappear but in discovering their deeper underlying truths, resolving the reasons that gave rise to them, and using them to drive personal and organizational improvement.

To assist you in discovering these truths for yourself, we present you with eight strategies for resolution, each leading to the center of the conflict. We offer you a diverse set of tools to resolve your conflicts—not just hammers and wrenches, but mirrors and scalpels. The mirrors are to help you reflect on what *you* are doing to encourage the conflict and see how you can use that information to trigger a personal or organizational transformation. The scalpels are to assist you in eliminating unproductive, destructive, and unwanted behavior patterns and free you to approach your conflicts in a more constructive and strategic manner. Our object is not to tell you what to do but to provide you with tools that will lead you to your own truth, as we have been led to ours.

No single tool or technique will work for everyone in every situation at all times. If there is any set principle in conflict resolution, it is that there are no set principles. Success proceeds from a synergistic combination of intellect and emotion, honesty and empathy, reason and intuition, head and heart, and a willingness to integrate and let each guide the other. Everyone can improve their objective and subjective conflict resolution skills and learn better ways of expressing their needs, feelings, and ideas.

We hope you will follow the strategies we describe and work to create an organizational environment in which conflict resolution is creative and strategic, integrated and accepted, celebrated and continually reinvented—an environment in which settlement is not settled for and resolution opens opportunities for organizational transformation and personal mastery.

The strategies we describe invite the magic that comes from listening, collaboration, and forgiveness. Our basic message is to strengthen and follow your intuition, be guided by your heart, deepen and expand your empathy, and be willing to risk being deeply and compassionately honest about what you have seen and experienced. While there are times and places where being open and honest can get you into trouble, for the most part we overcensor ourselves and, in the process, cheat ourselves and others out of learning and growth.

If you are willing to take the risk of being deeply empathetic and honest, we can promise you that your conflict and the strategies for resolving it will open up to you—and to the organization in which you work—extraordinary opportunities for improvement that include personal growth, reduced costs, improved morale, and deeper and more satisfying relationships.

Because everywhere we get stuck and find ourselves at impasse, both personally and organizationally, expresses itself as a conflict, it should be obvious that to obtain the release, resolution, and transformation we desire, we need to learn to move toward, into, and through our disputes. In conflict resolution, the way *out* is *through*.

Finally, while everyone can improve their skills and become more effective at resolving their conflicts, we each need to discover the approach that works best for us. In this book, we have identified eight distinct strategies to help you

define your approach to conflict and to assemble a “resolution toolbox” from the dozens of techniques we cite. Your challenge will be to design your own strategy, which begins by looking inside yourself and recognizing that you can choose the direction your conflict will take you.

We encourage you to learn from your opponents and all the people with whom you have been in conflict, without whom it will be impossible to understand fully what your conflict is trying to teach you. We know we cannot teach you anything you do not want to learn, and it is difficult to decide to learn from your opponents. Nonetheless, we invite you to open yourself, your colleagues, and your organizations to conflict and to be willing to learn a new approach to resolution. We are pleased you have chosen to learn with us.

Acknowledgments

Everyone faces their conflicts alone, but no one resolves them alone. The process requires collaboration, support, safe havens, honest feedback, and understanding from those who are willing to reach out and promote peace and reconciliation. The two of us are deeply grateful to all our friends and mediation associates who have traveled this road with us.

We want to thank our friends and family for having taught us many lessons about conflict and resolution and for having been deeply committed to transforming their own lives and the lives of others as well. We also want to thank the many courageous organizational leaders on all levels with whom we have worked who have allowed us to try out many of the ideas we present here.

A special thanks goes to Warren Bennis for believing in us and in our book. Finally, we want to thank our editors, Alan Rinzler and Seth Schwartz, our indexer and friend, Carolyn Thibault, and our assistant, Solange Raro.

Kenneth Cloke
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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:

Eight Strategies to Move from Impasse to Transformation

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

Each of us experiences innumerable conflicts and miscommunications in the course of our lives, many of which affect us deeply and profoundly. It is nearly impossible today to grow up in a family, live in a neighborhood, attend a school, work at a job, have an intimate relationship, raise children, or actively participate as a citizen without experiencing multiple conflicts.

Much of our childhood is spent in conflict 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 difficult behaviors. Our schools teach us hard lessons about rejection and compromise; about how to succeed and fail in disputes with teachers and peers; and about shame, rage, and fear. Our spouses, partners, neighbors, and children force us to face fresh conflicts over false expectations and assumptions, roles and responsibilities, change and loss.

Thus, our most intimate family relationships are immersed and influenced by conflict and either deepen or dissolve with it. Our society and cultures are saturated with conflicts that scream at us from headlines, ads, and movies that subtly shape our psyches. Our neighborhoods and ethnic communities are deeply divided by racial prejudice, hatred of people who are different, and conflicts over how resources will be used to satisfy needs and expectations.

Yet, for many of us, the principal sources of conflict are the people with whom we work. Our workplaces and organizations are profoundly shaped by conflicts between workers and supervisors, unions and management, competing departments, and difficult behavior by coworkers. Our competitive economy, status-conscious society, and politicized governmental agencies generate chronic disputes between haves and have-nots, ins and outs, us and them, powerful and powerless—all battling over the distribution of scarce resources.

We pay a heavy price for these conflicts—not only individually and relationally but organizationally and socially—in litigation, strikes, reduced productivity, poor morale, wasted time and resources, 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.

Yet, most of these conflicts are completely avoidable, unnecessary, and quickly resolvable. Many arise from simple miscommunications, misunderstandings, seemingly irrelevant differences, poor choices of language, ineffective management styles, unclear roles and responsibilities, false expectations, and poor leadership. These conflicts can be corrected easily by listening, informal problem solving, dialogue, and collaborative negotiation.

But there are also deeper sources of conflict, which consist of *chronic* disputes that repeat themselves in various forms between different people and personalities, diverse issues, and dissimilar times and locations, yet never completely disappear. The causes of these conflicts have little or nothing to do with the petty, superficial issues people are fighting over but go much deeper into the nature of conflict, the cultures of organizations, and the way work is structured.

How, then, do we resolve these conflicts? We have to begin by recognizing that every chronic conflict we experience contains at least two fundamental truths: the truth of impasse, that we are stuck with a problem from which we would like to escape and cannot, and the truth of resolution, that it is possible for us to become unstuck and move to a higher order of relationship. We can do this by understanding at a deep level what got us stuck in the first place and transforming the way we think, feel, and act about it.

Every organization and workplace generates chronic conflicts—every corporation, school, nonprofit, and government agency. Each of these conflicts reflects in some way a challenge the organization is beginning to face, or has not faced as well as it could. Each reveals a paradigm that has begun to shift, a problem that has yet to be solved, and an opportunity for improvement that has not been understood or seized upon and implemented.

For this reason, every conflict you experience at work will present you with an opportunity to significantly improve your personal life, expand the effectiveness of your organization, increase the satisfaction of your friends, coworkers, and customers, and release you from impasse. To do so, it is necessary to understand how and why you got

stuck and develop the strategies and skills that make resolution and transformation possible.

The Dark Side of Conflict

When we are in conflict, we all 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. We seldom speak from our hearts or expose our most vulnerable parts, or do so in ways the other person 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, and make us genuinely believe that there is no way out other than through battle. 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 be silent and listen. Conflict alternately strokes and crushes our egos, fuels and exhausts our will, energizes us 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 become 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 encourage us to define ourselves and what we want in absolute terms, 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, and how to take responsibility for our own miscommunications and conflicts. We have failed to find ways of working collaboratively with our opponents to find solutions to our problems. As a result, we have felt trapped in our conflicts, sensing or believing that there was no exit, no way out.

At the same time, we have resisted apologizing for our behaviors, acknowledging our miscommunications, or recognizing that our emotions originate inside us and often have nothing to do with our opponents. We have become lost in self-aggrandizement and self-denial, sometimes simply by focusing exclusively on what our opponents did or said. We have engaged in conflict because we were unhappy with our lives; because we needed attention, felt rejected, or did not have the courage to stand up for ourselves; because we felt insecure or upset by criticism, were ashamed of our own cowardice or grief, or did not have the skill to respond effectively to someone's behavior. So have our opponents.

Instead of facing up to these internal reasons for being upset, we have become angry with others and claimed our cause was noble, just, true, and right. We have described our opponents in terms of evil, injustice, unfairness, harassment, aggression, dishonesty, betrayal, and insanity, as opposed to describing our relationship with them in terms of misunderstandings, false expectations, miscommunications, and petty incidents that have been blown out of proportion by both sides.