

'Clear, open, honest and direct communication is the only way to address conflict, and this book is essential reading. Highly recommended!'

Dr Ivan Misner, Founder, BNI and *New York Times* bestselling author

THE 7 PRINCIPLES OF **CONFLICT** **RESOLUTION**



HOW TO RESOLVE DISPUTES,
DEFUSE DIFFICULT SITUATIONS
AND REACH AGREEMENT

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Understand and acknowledge your limited mindset

If you look at the news today, you will come across some kind of conflict situation occurring around the world. Alongside the acts of war and aggression that we witness between and within countries, we are accustomed to random acts of violence and terrorism perpetrated by seemingly normal young men and women. Often, at the root of these acts can be a personal outlook on the world which carries a perceived justification for their actions. This justification may be rooted in a feeling of disempowerment, not feeling respected, feeling like the system is corrupt, wrong and against the individual, a very real feeling that life just isn't fair and a feeling of entitlement to something better.

Essentially, these boil down in varying degrees to a self-centred view of the world when we are in conflict with it. In other words, it comes often understandably from a difficulty in seeing anything other than our version of events.

Although better disguised and often dressed up in socially acceptable behaviour, a similar albeit watered down self-centred mindset can exist in the workplace and in our communities. This can happen when we don't get what we want – or there is a risk that will happen – and we experience actual or perceived unfairness. In simple terms, our thoughts and feelings start to dominate our perspective on the world and trigger us to be more consumed with our own interests, needs, worries and concerns.

We might become increasingly driven by disappointment and anger at not having what others have, or a sense of lack of fairness and of not being appreciated for what we bring to the table. Our pride may start to take over. We may start to be dominated by fear that we won't get what we want and need. Equally, the shame of feeling like this or wanting the things we want may drive some of us to focus on our thoughts and feelings rather than the bigger picture. The more self-justified we feel, the more our thoughts and feelings then fuel the narrative that we create around the situation and the misunderstandings and miscommunications that ensue.

In practical terms, we might feel that our bosses don't value or respect us. We can feel resentful at corporate bonuses when we are struggling to make ends meet. We can feel disgruntled at paying taxes. We can feel irritated that our

employees are asking for pay rises when they aren't bringing enough to the table. At this stage we focus on our upset rather than what we might be able to do to turn the situation around. Although our upset may be valid, it can also be a distraction from addressing the matter in hand in our best interests. Crucially, when we fall into this thinking pattern, we limit our perception of what is and is not possible.

Notice the effect of your mindset on your perspective

Although our responses to these situations are not violent, they can become very disruptive, such as undermining bosses in the course of pub gossip, taking excessive sick days, criticising the organisation at the water cooler, resulting in a lack of commitment to the job and lack of communication with employees. In terms of damage, this translates into days lost, poor treatment of clients and a lack of loyalty. When we adopt this mindset we can start to feel unheard, undervalued and ready to jump ship for a better offer that can easily end up in a similar dynamic or situation.

On a personal level, these thoughts and feelings turn inwards on the individual experiencing these situations and in turn can result in depression and sickness. The disabling consequence of this are extensive both in work days and money lost (find out just how much by going to this website: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress/>), but more importantly, the misery that is felt by individuals and families and communities on a daily basis.

In the workplace, the immediate knock-on effect of sickness and depression generally translates into reduced performance and lower profits. In our day-to-day lives it can translate into divided communities, social unrest, one-off acts of aggression and often in individuals cutting themselves off or hiding away from their neighbours to avoid the challenges inherent in situations where we can't seem to resolve our differences.

The bottom line is that to resolve conflict we need to be prepared to take responsibility for our own behaviours and reactions. This requires us to accept on some level that we have created or invited the situation into our lives to a certain degree. The natural consequence of this understanding will be that something in us, in our mindset or in our behaviour, will have to change if we are to resolve the conflicts that we find ourselves in. The bad news is that this

will probably not happen quickly although this book will help you to achieve some quick wins. If done properly, it may in fact be a lifelong process. The good news is that where we truly learn the lesson the conflict has presented us with, we will increase our capacity for personal and commercial success. We will also be in a position to positively affect the people and communities around us and our small actions can be the make or break in affecting social change.

When we reach these realisations, we may start to feel overwhelmed. We may overthink or even obsess about the situation, believing that thinking or obsessing about it will solve it. It won't. This is a tall order but the suggestion here is only to take the foot off the pedal for a few moments. If we can physically move away from the situation we immediately gain some perspective. If we can then do a small action for someone else that is inspiring or enjoyable, we can significantly turn the situation around. By taking our focus off the problem and preferably giving someone else some joy for a few minutes, we can regain perspective and at the same time put something more positive into our environment.

Case study

I am extremely lucky to have worked at home while my children were young. One day I received a text from a colleague saying we needed to talk. I texted back to ask if there was a problem. My colleague said there may be. I hadn't been paid by our mutual client and was not getting any responses from another colleague who I had found to be obstructive so I started to worry.

I took step 1 – I sat down and focussed on a project that really inspired me. I then went downstairs and tickled my 18-month-old that reduced her and me to fits of laughter. Within a few moments I had moved from a place of anger and fear to one where I was playful, light-hearted, happy and much better equipped to carry out the other steps set out here.

The more adept we are at being open to adjust our perspective on the situation, the sooner it is likely to change even if nothing changes in the other person. We can do this in various ways but critical is moving out of thinking about ourselves and our situation and being able to think about other people. Even by reminding ourselves that there is a bigger picture, we start to gain an amended perspective.

Here are some questions to help change perspective or see the bigger picture:

- Can I think of someone who is having a challenge with something right now?
- Is there something I can do to help them?
- Is there anyone who would appreciate a call from me right now to tell them that I appreciate, love or am thinking of them?
- What random act of kindness could I take in this moment?

Find something in the newspaper that you feel angry, sad or passionate about and take some action to help that situation (donate money, write a letter, join a campaign, take a moment to think or pray about that situation improving).

Step 4: Get your facts straight

It is important to be absolutely clear of the facts before entering into the conversation. You do not want to be fumbling about for information instead of focussing on the matter at hand. You also need to know what your options will be if the conversation goes wrong. It is useful to be clear about your position if you need to take a more formal route later down the line. This step helps you think through the presenting situation and gather the information to help you make informed decisions.

List the information you need to have the conversation

The information you need may be emails sent or received, notes relating to previous performance meetings, details of financial agreements, photographs, specific and relevant feedback that is important to share. Basically, any information you may need to rely on during the conversation.

If you don't have the information, what do you need to do to get it?

In what way could the conversation go wrong and what management, HR or other advice authorisation or support do you need to take to manage this risk?

Here are some questions to help you get your facts straight:

- What are the five key points you want to get across to the other person?
- What information would best help the other person to see your point of view?
- Do other people have information that contradicts what you are saying?
- Could the other people involved have information that compromises you or your point of view?
- Is it possible that additional information may clarify or resolve the situation?

Step 5: Identify and think through outcomes and options

A difficult conversation is, as much as anything, an opportunity to reset a situation. Like anything, if we can be clear about where we want to get to we are more likely to get there. When we identify our intended outcomes, and those of the other party, we not only build a vision of how we would like things to be but also where there may be room for alternative solutions and negotiation. The following set of questions will help this process.

What do you want? What are the best and worst-case scenarios of what you would like to achieve from the conversation? This will elaborate on your answer in Step 2.

What does that look like? What is the detail of what that looks like and how would it work in practice?

How far are you away from achieving that? What are the milestones that will be required to achieve your desired outcome?

What are you going to do when you get there? What will the next steps be?

What issues might cause you to change your mind, such as new or clarified information or a change of heart?
