

# conflict

BY ALAN SHARLAND

*“Conflict is the beginning of consciousness.”*  
—Mary Esther Harding

**C**onflict is inevitable and, as Harding suggests, we only come to consciousness once it has occurred. As a mediator and conflict coach, I explore conflict and its causes and consequences with a view to using it as a creative opportunity—to see the “raw material” of a conflict as a natural resource that can be used for positive change and development at both a personal and organizational level.

Of course, as with other natural resources, there can be challenges and dangers in its exploitation. But with considered exploration and extraction of the useful raw material within, it can be refined into something beneficial.

## Choose the approach

How we proceed once we have become conscious of a conflict is key to whether it is an opportunity for positive change and growth or the beginning of a long, stressful, debilitating journey. Fortunately, even if it starts out on that stressful journey, we can still change course and benefit from it; it just might be a little harder to do so.

In the contexts of managing teams and providing training, conflict inevitably arises. Do we wish it hadn't and try to proceed as if it didn't? Do we scream and shout about it, deny the inevitable, and try to suppress the message it brings? Or do we take a breath, reflect on its inevitability, and look for the opportunity within it?

To look at some examples of the kinds of challenges within the two contexts of being a manager of a team or department, and being a



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# as an opportunity

View conflict among your employees as a way for them to learn, connect, and gain insight.



trainer in whatever form that takes, I want to describe the framework we use at CAOS Conflict Management for reviewing responses to conflict, both effective and ineffective, and then explore how this can be applied in these two areas.

### Ineffective responses to conflict

*Treating conflict as a competition: I am right, you are wrong. I am good, you are bad.* Conflict will remain unresolved if the focus of energy is on winning against the other person. Whether it's an intellectual argument or a practical proposal, the determination to be seen as right and all other perspectives wrong meets with immediate resistance because there is no acknowledgement of the possibility of a different perspective based on different considerations.

This battle can then become personal ("I'm a good person; you are bad") if the attempts

to win the argument descend into comments designed to diminish, even dehumanize, the other person through characterizations such as *stupid, crazy, unintelligent, uneducated, and uncivilized*; or references to the other person as belonging to a particular group that is assumed to be somehow less than we are.

With the focus in this direction, the issue at stake is forgotten and thus no forward movement is achieved. As a result, projects become stuck for long periods because the focus is on individuals rather than the problem.

Where has that happened in a conflict you have been involved in or are aware of? What have you contributed to the perpetuation of that?

As I will examine later, an effective response will not move to personal comments and instead will acknowledge that "right for me" may not be "right for you," so how can we

**Table 1. Negative Responses to Conflict**

| Unresolved Conflict   | Competitive Response  | Avoidance Response  |
|---|---|---|
| Resistance to a directive or change (manager's perspective)                       | Use force of will or authority to make it happen, and escalate punitive action if resistance continues. Dismiss perspective of those resisting and view them as having malicious intent and a motivation that is deliberately destructive. A frequent consequence is workforce strike action. | Work only with those who do carry through the directive in the hope that others will follow along in time. Vent frustration to others about noncompliance of those resisting, but do not address the issue directly with the resisters. |
| Difficulty between staff members (manager's perspective)                          | Make an informal judgment based on past experience of those involved and tell the person felt to be the cause to "fall in line or else." Ask the staff member you most sympathize with to bring any difficulties to you to deal with.   | Keep the staff members at issue separate from each other via scheduling, project team allocation, and putting others you feel are good workers with them in the hope that their attitude rubs off on those in dispute.                  |
| Resistance to content of training (trainer's perspective)                         | Engage in direct arguments with attendees, possibly including personal comments. Justification to self is that attendees are not "up to" the training, possibly because they are academically or technically lacking.   | Not wanting to engage with challengers, possibly using a style that is entirely didactic to prevent—either from the start or during the session if the challenges feel like "too much."   |
| Resistance to style of training or personality of trainer (trainer's perspective) | Make comments such as "At XYZ organization they loved this approach" or "I have been a trainer for 25 years" in response to challenges about style or personality.  | Make comments such as "They were an aggressive group; not open to learning" or "One or two had ego problems so I will ask for some pre-selection of attendees in the future" to others outside of the training session.                 |

work together toward “right for both of us”? Or at least: If it has to be right for me, how can I move forward in a way that does not consistently crash into you? How can I accommodate your perspective rather than dismiss it or seek to suppress it?

*Treating conflict as a problem to be avoided: If I avoid them/the situation, the problem may go away.* This approach is seductive as a response to conflict because it can, at first, seem like an effective way to respond. However it doesn’t acknowledge that the very effort of avoidance means the experience of the conflict remains unresolved. Therefore, it has a continued indirect impact.

Avoiding the person is time-consuming and energy-sapping, and can easily affect others who are not involved in the situation due to rearrangements and cancellations being made to perpetuate the avoidance. Sometimes managers can revise the schedule to keep people in dispute away from each other and avoid their making contact in workplaces. In doing so, managers are telling themselves they are doing it to prevent a conflict, but in fact they are keeping the impact of the situation in place.

The rearranged schedule may not lead to the most efficient team being allocated to a task, thus lower productivity for all is a consequence. It also may lead to accusations of unfairness if someone is continually placed on a less popular task to keep apart two or more people who have an unresolved conflict.

The examples of ineffective responses outlined in Table 1 are either intended to suppress challenge from those being managed or trained, or intended to avoid dealing with those who are challenging, yet still have discussion about them outside of the context—rather than engage with and learn from them.

### Effective responses to conflict

*Treating conflict as an opportunity for learning, connection, and insight.* We like things simple at CAOS Conflict Management, so we look at resolved conflict as having three distinct features: learning, connection, and insight relating to practical, interpersonal, and personal aspects of a situation, respectively. A resolved

conflict can retrospectively be seen to incorporate one or more of these features.

**Learning.** What can I learn from this? What practical changes can I make to improve this situation, relationship, service, product, or training event?

Learning within this context means identifying practical changes that resolve a situation. As a simple example, if someone does his photocopying each day at 3 p.m., but this causes continued disturbance to another, there can be an argument about the person’s copying, without consideration of the practical aspect of the time at which it occurs.

Comments such as “Don’t do all your copying here; use the other copier” or “He should be more considerate” don’t acknowledge the simple reason why it is a problem at the time it is. Doing the copying at a different time may by itself solve the problem. Many, and more complex, disputes can be resolved when a return to focus on learning occurs—especially when previously an impasse over territorialism and personal comments about respect and consideration has existed.

**Connection.** What more can I learn about the view of those who are providing challenges to my management or training?

Connection is a commitment to try to understand the other person’s point of view

## AVOIDING THE PERSON IS TIME-CONSUMING AND ENERGY-SAPPING, AND CAN EASILY AFFECT OTHERS.



without having to agree with it. In a competitive approach to conflict, this is seen as giving in or losing because it acknowledges another perspective can exist rather than treating all opposing views as fundamentally flawed. Consider how, within religious circles, interfaith work is occurring when many years ago such notions would have widely been unthinkable.

In an effective response to conflict, connection allows assertion of one's own views without having to try to destroy another's. It allows for accommodation of their view in future plans and actions rather than continuous, draining skirmishes with the person that draw energy away from, and possibly prevent reaching, the intended outcome.

**Insight.** What is going on in me in response to this? How can I support myself with my difficult thoughts and feelings about it?

In many unresolved situations, the focus is so continuously outward on either avoiding or undermining the other. We can lose a sense of ourselves and the damage we experience as a result of the ongoing difficulty. It often can be that supporting ourselves with those difficult feelings is, in itself, enough for us to consider our experience of a conflict to be resolved, without any need for external change.

When a conflict has remained unresolved, it is useful to ask questions to help create movement toward learning, connections, and insight (see Table 2).

A work-team conflict provides the opportunity to:

- support the empowerment and capacity of staff to create positive change
- increase workforce engagement
- increase productivity.

Additionally, for trainers, conflict provides the opportunity to improve training content and style of delivery.

These approaches may seem obvious in many situations, but where conflict has remained unresolved, it is almost always because the obvious has not occurred and the competitive or avoidance response has become the norm. If you have an ongoing challenge with an individual or group you are managing or training, acknowledge where you may be competing or avoiding and consider the opportunities that exist to create learning, connection, and insight.

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**Table 2. Positive Responses to Conflict**

| Situation   | Ways to Create Learning, Connection, and Insight  |
|---|---|
| Resistance to a directive or change (manager's perspective)                       | Explore reasons for resistance with open questions to gain connection with views. This does not mean the directive does not go ahead, but concerns are acknowledged and accommodated rather than dismissed and continually resisted.  |
| Difficulty between staff members (manager's perspective)                          | Explore with them separately and possibly together the reasons for difficulty (supports their insight and connection and may lead to learning), but don't direct actions regarding the working relationship. Place onus on staff to resolve personal dispute with each other effectively, amicably, and professionally, possibly using mediation for support. |
| Resistance to content of training (trainer's perspective)                         | Explore objections and obstructions. Staff know what they do day-to-day, so content may not be accommodating their needs. Exploration does not mean omitting the training, but it encourages engagement with content rather than passive spoon feeding.   |
| Resistance to style of training or personality of trainer (trainer's perspective) | Reflect on your own feelings as trainer about the response. Listen to views of attendees about style (taken from session evaluations, for example). Make changes to style and beware of blaming resistance on trainees to avoid making changes.   |



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