STRATEGY 1

UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE AND DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT

Only someone who is ready for everything, who doesn't exclude any experience, even the most incomprehensible, will live the relationship with another person as something alive and will himself sound the depths of his own being. For if we imagine this being of the individual as a larger or smaller room, it is obvious that most people come to know only one corner of their room, one spot near the window, one narrow strip on which they keep walking back and forth. In this way they have a certain security. And yet how much more human is the dangerous insecurity that drives those prisoners in Poe's stories to feel out the shapes of their horrible dungeons and not be strangers to the unspeakable terror of their cells. We, however, are not prisoners.

— Rainer Maria Rilke

How many of us work in organizations where we know only one small corner of what is possible, where we continue walking back and forth along a narrow, limited, controlled strip of existence? How many of us think, feel, and act this way in our conflicts and, in exchange for peace or security, become their prisoners, along with our opponents and organizations?

As we begin this examination of the conflicts in our work lives, let us not be prisoners of their hidden dynamics, or strangers to ourselves and one another. Let us agree to explore the cultural shapes and dynamics of our conflicts, where their hidden meanings suddenly become clear. Let us no longer experience them as dungeons, but as opportunities for learning and improvement, and as journeys that can take us far beyond the seemingly insurmountable differences that somehow keep us imprisoned.

Decoding the Culture of Conflict

What is it that keeps us imprisoned and stuck in conflict? In the first place, it is our *perceptions* of what has happened, including the issues over which we are arguing, the character of our opponent, our own inner nature, the ways we are able to think about and respond to it, the history of our relationship, and the unspoken expectations and assumptions in our workplaces and organizations about the *meaning* of conflict, whose fault it is, and what can or ought to be done about it.

A useful way of thinking about all of these perceptions, expectations, and assumptions is that they form part of, and are influenced and defined by the *culture*, or more specifically, by what we think of as the "culture of conflict" that is present, though largely unspoken and undiscussed, in every workplace and organization.

It may help to think of your own culture of conflict in the following way. Every society, organization, workplace, group, family, and ongoing intimate relationship creates not only occasional conflicts and disagreements, but a complex set of words, ideas, values, behaviors, attitudes, expectations, assumptions, archetypes, customs, and rules that powerfully influence how its members think about and respond to them.

These cultures of conflict are shaped by our previous experiences, particularly in our families of origin. They set the basic parameters and "default settings" for what we consider possible when we are in conflict, and define what we can reasonably expect to happen, both from ourselves and from others. They shape our capacity to ask questions, alter how we see our opponents and ourselves, and tell us what is acceptable and what is not.

Every workplace and organization, school and neighborhood, family and relationship generates spoken and unspoken rules about what people should and should not say and do when they are in conflict. Each of these entities thereby produces a distinct culture that exerts enormous pressure on its members to respond to conflicts and disagreements in ways that reflect the boundaries and traditions of the culture.

Conflict is a kind of social rupture, a potential dissolution of the bonds that keep people together, and it is important that there be rules to make sure this does not happen when disagreements are trivial, or can easily be resolved. At the same time, conflict is a time-honored way for people to get more of what they need or want, and a method of introducing necessary improvements, so it is important that disagreements not completely disappear.

For these reasons, many organizational cultures place a premium on conflict suppression and avoidance. Many highly competitive corporate cultures give rewards for aggressive conflict behaviors; others reward accommodation or compromise, and still others *preach* collaboration but practice avoidance and accommodation. Each of these cultures possesses a subtle set of rules regarding how their members should behave, with whom, over what, and what will happen to them if they don't.

In many workplaces, we find dismissive attitudes that regard conflict resolution as pointless or "touchy-feely"; conflict-averse cultures that reward avoidance and accommodation; aggressive, hyper-competitive cultures that permit bullying and retribution or reprisal for speaking the truth. Others develop bureaucratic rules and regulations regarding conflict that encourage passive-aggressive behaviors, promote hypocritical, self-serving leaders, or tolerate covert systems that generate chronic, morale-crushing, yet completely avoidable conflicts.

As we scan our current organizational and workplace cultures, we search in vain for signs of support for genuine collaboration with our opponents; for cultures that value open, creative dialogue regarding problems; for honest, empathetic, self-critical leadership in addressing

3

and responding to conflicts; and for preventative, persistent, systemic approaches to resolution and learning.

It is rare in most organizational cultures that aggression, avoidance, and accommodation require explanation, whereas collaboration, honesty, openness, and forgiveness seem vaguely unacceptable. Novelist Albert Camus, observing a similar phenomenon during World War II, wrote, "Through a curious transposition peculiar to our times, it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself."

Our colleague, Harvard University Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter, has written a summary of the conflict-generating rules in many organizational cultures that discourage resolution and actively stifle innovation and change:

1. Regard any new idea from below with suspicion—because it's new, and because it's from below.

2. Insist that people who need your approval to act first go through several other levels of management to get their signatures.

3. Ask departments or individuals to challenge and criticize each other's proposals (that saves you the job of deciding; you just pick the survivor).

4. Express your criticisms freely, and withhold your praise (that keeps people on their toes). Let them know that they can be fired at any time.

5. Treat identification of problems as signs of failure, to discourage people from letting you know when some thing in their area isn't working.

6. Control everything carefully. Make sure people count anything that can be counted, frequently.

7. Make decisions to reorganize or change policies in secret, and spring them on people unexpectedly (that also keeps them on their toes).

8. Make sure that requests for information are fully justified, and make sure that it is not given out to managers freely (you don't want data to fall into the wrong hands).

9. Assign to a lower-level manager, in the name of delegation and participation, responsibility for figuring out how to cut back, lay off, move people around, or otherwise implement threatening decisions you made.

10. And above all, never forget that you, the higher-ups, already know everything important about the business.

Conflict Messages in Popular Culture

The seductive, hypnotic power of negative, limited approaches to conflict are enhanced by powerful images in the popular media, to which we are continually subjected. Newspapers are sold with headlines featuring conflict following the classic editorial injunction, "if it bleeds, it leads." Television dramas and news reports alternately accentuate or trivialize it. Sporting events bristle with it and pass it on to their fans. Soap operas play with it. Advertising captures it in images, or creates a phony, superficial world where it cannot even be imagined.

Look carefully at the messages that are broadcast daily through movies, television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and advertising about conflict, and ask yourself: What ideas are being communicated? What behaviors are being reinforced or emulated by paying attention to them? What ideas and actions do others implicitly regard as unworthy of attention or emulation? How often does the hero respond to conflict by mediating, collaboratively negotiating, or resolving it without violence or hostility?

As we experience this continual cultural assault, our threshold of acceptance for violence and aggression is lowered, our capacity for peacemaking is undermined, and we become more and more addicted to the adrenaline rush of combat. Many of the effects of this continuous immersion in conflict are immediate and pervasive. They include a brutalization of the soul, a loss of capacity for empathy with the suffering of others, an overwhelming fear of violence, an anxiety about social acceptance, a numbing capitulation to unacceptable behaviors, a cynicism about human worth, an avoidance of social intimacy, a political paranoia, a retreat into compliant behavior, and a "bread and circuses" atmosphere.

Like addicts, we are alternately being numbed and "shot up" with negative images, not only of conflict but of efforts to resolve it without violence. In common media imagery, if we are to judge by movies and television, pacifism is naive and idealistic, saintly or cowardly, or merely passive and ineffectual; listening and thoughtfulness are regarded as boring or stupid; caution is seen as cowardice; aggression is a sign of passion; and cruelty represents seriousness of character.

These images divert our attention from solving problems that *appear* insurmountable because of the way they are described, or because we are no longer capable of paying attention to them, or we view our opponents as evil-doers who are solely responsible for them.

Increasingly we see ourselves as isolated and alone and cannot imagine banding together to bring about change. More and more we are afraid of public criticism, censure, controversy, or retaliation for violating accepted cultural norms.

In response to this cultural onslaught, many societies, workplaces, and organizations have developed internal ecosystems that promote conflict avoidance, or engage in polite, superficial communications that sweep issues under the rug. In these cultures, people spend an extraordinary amount of time hiding from honest communications, feeling trapped in unresolved disputes, being confused over unclear messages, and unsuccessfully trying to make their needs and feelings heard and understood.

People in these cultures spend little time learning what their conflicts are actually about—what caused them, why people are so upset, why they have such a hard time saying what they really think and feel, or talking directly, openly, and honestly about what matters to them. As a result, they fail to learn from their conflicts, resist change, and cannot see how they might respond more skillfully to their own obstacles and problems, or those experienced by others.

A dramatic example of this self-reinforcing spiral of conflict occurred in an engineering and maintenance division of a Fortune 100 manufacturing company in which we consulted. The engineers saw themselves as a highly skilled, well-educated elite corps. Their mission was to respond to requests from the manufacturing divisions to build equipment that would produce quality products and generate profits. Although they were not a revenue-generating center, they considered themselves to be central to the company's vision, mission, and goals.

Also in the same division was a maintenance crew that consisted of electricians, carpenters, and building managers who saw themselves as craftspeople. They were responsible for repairing the equipment that was built or purchased by the engineers and maintaining the machinery and buildings that housed it. Each group occupied a different status within the division and held the other in disdain. Not only had they developed completely different organizational cultures, languages, and attitudes that disregarded the contributions of others and described them as obstructionist, their mutual hostility began to undermine their ability to successfully complete even routine work projects and sent them into a downward spiral of conflict.

The engineers who introduced new equipment neglected or refused to provide directions, instructions, blueprints, or repair charts to

the craftspeople who were required to maintain and repair it. The maintenance staff, in turn, neglected or refused to inform the engineers when they modified the equipment, repaired it, or changed the location of machinery the engineers had installed, leading to frequent and chronic miscommunications, petty disputes, and conflicts.

When the maintenance staff aggressively challenged the engineers to supply the information they needed, the response they received was hostile and dismissive. The engineers saw these requests as unnecessary incursions into their protected, elite, professional domain, whereas the maintenance staff considered the engineer's reactions as stonewalling what they saw as logical and necessary requests.

Maintenance, on the other hand, considered engineering's requests to know when and how the equipment had been modified, became defunct, was moved, or broke down as "none of their damn business." Needless to say, the division's overall organizational culture resulting from these disputes was characterized by "turfism," competition, mutual suspicion, conflict avoidance, small acts of aggression, and bureaucratic bungling, all of which cost the organization a great deal and took months to fix.

To their credit, they did address the problem with facilitated open meetings that began with confessions of disregard and mutual admissions that they had bungled opportunities for collaboration. A joint team of six engineers and craftsmen came up with a set of guidelines for timing and a list of communication ground rules that everyone agreed to follow and revise when necessary. It was not easy, but with effort and commitment, they were able to shift their culture of conflict in a positive direction.

Shifting Conflict Cultures Globally and Locally

Our challenge, like that of the organization described above, is to release ourselves from pointless, unproductive cultural patterns and build organizational cultures that value openness, honesty, dialogue, collaboration, negotiation, conflict resolution, and the ability to learn from our conflicts and our opponents. The difficulty is that we can no longer do so exclusively locally, or in isolation from conflict cultures around the world.

Our local conflict cultures are now directly impacted by international events, including wars, arms races, religious intolerance, environmental disasters, and outbreaks of terrorism, as well as by

drug and arms trafficking, climate change, global pandemics, cutbacks in scarce resources, and international financial crises that lead to constricted public budgets, downsizing, layoffs, mergers, unfriendly acquisitions, and strikes.

Moreover, cross-cultural conflicts have become a fact of life in many of our organizations, due not only to the increasing globalization of manufacturing, finances, services, and culture, but to the development of diverse leadership and staff; to the growing interdependence of worldwide customers, markets, vendors, and suppliers; and to the explosive impact of technology on creating instantaneous global cross-cultural communications.

As a result of these developments, globalization is also having an impact on dispute resolution, increasing the frequency and consequences of conflicts in today's corporations, nonprofits, educational institutions, and government agencies. These worldwide ripples can no longer be dismissed as isolated or trivial. In response, we require a new approach to conflict, and a new, invigorated *international* culture of resolution.

Each of us can improve the way we respond to the conflicts that touch us, whether they are local or global in scope. As we do, we gradually begin to shift the cultures of conflict that we have created or tolerated around us—in our homes, families, schools, organizations, communities, and nations. As we achieve a critical mass in favor of conflict resolution, our larger cultures and societies will begin to change in the way they respond to conflict as well.

We think of this as a conflict resolution "butterfly effect," in which every tiny effort at resolution ripples outward to produce a subtle, yet cumulatively positive effect, on a local level in our families and workplaces, and on a global scale in the cultures and attitudes of people toward their conflicts and the resolution process.

For example, it is possible for us to reduce the level of conflict avoidance in our workplace cultures simply by listening empathetically and responsively to our opponents, honestly and nonaggressively communicating our differences, and collaboratively discussing our issues with others in a spirit of trying to find better solutions. In doing so, it is possible to share our cultural traditions, expectations, and assumptions with our opponents, and reach across our cultural differences to find ways we can each communicate more effectively. Here are some small yet powerful ways you can "think globally and

act locally,'' and begin to shift the conflict culture in your workplace, organization, school, community, or family:

- Increase your ability to empathize with your opponents and colleagues, and generously acknowledge their contributions to your learning and improvement.
- Discuss disagreements publicly and don't allow them to be swept under the rug.
- Be self-critical about the role you have played in your conflicts.
- Agree not to engage in caustic insults, accusations, or vitriolic attacks on others.
- Encourage your opponents and colleagues to let go of ancient, unresolved grievances and create common ground with each other.
- Build consensus, particularly over vision, mission, goals, ground rules, and shared values.
- Reach out to communicate across cultural boundaries or borders, and publicly resist the temptation to slip into ''us versus them'' thinking.
- Publicly identify avoidant, aggressive, and covert or passive-aggressive behaviors, and ask yourself and others whether you *want* to engage in them, or believe they will prove helpful in the long run.
- Encourage your opponents and coworkers to honestly and empathetically communicate their thoughts and feelings about how you and they are interacting, and ask them how they would like to interact with you in the future.
- Publicly invite your opponents and colleagues to engage in dialogue and collaborative negotiation or mediation with you in order to solve your common problems.
- Seek forgiveness and reconciliation within yourself, with your colleagues and your opponents, and let them know how and why you did so.
- Collaboratively identify the elements of your conflict culture that are blocking or supporting resolution and continually improve them.

In these ways, we can begin to change the conflict-averse, avoidant, and aggressive elements in our conflict cultures—and, more

important, increase our awareness of the subtle forms of violence and prejudice that are routinely practiced and rationalized around the world, thereby encouraging others, both locally and globally, to be more open, honest, empathetic, committed, and collaborative when they are in conflict.

Altering the Dynamics: Seeing Conflict as an Opportunity

It is difficult in the midst of conflict to deepen our capacity for empathy and understanding with our opponents. For example, we commonly get angry at things that go wrong, and our anger transforms a person who may have made an innocent mistake into a stereotypical demon or villain. We then become upset, get stressed, feel victimized, and believe we are powerless to respond or to change their attitude or behavior.

Similarly, we commonly become defensive in response to anger that is directed at us by others for what we believe is some innocent mistake, causing us to feel upset in response and unable to communicate openly and honestly with people we now view as our opponents, or to listen deeply and carefully to what they mean beneath the angry, negative, judgmental words they are repeating.

On the other hand, when we engage in dialogue with our opponents we resurrect their human side—and become able to express our own as well. By acting with integrity in conflict, we increase our awareness and stimulate self-improvement in others. Uncontrolled anger, defensiveness, fear, and shame defeat these possibilities and leave us feeling weaker. We all feel more powerful when we face our problems, negotiate our differences, and search for resolution; and we all feel weaker when we succumb to negative emotions and refuse to talk with the other person, or even try to resolve our differences.

It is a bitter truth that victories won in anger lead to long-term defeat. Anger causes everyone to feel they lost and leads to additional problems in the future. In conflict, everyone suffers, everyone feels betrayed and unjustly accused, everyone feels hurt and brokenhearted. If there is no resulting dialogue or resolution, both parties carry these unresolved injuries with them into their ongoing relationship, making their next conflict more probable and more serious.

If, on the other hand, both parties are genuinely able to experience their conflicts as opportunities to learn what is not working and how to fix it, they will not be so frightened by their anger. Instead, they will experience it, perhaps, as an indication of frustration and caring,

as an opportunity to learn how to be honest without making others mad, or as a chance to experience their own feelings and become more aware of how their anger and other negative emotions work.

Clearly, finding a solution to your conflicts depends on your ability to understand what caused them. This depends, in turn, on your ability to listen to your opponent as you would to a teacher. Doing so will allow you to halt the cycle of escalation and motivate a search for insight and opportunities for improvement. Thus, different—even antagonistic—points of view can help you create a larger, more complex analysis of what may otherwise appear as a simple, narrow problem, and identify richer, more creative, comprehensive, and effective solutions.

Finally, your conflict can lead you to a deeper understanding, not only of your opponent, yourself, your conflict, and your organizational conflict culture, but also of the complex relationships, holistic interactions, and large-scale evolution of these elements at your workplace and within its culture. Increased awareness of the deeper causes and subtle nature of conflicts in general, the intricacies of interpersonal communication and group process, and understanding the reasons why people become angry with each other, can help you develop a more profound understanding of the chronic *systemic* sources of conflict throughout the organization and lead you to more effective methods of resolution.

The Dynamics of Conflict

If it is possible for us to see our conflicts as opportunities, why do we persist in engaging in them as forms of combat? What fuels our negative attitudes in conflict? How do we get trapped in them? Why do we respond to perceived hostility or aggression in such futile, counterproductive, self-defeating ways? Why do we respond with automatic reactions and responses that make us less inclined to listen to our opponents?

The principal driving force in determining the character of our participation in conflict, the nature of our conflict cultures, and our perception of the choices available to us when confronted with aggression, hostility, or opposition, has been a powerful and instinctual, habitual response that is embodied in what is commonly called the "fight-or-flight" reflex.

Let's begin by diagramming the typical neurophysiological responses most of us have to perceived aggression. Assume that the first move
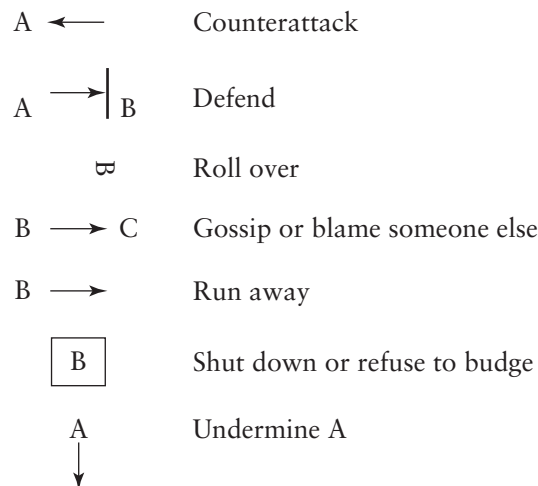
11

in our conflict is made by the other person, whom we will call A, and let's assume that A has engaged in some action that we, B, perceive as aggressive, hostile, or directed against us. To make this clear, let's illustrate the opening move in the conflict, as B sees it, as follows:

$$A \rightarrow B$$

We are not concerned here with what A actually did or intended, or with the subject matter of the dispute, or with whether some third party did something to trigger A's actions. Instead, we are concerned solely with what B *perceives*. From B's perspective, A is behaving hostilely, and if we analyze B's initial instinctual response, B's view of the action is the only one that counts.

On the basis of this diagram, what can we predict about what B will do next? Based on the perceived hostility that is coming from A, what options does B perceive? The next chart illustrates the most common responses B might make to A's perceived aggression. As you scan this chart, think about the responses you make most often when you are in conflict. If you recognize any of B's typical responses in what your opponent is directing toward you, you can assume you have become A in your opponent's eyes.

It is therefore likely that B will respond to A's perceived attack in one of the following ways:

A $\longleftarrow$	Counterattack
A $\longrightarrow\mid$ B	Defend
ᗺ	Roll over
B $\longrightarrow$ C	Gossip or blame someone else
B $\longrightarrow$	Run away
$\boxed{B}$	Shut down or refuse to budge
A $\downarrow$	Undermine A

Notice that in each of B's possible responses, A appears more dominant and powerful while B seems weaker and merely responsive

to A's cues. Notice also that A "gets something" from every one of B's responses:

- If B counterattacks, A will succeed in getting B's attention and earn support or sympathy from others by no longer appearing to be the one who initiated the dispute.
- If B withdraws, A wins, and can say that B refuses to talk or is never available.
- If B becomes defensive, A can say that B is not listening or is just being defensive.
- If B gossips to C, blames A, or refuses to budge, A can criticize B for gossiping, defensiveness, bad-mouthing, and refusing to accept responsibility for solutions.
- A may even, as a result of B's responses, look like the innocent victim of B's unprovoked attack to an outside observer who did not actually see A attack B first!

In each of these responses, B actually does A a *favor* by entering the conflict, and paradoxically increases A's power by responding in the ways diagrammed. B also loses the moral high ground and aura of leadership by sinking to A's level. Notice, in addition, that to someone who does not know A or is unaware of A's prior aggression, B may not only seem to be the aggressor, but may appear to be "troubled," "crazy," or "a difficult personality" who should be avoided at all costs.

Yet the truth is that A and B are both acting out of a context in which anyone who is an opponent is regarded and treated as an enemy. This warlike approach encourages defensive responses based on ancient instinctual reactions and primitive strategies of fight, flight, or freeze that originate in an area of the brain called the amygdala, which regulates our perceptions and responses to aggression. The function of this area of the brain is demonstrated when the amygdala is disabled by, for example, a stroke, causing fear to disappear.

As a result of the evolution of our brains and increased capacity for higher-level thinking, we have developed a rational prefrontal cortex that advances a set of strategies that are more subtle than simply attacking others, defending oneself, freezing, or running away. These strategies consist, for example, of shifting blame onto others, undermining an opponent's support through covert criticism and hostile forms of humor, disrespectful body language, spreading rumors, and gossiping to C about what A did.

13

As a result, it is extremely rare that A or B regard their conflict as an opportunity. Neither is likely in their initial responses to a perceived attack to ask their opponent to sit down; listen empathetically and responsively; talk openly and honestly about what happened; or jointly and collaboratively define, explore, and resolve the problem. This is largely because they have each already labeled the other's behavior as an attack and automatically reverted to more primitive responses. If they had labeled the incident as a misunderstanding, a natural response to rejection, a request for honest communication, an effort to identify something that is not working as well as it might, or a barrier that could be overcome through joint problem solving, their responses would be quite different.

The difficulty with all the options outlined so far is that none of them have anything to do with listening. None support either side in understanding or coming to terms with the underlying issues in the dispute. None assist them in finding solutions to problems or contribute to improving the quality of their relationship. Instead, these options encourage them to think of their conflict as a battle, and keep them trapped in ongoing, chronic hostilities.

Once we have defined our opponents as evil, resorting to aggression and warfare becomes automatic. The adjectives we use to describe them, the metaphors we use to communicate and think about the conflict, the ways we analyze our options, and what we feel it is intelligent to do in response become limited to a set of instinctual, counterproductive, mutually reinforcing reactions to our perception that we are facing a hostile, adversarial opponent.

Whether we are A or B, we are likely to remain in impasse until we commit to listening and understanding the other person, critically examine our own assumptions, determine whether either side is being *irrationally* aggressive, and halt our instinctual responses. Only then will we be free to identify the opportunities that are hidden in our conflicts, to focus on finding solutions to common problems, to develop a deeper understanding of the issues, to stop reinforcing the other side's negative behaviors, and to become more skillful in responding to perceived aggression.

From Fight or Flight to Tend and Befriend

So how *do* we overcome our initial fight-or-flight reactions and join someone we fear, dislike, or distrust who seems to be continuously attacking us? How do we respond more positively, consider conflicts

as opportunities, and achieve the ends we and our opponent desire? How can we benefit from learning how to disarm our instinctual responses, listen to what our opponent is actually saying, and search together for constructive, collaborative solutions?

The answers, although simple to suggest, are not at all simple to implement—particularly if you are in the grip of an ancient, powerful, and hypnotizing emotion like fear or rage. To make this shift, you need to create a new dynamic, try to understand your opponent, critique yourself, and search for the real content of the dispute and ways of improving your relationship, thereby deepening your understanding of the nature of conflict in general.

Several years ago, researchers discovered that there are in fact *two* principal pathways or responses to aggression: one is "fight or flight" and the other is "tend and befriend." The first is regulated by adrenalin, the second by oxytocin, sometimes referred to as "the bonding chemical." Oxytocin stimulates trust, collaboration, and caring, and is increased by listening, acknowledgments, and concessions, including unilateral ones. The release of oxytocin dramatically alters the way we see and interact with our opponents, which automatically and simultaneously alters our definition of ourselves, and our understanding of the causes, content, and context of our disputes.
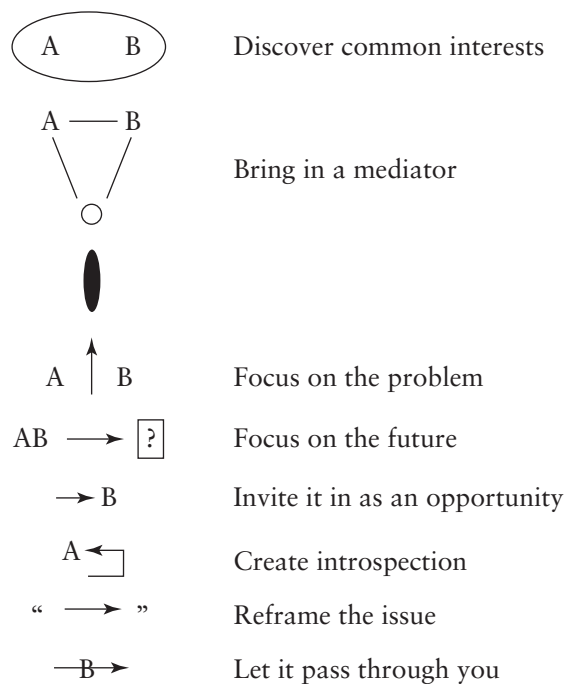
By experiencing our conflicts as opportunities, we automatically increase our capacity to listen and resolve our disputes, thereby strengthening our relationships and improving the way we approach conflicts in the future. Listening is therefore the "opportunity of opportunities," because it is through listening that it becomes possible to increase trust and collaboration, gain deeper insights, act with greater self-awareness, prevent conflicts from escalating, and begin to see how we can shift our communications and relational dynamics in a more constructive direction.

If, for example, instead of assuming your opponent is attacking you, you assume they have merely confused you with the problem, you may be able to respond by shifting your opponent's attention by describing the problem as an "it" rather than as a "you." Or if you can hear the other person's attack as a request for assistance, attention, or support, you may be able to say, "How can I help you?" or "How could we work together to solve this problem?" Or if you can hear the attack as a critique of the way you have communicated, or as a request to adopt a more effective way of speaking, you may be able to apologize for not communicating clearly enough, or to say, "Can you give me some feedback so I can communicate with you better next time?"

None of these responses, in the beginning, is likely to be effortless, but each will lead you away from aggression and toward collaboration, thereby revealing opportunities for improved solutions. As illustrated in the following chart, there are a number of practical, realistic ways you can shift your response from one that is based on adrenalin and a perception of aggression to one that is based on oxytocin and a perception of commonality and misunderstanding.

(A B)	Discover common interests
A — B	Bring in a mediator
A ↑ B	Focus on the problem
AB ⟶ [?]	Focus on the future
⟶ B	Invite it in as an opportunity
A ←	Create introspection
" ⟶ "	Reframe the issue
—B→	Let it pass through you

In each of these collaborative responses, the cycle of aggressive or defensive responses is halted for a variety of reasons. B is no longer responding as though A were the aggressor. The focus has shifted from people to problems. A and B are engaging in dialogue over common problems. They are attempting to satisfy each others' interests. They are not arguing about the past but considering what they want to happen in the future. In other words, B is being responsive, empathetic, and collaborative, rather than acting out of a fight-or-flight reaction.

Notice also that in the second chart B *gains* power by engaging in these actions, while at the same time eliminating the reasons that prompted A's original and continued aggression. B's collaborative

"tend and befriend" approach rewards A for engaging in dialogue, while not giving A attention or similar rewards for aggressive behavior. This new response by B makes A appear uncooperative if he or she continues to act in an aggressive manner.

Despite the simplicity of these approaches, it may be difficult in practice to convert your initial responses to A from negative to positive. In attempting to do so, it may help you to recognize that A could be behaving aggressively for reasons that have more to do with A's *own* needs than with B's actions. It may also help you to recognize that A could be using aggression more to communicate to B what A is feeling, or how important the issues are to A, and that B's defensive responses are blocking and frustrating this communication. If B can find a way to listen, discover, and satisfy A's legitimate interests while not rewarding A's aggressive behaviors or taking them personally, even by silent acquiescence, in most cases A's aggression will gradually disappear.

If you are B, you may also be able to halt the escalation of the conflict by refusing to accept the role as perpetrator that A has created for you. If you are B, you do not have to be the victim of A's aggression, or accept A's definition of the problem, or allow A's version of your role in the interaction to go unquestioned. The goal is not to give in to aggression, but to sidestep it, not allowing it to determine what you will do in response, and become more skillful and self-confident when confronted with it. In other words, it only takes *one* to stop the tango, and that one could be you.

Creating Learning Organizations

Transforming your response from one of counter-aggression or defensiveness to one of listening and collaboration is not easy, yet it is possible in every conflict. Collaborative responses begin with simple steps that each person can begin to take in the direction of learning and resolution. In this way, a larger strategy is created that focuses on solutions rather than obstacles, thereby dramatically improving communication and relationships throughout the workplace.

Yet it is also possible for families, organizations, and institutions that are experiencing chronic conflicts to become more proactive about preventing and resolving them, and similarly shift their perspectives and orientations in responding to conflict from avoidance, accommodation, or aggression to engagement, collaboration, and learning.

Doing so automatically transforms their conflicts into opportunities, and themselves into learning organizations.

Learning organizations are able to discover the opportunities in conflict, creatively solve their problems, and continuously find ways to improve. They encourage employees to take responsibility for their disputes and routinely initiate open and honest communications that emphasize commonalities while valuing diversity and dissent. According to our colleague, Peter Senge, who brilliantly conceptualized learning organizations in *The Fifth Discipline*, they are able to reduce chronic conflicts by creating

- *A Shared Vision:* They articulate personal visions, communicate, ask for support, use visioning as an ongoing process, blend extrinsic and intrinsic visions, and distinguish positive from negative visions.
- *Mental Models:* They encouraging leaps of abstraction, balance inquiry and advocacy, distinguish espoused theory from theory in use, and recognize and defuse defensive routines.
- *Systems Thinking:* They value interrelationships rather than things and processes, move beyond blame, distinguish detailed complexity from dynamic complexity, focus on areas of high leverage, and avoid symptomatic solutions.

In these ways, learning organizations empower people to analyze their conflict culture, discover what prevents them from learning from their disputes, and develop ways of encouraging resolution and prevention. They generate knowledge-enhancing systems that work to improve processes and relationships so as to increase collaboration and spread best practices throughout the organization.

The complex process of creating learning organizations begins by fostering and supporting individual learning, which is especially powerful in connection with conflict. Because individuals are not completely isolated at work and require support to learn from their conflicts, in order to create learning organizations with positive conflict cultures it is necessary to

- Design, detect, and nourish local learning practices
- Create shared understandings of conflicts as learning opportunities

- Empower people to analyze what in the culture prevents their learning and to change it
- Generate knowledge-enhancing systems
- Regularly assess the impact of each new conflict on desired results, high-achieving processes, and collaborative relationships
- Diffuse appropriate lessons and meditative processes throughout the organization

Every conflict culture, dynamic, and organizational orientation begins with a single action on the part of some individual who is willing to model a new way of responding to divisiveness and disagreement. To shift large-scale personal and organizational attitudes toward conflict, it is necessary that the responses, behaviors, and actions of large numbers of individuals become more conscious, responsible and oriented to learning, resolution, and collaboration. To better understand how this is possible, it may be useful to deepen your understanding of conflict dynamics, and the reasons people respond in the ways they do.

Five Responses to Conflict

Aggression and collaboration are not the only responses you can have to conflict. There are several other ways you might respond, each reflecting a different attitude toward yourself, your opponent, and your conflict. The most common responses to conflict, shown in the list that follows, focus either subjectively on the *people* in dispute or objectively on the *result*, goal, or outcome. These responses are

- Avoidance
- Accommodation
- Aggression
- Compromise
- Collaboration

The following chart, drawn from research by Thomas and Kilman, reveals the relationship between these approaches by differentiating them according to whether the concern for people is stronger or weaker than the concern for results.

Concern for People

| Accommodation | Collaboration |

Compromise

| Avoidance | Aggression |

Concern for Results
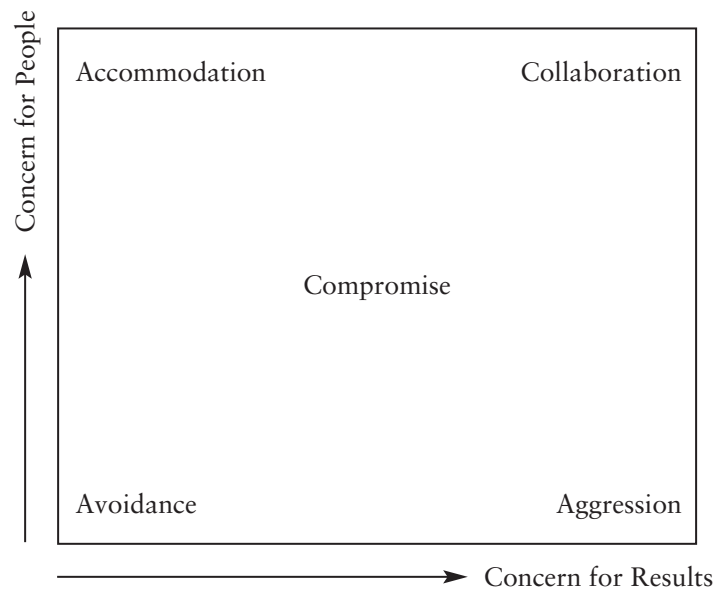
The key to choosing an effective response is deciding what kind of relationship you would most like to have with your opponent, and what results you would most like to achieve. If you are primarily concerned with people as opposed to results, you will be more likely to choose accommodation.

More significantly, however, whenever you accommodate, you *automatically* communicate to other people that you are more concerned about them than you are about results. And when you act aggressively, you communicate the exact opposite—that you care more about results than you do about them. When you are collaborative, you communicate that you care about both, that your relationships with them and what you want to achieve are equally important to you.

To understand the differences between these responses, imagine that you are about to be asked to work late. If you use avoidance, you may decide to hide in your office or duck out the back. If you use accommodation, you may decide to do the work, but feel resentful and perhaps do it poorly or not complete it. If you use aggression, you may decide to refuse to do it and create an argument. If you use compromise, you may agree to do it today if someone else agrees to do it tomorrow. And if you use collaboration, you will decide to do it together.

None of these responses is wrong. In fact, a skillful person is able to employ each response at the right moment, with the right person, to solve the right problem in the right way. Each is simply a choice of how you will respond to conflict. Here are a few of the reasons you might choose one response over another in any given conflict.

Reasons for Avoiding Conflict

- You regard the issue as trivial.

- You have no power over the issue or cannot change the results.

- You believe the damage due to conflict outweighs its benefits.

- You need to cool down, reduce tensions, or regain composure.

- You need time to gather information and cannot make an immediate decision.

- You can leave it to others who are in a position to resolve the conflict more effectively.

- You regard the issue as tangential or symptomatic and prefer to wait to address the real problem.

Reasons for Accommodating to Conflict

- You realize that you were wrong or want to show you can be reasonable.

- You recognize that the issue is more important to others and want to establish good will.

- You are outmatched or losing, and giving in will prevent additional damage.

- You want harmony to be preserved or disruption avoided.

- You see an opportunity to help a subordinate learn from a mistake.

Reasons for Being Aggressive and Engaging in Conflict

- You want to engage in quick, decisive action.

- You have to deal with an emergency.

- You are responsible for enforcing unpopular rules or discipline.

- You see the issues as vital, and you know you are right.

- You need to protect yourself against people who take advantage of collaborative behavior.

Reasons for Compromising Conflict

- Your goals are moderately important but can be satisfied by less than total agreement.

- Your opponents have equal power, and you are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals.

- You need to achieve a temporary settlement of complex issues.

- You need a quick solution, and the exact content does not matter as much as the speed with which it is reached.

- Your efforts at either competition or collaboration have failed, and you need a backup.

Reasons for Collaborating to Resolve Conflict

- You believe it is possible to reach an integrative solution even though both sides find it hard to compromise.

- Your objective is to learn.

- You believe it is preferable to merge insights that come from different perspectives.

- You need a long-range solution.

- You want to gain commitment and increase motivation and productivity by using consensus decision making.

- You want to empower one or both participants.

- You see it as a way to work through hard feelings and improve morale.

- You want to model cooperative solutions for others.

- You need to help people learn to work closely together.

- You want to end the conflict rather than paper it over.

- Your goals require a team effort.

- You need creative solutions.

- You have tried everything else without success.

(*Source:* Adapted from Thomas-Kilman Instrument.)

Each of us should be able to use all of these responses under the appropriate circumstances. Thus, there will be times when the most effective approach is to walk away or surrender. There will be times when there is no alternative than to fight or be aggressive. Nonetheless, it is clear that responding with collaboration produces the best and

most satisfying results, especially when there is an ongoing relationship between them.

Consider, for example, the kind of person you are likely to *become* if you can only respond in one of these five ways. If all you ever do is avoid conflict, after a while you will begin to feel numb and disengaged. If all you ever do is accommodate, after a while you will feel used or like a doormat. If all you ever do is respond with aggression, you will increasingly feel angry, guilty, or incapable of empathy or compassion. If all you ever do is compromise, you will end up feeling dissatisfied and compromised. But if all you ever do is collaborate, you will feel connected and successful.

The difficulty, however, is that of all these responses to conflict, collaboration requires the highest level of skill, the greatest investment in time and energy, and is the *last* approach we learn, Most of us discover the power of avoidance by the time we are two. We learn to accommodate from our parents as children. We learn aggression from our siblings and in school, and to compromise as we grow older. Collaboration is the last skill we learn, but it is increasingly critical in the workplace, because it is the basis for all teamwork, and the method by which conflicts are transformed into opportunities.

The Opportunity of Collaboration

Most people prefer to use the collaborative approach, not because it is quicker or easier or necessarily the right response under the circumstances, but because it

- Is more pleasurable
- Allows people to penetrate deeper into their problems
- Seeks to satisfy interests
- Produces better and more lasting results than the others
- Is more respectful
- Is versatile and satisfying
- Builds better relationships
- Encourages learning

As an illustration, a large communications firm in which we were consulting was attempting to implement a sweeping new structure that had been designed by the CEO with hardly any input from below. As

a result, the change process had produced many disgruntled managers, and even the custodians were skeptical! As we probed the sources of covert resistance, we found that the conflicts and disagreements that had been triggered by the change process were being avoided and swept under the rug by the top leadership, who hoped these problems would simply disappear over time.

Instead, they were festering and simmering behind closed doors and fueling a growing resistance to change. We interviewed a cross-section of employees, opened conversations about the real barriers, and drew the underlying conflicts out into the open. As we did so, we were able to see relief and renewed energy bubbling to the surface among staff members who had become frozen in rage, avoidance, and despair.

This renewed energy represented a widespread unspoken desire to collaborate in making the change more effective and successful. Allowing staff input on how the CEO's ideas could work better transformed staff resistance into collaborative problem solving. The transformation was so complete that the leadership council, which included several executives who had resisted the change, volunteered to make their annual bonuses contingent on its success.

In our day-to-day lives, we face an unending array of choices about what to say and do and how to behave when we are in conflict. When we step back from our instinctive responses and the pressures and demands of the moment, and allow a collaborative approach to guide our behaviors, we feel more empowered and proactive, open to experience, and better able to locate the transformational potential that is hidden in our conflict.

The shift from feeling victimized, reactive, overwhelmed, destructive, or passive in our conflicts to feeling powerful, proactive, challenged, constructive, or collaborative is *already* a transformation in the attitude, culture, dynamic, and context through which we are participating in our conflicts, and thus in our ability to select a strategy that supports our deepest intentions and commitments. Consciously choosing a strategy and sticking to it makes us feel less driven by the choices of others, or the emotional whims of the moment, or the dictates of circumstance.

How to Collaborate in Conflict

Once you have decided to use collaboration in your conflicts, the next step is to learn how to respond to your opponents in ways that bring them closer, rather than push them farther away. Instead of papering

UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE AND DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT

over your conflicts, giving in to them, sweeping them under the rug, escalating them through rage, or compromising them, you will want to improve your skills in being able to engage in conflict in a collaborative way. The key is to find ways of combining a concern for people with a concern for results.

The following exercise and questions are designed to assist you in reaching out and creating a more collaborative relationship with your opponents. As you review these suggestions, consider a conflict in which you are presently engaged and answer the questions with it in mind. Allow each question to point you toward ways of collaborating and learning from your conflicts.

1. Begin by recognizing and affirming that conflict can be a positive experience, try to clarify where the opportunities for growth and learning lie, and ask yourself whether they indicate a need to change the culture or dynamics, or shift an organizational paradigm.

   - Can you think of any ways your conflict might be experienced positively?
   - How could this conflict become a learning opportunity, or a trigger for growth?
   - What positive changes and options for learning does this conflict suggest?

2. Use empathy to place yourself in other people's shoes and try to see things from their point of view, while at the same time recognizing that there are differences between understanding their behavior and condoning it, between forgiving them and forgiving what they did.

   - Why do you think they acted as they did? What might make you act that way?
   - How do you think they see your actions?
   - How could you learn more about their motivation that could help you understand what they want?
   - How could you respond to them more skillfully as a result?

3. Shift your focus from holding on to power and defending your position to focus on sharing responsibility and satisfying both sides' interests.

- If you let go of the desire to hold on to your power or position in the conflict, what might you learn as a result?
- What changes would you be willing to make to increase collaboration?
- What would happen if your opponent were willing to do the same?
- What are your interests? What are your opponents' interests?
- What interests do you share? How might both sets of interests be satisfied?

4. Focus your efforts beyond settlement and to commit to fully resolving all the underlying issues in your dispute.

   - What would accommodation, or settlement for settlement's sake, leave out of the equation?
   - What are the deeper underlying issues in your dispute?
   - What would it take to resolve them?
   - How can you bring these issues up so they can be resolved?

5. Be deeply honest with yourself and your opponent, and give empathetic and timely feedback.

   - What feedback can you give your opponent that is empathetic and truthful, and at the same time constructive and likely to move the conflict toward resolution?
   - How long has it taken you to give honest feedback? Why has it taken so long? What could you do to respond more quickly?
   - What feedback do you think the other person might give you?
   - Have you requested their feedback? If not, what is stopping you?
   - How might you benefit from your opponent's feedback?
   - What honest feedback can you give yourself?

6. Speak and act with integrity and clarity, without judgment, and with your heart and spirit, rather than only from your head.

   - Have your actions and communications been crystal clear, and have you had the highest integrity?

- If not, why not? What might you do to change or correct it?
- What can you say to the other person that comes straight from your heart and at the same time is clear and nonjudgmental?
- Instead of holding on to judgments and answers, can you ask questions that do not assume the answer?

7. Search for small-scale collaborative alternatives that increase cooperation, create common ground, and focus on shared interests.

- What are some things you might do together to increase your cooperation and partnership?
- What interests, values, or concerns do you both share?
- What could you both do to find or create what you both need and want?

In answering these questions, remember that collaboration, resolution, and transformation are real, practical possibilities that become available whenever we begin to search collaboratively for the opportunities in our conflicts. To become genuinely collaborative and transform your conflicts into opportunities for learning and improvement, empathetic and responsive listening is a critical skill. If you listen in a committed way, even to your opponents, and especially to people you do not trust or like, you will start to discover, and then to create, the magic of resolution.