

Non-Purposeful Quote

The argument culture urges us to approach the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done: The best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; the best way to cover news is to find spokespeople who express the most extreme, polarized views and present them as “both sides”; the best way to settle disputes is litigation that pits one party against the other; the best way to begin an essay is to attack someone; and the best way to show you’re really thinking is to criticize...Conflict and opposition are as necessary as cooperation and agreement, but the scale is off balance, with conflict and opposition over-weighted. – Deborah Tannen

The quote above sounds ominous. With that cultural mindset why would we embrace conflict? My goal is to offer an explanation by way of two factors.

- First is to offer some skills that will increase your ability to manage conflict and to actually utilize conflict in the work that you do with families and organizations.
- Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I want to increase your own awareness of your own thoughts, feelings, and blind spots as relate to conflict. I’m a big believer in self-awareness and in fact it informs all of the work that I do. As Aristotle stated, “Knowing oneself is the beginning of all wisdom.

Key to any successful relationship is how we deal with conflict. At the heart of healthy and vibrant relationships is being able to address conflict in a manner that helps us to stay connected and that allows our dialogue to continue. Many of us are not particularly skilled at handling conflict. We might just avoid it all together. We might be the person who escalates a conflict into hurt feelings and/or disengagement.

When I work with couples, families, and organizations, one of the things I assess is the level of conflict, how it is expressed and how is it resolved or not resolved. When I don’t see conflict I am alarmed. In a couple or a family where there is no conflict I am concerned that there might essentially be one person in the relationship. The others do not express themselves. Possibly they are hampered by their own anxiety or internal issues. Or there might be a cost to expressing oneself in a relationship or family or organizational system. Or sometimes the history of unresolved conflict just leaves people feeling hopeless and helpless in the face of conflict. At the other end of the continuum are high levels of conflict. At this end of the continuum conflict is frequent, is expressed intensely, and does not get resolved.

Somewhere in the middle is where we find healthy conflict. Ultimately in this position we would find people who are comfortable with their emotion, theirs and others. We would find people who can listen, who can collaborate, and can change their perspective to see things from the other persons’ perspective. The research tells us that most (90%) (1% school) and (10% work) of one’s responses to conflict come from one’s own upbringing and family dynamics.

In preparing for this workshop I read up on conflict from multiple perspectives including organizational leadership, family therapy, couples therapy, neuroscience, coaching models, individual self-improvement. I found five themes that ran through everything I read:

- Self-awareness is a necessary skill and state of being for healthy conflict dynamics.
- Conflict is all about emotion.
- Curiosity about other perspectives is a key factor in engaging conflict partners constructively.
- Trust and safety are paramount for healthy conflict dynamics.
- ‘Foot in the Mouth’ comments are very hard to undo.

COGNITIVE COMPETENCY SKILLS

Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan ([Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader](#)) coined the term Conflict Competency. Cognitive competency involves the ability to develop and use *cognitive, emotional, and behavioral* skills that enhance productive outcomes while reducing escalation or harm. Let’s go over these separately.

COGNITIVE Skills are:

- The ability to develop self- awareness about one’s current attitudes and responses to conflict. For example, knowing what triggers one; and what are the attitudes one holds that affect their response to conflict.

EMOTIONAL skills are:

- Being able to manage one’s emotions. One needs to understand one’s emotional responses to conflict and to regulate those emotions.
- Responding to the emotions of one’s conflict partners, and using cool down steps when necessary.

BEHAVIORAL skills are:

- Engaging constructively by understanding the other person or persons' perspectives, needs, and emotions. Focusing on the other person's words and behaviors, not your assumptions. Listening to the other person with the intent of understanding rather than debating. Not interrupting. Summarizing what you hear.
- Sharing one's own thoughts and feelings. Feelings are often at the core of a conflict. Pick the right time and place. Express yourself in a way that casts no blame.
- Collaborating to develop creative solutions. Identify multiple solutions, not just one. Be willing to compromise. You are looking for a solution, not a victory.
- Reaching out to re-start communications when they have stalled. Make the first move. Attempt to repair the emotional damage that has been caused during a conflict. Be willing to apologize.

TOOLS AND MODELS

TOOLS

ASSESSMENT TOOLS. I'm a big believer in assessment tools, both for the information they offer and as a springboard to conversation.

- They help people understand conflict dynamics
- They help people understand themselves and set goals for their personal learning
- They help people understand others

Some good ones are: Conflict Dynamics Profile, the Thomas-Kilman Assessment, and the Hiam Dealing with Conflict Instrument.

TO DECREASE DEFENSIVENESS

- Be more descriptive and less evaluative
- Be more interested in problem solving and less interested in control
- Be more genuine and less manipulative
- Move from superiority to equality

COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION. Neuroscience offers ways to communicate that effect the brain in ways that build trust, resolve conflict, and increase intimacy.

- Speak briefly. The human mind can hold about four chunks of information and it can hold them only for thirty seconds or less.
- Be positive. Negativity increases conflict exponentially.
- Think before speaking. Duh.
- Relax and stay present.
- Cultivate inner silence and reflect on your deepest values
- Observe non-verbal cues.
- Speak warmly and slowly.

MODELS

CENTER FOR SOCIAL LEADERSHIP

1. Affirm the relationship as being more valuable than dealing with the discomfort caused by dealing with the conflict
2. Seek to understand
3. Seek to be understood
4. Own your responsibility
5. Seek agreement

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY is a collaborative reflective process that allows organizations, teams, and families to engage in the process of construction by telling their stories about the past, present, and future. It uses the power of story to recognize the relationship between how people think about their future and how they move toward it.

1. Discovery
2. Dream
3. Design
4. Delivery

REINA TRUST MODEL (Dennis and Michelle Reina) for developing and regaining team trust

1. Observing and acknowledging what happened
2. Allowing feelings about the breach to surface
3. Getting support from a friend or trusted colleague to address the feelings
4. Reframing the experience to look for lessons that can come from it.
5. Taking responsibility for your part in the matter
6. Forgiving yourself and others
7. Letting go and moving on

Here is why we embrace conflict. Conflict presents an opportunity to become more connected to ourselves, our dreams, our creativity, and to one another. When we learn to embrace conflict with an open heart and curiosity we find it promotes personal growth.

It forces us to become more flexible thinkers, more tolerant, and more open minded. It increases our ability to effectively communicate. It increases our ability to give people the benefit of the doubt and to be more empathic. We set the stage for our relationships to be more dynamic. It increases the potential for lasting agreements for addressing challenges and opportunities for the future.

**We embrace conflict for the miraculous results that are possible
On our path towards personal transformation.**

Purposeful Conflict Quote:

Every conflict we face in life is rich with positive and negative potential. It can be a source of inspiration, enlightenment, learning, transformation, and growth—or rage, fear, shame, entrapment, and resistance. The choice is not up to our opponents, but to us, and our willingness to face and work through them.

– Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith