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Becoming a CONFLICT COMPETENT LEADER

SECOND EDITION

How You and Your Organization Can
Manage Conflict Effectively

CRAIG E. RUNDE &
TIM A. FLANAGAN

Authors of Building Conflict Competent Teams and Developing Your Conflict Competence

THE CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP
Ranked in the Top 5 Worldwide for Executive Education by *BusinessWeek*

Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader

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*A Joint Publication of
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To Mac, Lindsay, Kyle, Kathy, and Matthew

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Preface to the Second Edition

Since the completion of the first edition of *Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader* in the fall of 2006, much has transpired in the world—some good, some not so good. In six short years, we’ve seen unprecedented upheaval in the world economy, bank failures across the United States, government bailouts for major corporations, jobless rates at their highest levels since the Great Depression, military interventions in multiple countries, ousters of dictatorial leaders in the Middle East, defaults of entire countries, the demise of the U.S. housing market, and oil prices topping \$100 per barrel. National politics seemed to reach new low points as bipartisanship all but disappeared. The explosion of technology continued to create opportunities for instant and constant information exchange while making face-to-face communication apparently less necessary. These issues, among many others, helped fuel rising stress levels and despair, creating a perfect storm for an increase in conflict.

It would be easy to dwell on the negatives. But we’ve also witnessed many amazing and inspirational events. In the wake of natural disasters, we saw communities come together in ways unimaginable just days before. We witnessed the historic election of President Barack Obama. Electric and hybrid cars have become a practical alternative. We store and share information “in the cloud.” Medical advances have made organ replacement almost routine, giving new hope to those suffering from previously incurable diseases and disabling injuries. Even complete

face transplants have become possible. Astronomers have discovered countless new galaxies and biologists dozens of new species.

Through it all, we learned a lot. We've always been passionate about conflict, and we had much to share. We wrote two additional books, *Building Conflict Competent Teams* (2008) and *Developing Your Conflict Competence* (2010). With our colleague Sherod Miller, we designed a unique two-day course, *Becoming Conflict Competent* (2010). We believe that conflict brings opportunities at least as often as it stirs challenges, especially because it's not a spectator sport. When you're in conflict with someone, the only way to get the best out of it is to fully engage. We say that with absolute acknowledgment that it's easier said than done. With that in mind, we have polished our message and introduced our conflict competent model: Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively.

The second edition features two completely new chapters: one that addresses the model and one that offers guidance for conflict in teams. We've added references to recent research and many new suggestions for "staying in the zone." Examples are updated throughout. We've added a new constructive behavior, listening for understanding. We're especially proud of the enhancements (including tips and exercises at the end of each chapter) that make this edition much more user friendly as a personal resource or a text for teaching others.

Craig continues to serve as a thought-leader in the field as director of the Center for Conflict Dynamics at Eckerd College. Tim and his wife, Mac, have launched their own firm, Custom Leadership Solutions, specializing in conflict resolution, team building, and leadership development training. Together, we have appreciated the acceptance and proliferation of *conflict competence* throughout the leadership development and executive education industry.

We have many people to thank for their support, assistance, and views. Our wives, Kathy Runde and Mac Flanagan, once again became expert reviewers, proofreaders, and book widows.

Without their support, we'd be lost. Our children again inspired us, our colleagues grounded us, and our clients challenged us. Craig wants to thank his friend John Rogers for his helpful conversations and insights. Our editor, Kathe Sweeney, and her staff at Jossey-Bass have once again surpassed our expectations with advice, guidance, and encouragement.

We hope you find this new edition to be a valuable addition to your library. Even more, we hope you use it to enhance your personal leadership journey. If you discover just one single tip that enables you to address conflict in more successful and satisfying ways, we'll be thrilled. After all, the world with no conflict would be a pretty boring place.

October 2012

Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan
At the Chattaway
St. Petersburg, Florida
(our unofficial "office")

Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader

1

The What and Why of Conflict Competent Leaders

Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict.

—William Ellery Channing

The basic nature of human beings is to avoid painful or unpleasant experiences whenever possible. How many different versions of “I’d rather go to the dentist than [fill in the blank]” have you heard in your life? For most of us, dealing with conflict ranks right up there with impromptu public speaking or firing an employee. If you’ve ever filled in the blank above with anything resembling “deal with conflict,” you’re in exceptionally good company.

So what might motivate you to strive toward conflict competence? First, we believe that conflict in the workplace is bound to occur, so you may as well equip yourself with the skills to deal with it. Your workplace may be a Fortune 500 company or a family-owned small business. It may be a government office, a school, or a nonprofit agency. It really doesn’t matter, because conflict occurs in all workplaces. In our work, we have had the opportunity to interact with thousands of executives, directors, managers, and team leaders engaged in their personal leadership development processes. What we have learned from them about leadership and conflict, stated simply, is this: conflict is inevitable for leaders, and it exists at the root of some of their best ideas and at the core of many of their worst failures.

Second, the effects of conflict on both human resources and the bottom line are dramatic. So there is a level of leadership responsibility involved in addressing conflict. Effective leaders hold themselves accountable for establishing work environments that provide safety and respect while helping the organization meet business and financial goals. Effectively handling conflict encompasses both of these objectives.

Third, despite the avoidance response most of us experience when engaging in conflict, not all conflict is negative, painful, or unpleasant. On the contrary, conflict, if harnessed effectively, can be the catalyst for new ideas and creative solutions to challenging business issues. Jeff Weiss and Jonathon Hughes (2005) suggest that “executives underestimate not only the inevitability of conflict but also—and this is key—its importance to the organization. The disagreements sparked by differences in perspective, competencies, access to information, and strategic focus within a company actually generate much of the value that can come from collaboration across organizational boundaries. Clashes between parties are the crucibles in which creative solutions are developed and wise trade-offs among competing objectives are made” (p. 2). In other words, wise leaders should embrace conflict and find ways to encourage the proliferation of differences as a strategy that enables the organization to get and stay ahead.

Both the science and art of leadership have been studied and chronicled for decades. There are a myriad of leadership models, definitions, theories, and concepts. Who among us doesn't recall the great discussions focused on leadership versus management? Is a leader a manager? Is a manager a leader? Do leaders manage? Can managers lead? Today most of us agree that there are key differences between leadership and management. Nevertheless, the study of leadership and management shows no sign of slowing. In fact, over thirty-five hundred new management books are published each year (Pfeffer, 2005). In order to describe the conflict competent leader effectively, it seems appropriate to begin with a brief discussion of leadership.

Because we work in the field of leadership development, we prefer to think in terms of experiences, growth, and learning rather than a linear definition of leadership. It makes sense, though, to identify our broad definition of leaders. We believe that leaders are those whose roles in organizations include accountability for influencing others or establishing structure for others to follow, or those who are recognized for developing priorities for the organization. In most cases, leaders have formal role designations or titles: team leader, supervisor, manager, director, vice president, or president. In short, we believe that leaders are best identified by those who look to them for leadership. If you are a person who is consistently looked to for leadership, you are most likely a leader.

Leaders constantly learn from their experiences and actively seek opportunities for development. Leadership development has been defined at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) as the “expansion of a person’s capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes” (McCauley, Moxley, and Van Velsor, 1998, p. 25). The expansion of these capabilities occurs over time and is usually maximized through a variety of experiences that provide challenge, support, and opportunities to learn. And certainly context is important in shaping the development process. The most successful leaders continue to learn throughout their careers. They become aware of their most effective strengths and use them relentlessly. They are just as aware of their limitations, or “developmental opportunities,” and strive to improve or, in some cases, to minimize the effects of these limitations.

For many leaders, the area of conflict presents one of their most demanding challenges. This makes sense considering the sheer volume of conflict opportunities that leaders face. Leaders can find themselves in personal conflicts with others in the organization. They are also sought out to mediate conflicts among their direct reports or peers. Leaders are often asked for advice about how to handle conflicts or are looked to for conflict coaching. At times, they must grapple with conflict involving vendors,

clients, or other stakeholders. At other times, they must consider the culture in their organization, which may include assessing how conflict is treated at a strategic or systems level. Furthermore, the costs and opportunities associated with conflict demand leaders' attention. Because conflict is so often emotionally charged, there is a sense of urgency when it occurs, so it attracts leadership attention immediately. And conflict is frequently not resolved quickly, so leaders find themselves involved for substantial periods of time. Conflict definitely qualifies as a demanding leadership challenge.

The relationship between leadership and conflict appears natural and inevitable. It is our belief that defining conflict in broad terms makes the most sense for discussing its relationship to leadership. With this in mind, we refer to the work of our colleagues Sal Capobianco, Mark Davis, and Linda Kraus, the creators of the Conflict Dynamics Profile (CDP). The CDP is a groundbreaking assessment instrument that provides feedback on an individual's behaviors before, during, and after conflict. Its creators define conflict as "any situation in which people have incompatible interests, goals, principles or feelings" (Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus, 1999, p. 1). This definition certainly encompasses many different situations and contexts, as do a leader's role and scope. Leaders confront conflicts that arise regarding both short-term and long-standing issues, handle disagreements about strategies and tactics, and referee struggles for resources. They also discover conflict resulting from misperceptions, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and miscommunications among people. It appears that conflict can result from almost anything that puts at least two people in opposition.

As mentioned, in addition to handling conflicts among others, leaders often find themselves in disagreement with somebody about something. This is not to disparage those wonderful moments when everybody is "on board," the team is "flying in tight formation," or the entire organization is "marching in

the same direction.” These are times to savor and reinforce. Realistically, though, the notion of 100 percent buy-in is a lofty goal. When complete buy-in or agreement isn’t possible, why not respond as one of our close associates does with a hearty, “That’s great! We see it differently!” As we have already suggested, conflicts and disagreements present opportunities and should not be avoided. Some kinds of conflict can be productive and are at the very heart of creative ideas, innovative approaches, and previously unseen possibilities. Differing opinions and diverse perspectives can lead to new solutions and unexpected breakthroughs. Or conflict can become destructive when the disagreeing parties don’t handle their differences effectively. This dichotomy is at the fulcrum of the leader’s most crucial challenges when developing conflict competence. How do leaders encourage the exploration of differing viewpoints while minimizing the hazards of polarization? How do they know when to intervene in a dispute between or among others? What are the signs that a conflict is getting out of control? How do leaders stay attuned to their personal reactions and behaviors when they are involved in a conflict? Are there ways to construct effective organizational approaches to conflict? We believe that conflict competent leaders understand the dynamics of conflict, are aware of their strengths and developmental opportunities for handling personal conflict, model appropriate behaviors when engaged in conflict, find ways to foster constructive responses among others while reducing or avoiding destructive responses, and encourage the development of a conflict competent organization through systems and culture.

How does a leader acquire the skills and experience to develop this area of competency? Acquiring experience, if you agree with the notion that conflict is inevitable, will not be a problem. Lead long enough (we suspect a few days at most will be enough), and you will encounter conflict. A participant in one of our conflict workshops commented in the program evaluation, “I won’t have to look very hard to find opportunities to practice

the approaches I've learned in this class." Acquiring experience is not the issue.

Acquiring the skills is the primary challenge. And leaders who are conflict competent don't just "acquire" skills. They study, hone, and develop their skills over time as they encounter experience after experience. True to our leadership development roots, we believe that the most effective practices for developing competence are centered on exposure to a variety of developmental experiences coupled with the ability to learn. In one of the most extensive and revered studies of executive development, *The Lessons of Experience*, McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison (1988) categorized the key developmental experiences of leaders into three sets of lessons: assignments, the impact of others, and hardships.

Anyone using this framework can begin to imagine the variety of conflict experiences associated with each category. The assignments people accept during a career can be rife with conflict. How often are aspiring leaders given the challenge to "fix" an existing problem? Or "take over" a floundering project? Or present to an unfriendly audience? Or accept a new role with little or no training? A leader in any one of these cases can be instantly engulfed by the conflicting viewpoints of resistant workers, unhappy customers, or feuding colleagues. During a recent workshop, the general manager of a restaurant described the conflicting priorities she faced while opening a new facility: "I needed to keep the pressure on my assistant managers to complete the hiring of new employees by the deadline while at the same time insisting that they manage the training of existing employees in order to open the restaurant on time. I'm sure they thought I was unfair, unfeeling, and uncompromising in my approach. But what choice did I have? We had to have a critical mass hired, and we had to have the staff trained. There was no way I was going to be unprepared to open on time. As it turned out, we had a great opening, but I worry that I damaged some relationships along the way."

When considering the impact of others, most leaders are able to quickly identify people who provided positive models of accomplishment as well as those who were negative models. In later chapters, we explore the impact of constructive and destructive behaviors on conflict situations. For most of us, it is easy to recall the actions of others that demonstrate both sets of behavior.

Finally, lessons learned as a result of hardships can be associated readily with conflict situations. Most leaders are able to identify events or periods of time they describe as personal or career setbacks. A senior vice president at a major high-tech firm with whom we worked described his greatest challenge over the final few months of his tenure like this: “I’d estimate that 70 percent of my work-related energy was spent on managing the lousy relationship I had with my boss. We just didn’t seem to see anything eye to eye. Not only did I constantly battle him at work, but I found that I’d carry the negativity home with me every day, and it began to spill over with my family and friends. I didn’t know it at the time, but my wife later told me I was like a flea carrying the plague. Every person I touched was likely to be infected by the conflict I was bringing home from work.” Although not all setbacks and hardships are the direct result of conflict, it is reasonable to assert that they can provide the precipitating event or starting point for a conflict to develop.

We are certain that all leaders will experience conflict as they lead. In leadership development terms, those with an adequate ability to learn will be in positions to acquire, analyze, and apply knowledge to their experiences. Experience and ability to learn are the ingredients that lead to skill development, which is necessary for becoming competent—in this case, conflict competent. Our purpose is not to review the extensive research and documentation about best leadership development practices. Rather, the bulk of this book explores what we have learned about conflict and how leaders develop the skills to become conflict competent.

Individual Conflict Competence

Conflict competence is the ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation or harm (Runde and Flanagan, 2010). Conflict competence improves relationships and leads to creative, lasting solutions. Fortunately, the skills needed for conflict competence can be learned.

We believe that developing skills, learning mental models, and applying basic principles are the keys to developing conflict competence. Our model is simple and involves three key steps: Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively. The model suggests that those who deal well with emotions, are mindful of the ramifications of conflict, and use effective skills during conflict have the best chance of productive outcomes.

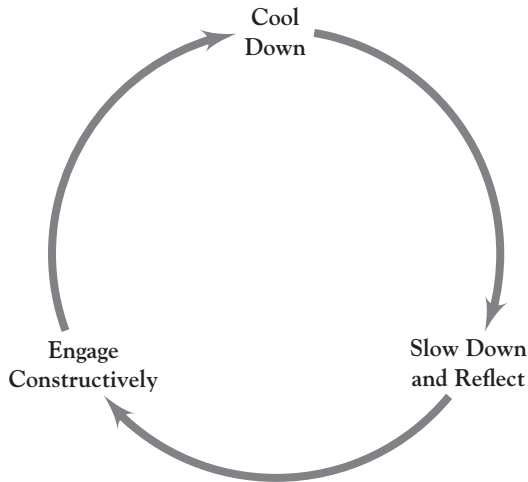
A number of principles (adapted from Runde and Flanagan, 2010, pp. 3–5) focus on the essence of individual conflict competence:

1. People are generally reluctant to address conflict. In order to overcome this reluctance, they need to believe that the value of managing conflict effectively is significant.

Motivation is as important as knowledge in developing conflict competence. Changing established beliefs and patterns of behavior is difficult, and unless people see value in doing so, it won't happen.

2. Individual conflict competence involves developing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that enable you to cool down, slow down and reflect, and engage conflict constructively.

Our Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively model (see Figure 1.1) outlines a path you can use to manage conflict effectively. When faced with

Figure 1.1 Individual Conflict Competence Model

conflict, people respond in a variety of ways. They think about what is happening. They experience emotional reactions that are influenced by the ways they view and interpret the conflict. They also take action to address the concerns that the conflict raises. In order to be able to deal effectively with conflict, you need to be able to improve your cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills so that you can cool down, slow down and reflect, and engage the matter constructively.

3. Cognitive skills include developing self-awareness about your current attitudes and responses to conflict and an understanding of the basic dynamics of conflict.

Self-awareness plays a key role in leadership more generally as well as in conflict management. This includes an understanding of how you currently view conflict, what triggers you in the first place, and how you behaviorally respond when conflict occurs. Improved self-awareness allows you to leverage effective responses and at the same time work on improving areas where you are less effective.

4. Emotional intelligence includes understanding your emotional responses to conflict, and regulating those responses to attain and maintain emotional balance.

In order to use constructive behavioral responses to conflict, you first need to manage your emotional responses. When these are in balance, you can become curious, and curiosity is a key factor in engaging your conflict partner constructively (Frederickson, 2009). Conflict is all about emotions, and managing your emotions provides a foundation from which to consciously choose constructive behavioral responses.

5. Behavioral skills include engaging constructively by understanding others' perspectives, emotions, and needs; sharing your own thoughts, feelings, and interests; collaborating to develop creative solutions to issues; and reaching out to get communication restarted when it has stalled.

There is considerable agreement about the kinds of behaviors that work well to resolve conflicts. These include *listening to understand* how other people see an issue, *sharing* your own perspectives, *working together* to develop effective solutions to problems, and *keeping communication open*. When you use these behaviors, conflict moves in more productive directions.

6. Engaging constructively also includes reducing or eliminating the use of destructive behaviors. These fight-or-flight responses to conflict typically escalate negativity.

It may be easier to default to destructive fight-or-flight behaviors, either because these are the kinds of responses you have learned or because you are upset, and turn reactive to protect yourself. Reducing these behaviors depends in large part on developing and practicing new, more constructive approaches and on regulating emotional reactions to conflict.

We encourage leaders who want to be conflict competent to learn more about the dynamics of conflict and their responses to it, enhance their emotional intelligence, reflect on what is happening in the conflict, and improve their constructive communication skills. In the next few pages, we provide an overview of these skill areas.

Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict and Your Responses to It

Conflict competent leaders do not have to be experts in the study of human behavior. They will benefit, though, from understanding the nature of some basic human responses such as “fight or flight” and the “retaliatory cycle.” Many of us experience strong emotional reactions to conflict. At times our instinct is to dig in and defend our positions at all costs. When confronted with arguments different from our own, we respond by arguing equally or more vehemently for our side. This is the “fight” response. In other situations, we find our emotional barometer urging us to escape the conflict situation, avoiding the confrontation or disagreement as best we can. Removing ourselves from the conflict as completely as possible and avoiding the other party seems the only reasonable choice. This is the “flight” response.

There are times when despite our intentions (and the best intentions of our conflict partner), the conflict seems to spin more and more out of control into the ever-deepening chasm of irreconcilable differences. The nature of our communication and the perceptions of our conflict partner contribute insidiously to a pattern of responses that leads us down a path of negativity and destruction with little hope for resolution. This “retaliatory cycle” is observable, manageable, and reversible.

The key to applying this understanding of the dynamics of conflict lies in the ability to observe and detect a myriad of subtle human interaction cues. A raised eyebrow here or strain in the voice there may be the clues that alert the conflict competent

leader to the potential conflict lurking just below the surface. The real trick is to monitor the clues and decide just how to respond. The conflict competent leader is adept at encouraging constructive conflict and equally skilled at handling conflict that becomes destructive.

It is especially crucial for conflict competent leaders to understand and embrace their own strengths and developmental opportunities in regard to conflict. The most effective leaders are known for being models of exemplary behavior. This notion has never been truer than as it applies to conflict. Self-awareness is critical.

As human beings, we experience emotions. As individuals, we experience emotions in unique and profound ways. In addition, as human beings, we have the ability to reason. Each of us has our own “wiring” when it comes to thinking and reasoning. We are uniquely individual. In our individuality, we respond to conflict in cognitive and emotional ways. For leaders, it is of utmost importance to be aware of their personal reactions to conflict so that they can manage their responses and model the most effective behaviors before, during, and after conflict. The way leaders are seen handling conflict sends strong signals to those around them about their ability to assist them when they experience conflict. In order to establish credibility as a conflict competent leader, you must model constructive engagement in conflict. In Chapter Two, we will explore these subjects in more depth.

Managing Your Emotions

It is only recently that significant attention has been paid to the role of emotions in conflict. Our experience is that conflict is all about emotions, and enhancing your capacity to manage them effectively can make the difference between well-managed conflict and disaster. Emotional regulation is a challenge, but one that is essential to becoming conflict competent. Yet people generally try to suppress emotions and look as though they are “playing it cool.” This tendency is influenced by culture; many

cultures prefer emotional reserve, and others support being more direct about emotions.

In many Western countries, it is as though there were an invisible sign outside the front of the headquarters building that reads “Check Your Emotions Here.” People feel that they need to repress emotions. Yet research has found that repression is the worst of all emotional management techniques (Gross, 1998a). It is essential to find a way to manage your emotions so that you can be more balanced when you face conflict. In Chapter Three, we will explore several approaches for doing this.

Reflecting on Conflict

Confusing and chaotic—these two terms describe the landscape of conflict. When your emotions get aroused, your thoughts can become scattered. It is easy to go into defense mode to protect yourself from perceived threats to your interests. When you’re dealing with conflict is the very time, though, when you need clarity in order to discover insights and solutions.

Taking time to reflect about how you are experiencing a conflict is critical before engaging with others to find solutions. Thinking about other people’s perspectives and interests can deepen your understanding of why people may be behaving the way they are. People rarely spend enough time reflecting on and preparing for conflict conversations. This work can lessen the tension associated with such discussions by helping you think through possible approaches and potential responses from the other person. We will look more deeply into slowing down and reflecting in Chapter Four.

Fostering Constructive Responses (and Reducing Destructive Responses)

One of the basic tenets of our work is this: people who are most effective at handling conflict behave in constructive ways. These

constructive behaviors are identifiable, learnable, and applicable. The more you employ these behaviors before, during, and after conflict, the more effective you become at handling conflict.

The work of Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus (1999) presents two sets of behaviors associated with responses to conflict: constructive behaviors, which tend to reduce tension and keep the conflict focused on ideas and information rather than people; and destructive behaviors, which tend to make things worse and escalate the conflict. The focus shifts to personalities and people and away from ideas. Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus suggest thinking of conflict as a fire: constructive behaviors help control the fire; destructive behaviors fan the flames.

Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus have identified seven constructive behaviors and eight destructive behaviors. The constructive behaviors are perspective taking, creating solutions, expressing emotions, reaching out, reflective thinking, delay responding, and adapting. In this book, we have added an additional constructive behavior, listening for understanding. The destructive behaviors are winning at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, retaliating, avoiding, yielding, hiding emotions, and self-criticizing.

Chapter Five deals with destructive behaviors, and Chapter Six focuses on constructive ones. In these chapters, we will explore in depth how the use of constructive behaviors leads to favorable outcomes as well as a reduction of destructive behaviors. Conflict competent leaders will not only discover how to use constructive behaviors themselves but also see the desirability of coaching others to do the same.

Team and Organizational Conflict Competence

The most effective leaders do more than just enhance their own conflict competence. They model effective behaviors and influence or develop others. They also find ways to transform their teams' conflict climate and their organization's conflict culture.