

Conflict: Teacher and Source of Transformation

Our greatest sources of inspiration and personal satisfaction come from love rather than hate, from moments of connection with others rather than times of aggression and opposition. Yet even while we are searching for insight and transformation or trying to rise above the fray, we find ourselves mired in petty squabbles and disputes that make our efforts to rise above them almost laughable.

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 of 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.

The German philosopher Nietzsche wrote: "When you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you. Looking into conflict means giving up your illusions, no longer seeing yourself as a victim or other people as enemies. It requires giving up your fear of engaging in honest communication with someone you distrust. By skillfully confronting your problems, entering into them and passing through to the other side, you can develop, grow, learn, and become more available to the people you value in your life.

Locating Opportunities for Transformation

If you would like to pursue the approach we have identified, where and how do you begin? The starting place for traveling any of these eight paths is your willingness to be open to learning and commitment to finding a resolution. You can position yourself to approach and engage in conflicts constructively through the following actions. As you review them, notice shifts in the ways you think about yourself, your opponent, and your conflict.

Some suggestions on How to Start

Set the stage for dialogue.

Move out of your office and into a neutral environment, even one that is warm and open, such as a garden or park. Consider asking your opponent to join you for a walk, or for lunch. Be open and friendly rather than hostile and accusative. Invite honesty and model it in return.

Disengage your fight-or-flight response

Clear your mind of everything you think you already know about the conflict, and listen empathetically to your opponent. The best way to learn from your conflicts is by listening to them. Responsive, active, and empathic listening techniques are based on your recognizing that all conflict is

fundamentally a request for communication. To listen, you need to understand others and control your emotional responses, to realize that angry people need to vent. Refuse to take whatever is said or done personally. When your own fragility makes you angry and defensive, you may forget that you always have a choice about how to respond to others. The largest part of your own anger often has nothing to do with the person to whom you are directing it, but everything to do with their actions and behaviors.

State, clearly and without anger, your emotional needs and self-interests

Then listen carefully to those expressed by others. Giving in to anger only encourages

the conflict, cheapens the victory, and makes the other side look good, or permits them to dismiss your integrity and willingness to listen. Asking for what you want or need is essential if you are going to give up your anger and negotiate as equals.

Try to Look below the surface of what is being said

This will help to resolve the underlying reasons for the dispute. Your conflict is probably not about the issues over which you are busy arguing. There are always issues that lie beneath the surface and need to be brought into the open for conflicts to be resolved. Rather than starting with your opponent, start with yourself, and think what you might be able to do to respond more powerfully to their actions.

Separate the person from the problem

This is important, along with separating the future from the past, positions from interests. Most people in conflict begin and end with the idea that the other person is the problem, that they are right about what happened, and there is only one solution, which is theirs. Conflict becomes an opportunity when you treat the problem as an it rather than as a you. Resolutions become possible when you stop debating over positions (what you want) and start dialoging over interests (why you want it). Interests can usually be satisfied in multiple ways, whereas positions are nearly always opposed and represent only a small range of possible outcomes. Positions are traps that narrow your thinking, perceptions, and imagination. By contrast, interests are rarely mutually exclusive. They broaden your choices and help you look to the future, which is the only part of conflict you can do anything about.

Brainstorm all potential solutions to your conflict

List as many as possible, and ask the other person to work with you to develop criteria

to resolve it. When you are in conflict, you probably spend most of your energy trying to get the other person to accept your solution, or poking holes in theirs, rather than searching for alternatives that benefit both of you. Brainstorming is one useful technique for expanding the range of possible solutions and not assuming the only alternatives are victory or defeat. Another method is agreeing on appropriate criteria for a satisfactory resolution.

Negotiate collaboratively rather than aggressively

Look for values, standards, or rules that will help resolve the dispute fairly, to your mutual satisfaction. Using a collaborative process and agreeing on a set of shared values, standards, or mutually acceptable ground rules shifts anger into problem solving. It is useful to search for what will satisfy the other parties' interests as well as your own. A dissatisfied opponent has a strong interest in continuing the dispute.

Use informal problem solving techniques

These include mediation, and other conflict resolution techniques to overcome impasse, clarify areas of agreement, and reach closure. It is possible to enormously expand the degree of opportunity you will be able to find in your conflicts through informal problem solving. If you are stuck, try to find an experienced third party to help mediate the conflict rather than litigate it.

Let go of your judgments about your opponent

Focus instead on improving your own skills at handling their difficult behaviors. Then let go, forgive yourself and the other person, and move on with your life. Your judgments about people are often distractions, ways of admitting you don't know how to respond skillfully to their behaviors. As you confront your judgment that you are right and they are wrong, you will discover how locked-in you are to fighting, and how far you are

from forgiveness. It is important to learn how to let go of your conflicts and release yourself in the future from what has been done to you in the past. At the same time, do not lose sight of the lessons you have learned that affect your ability to avoid future conflicts. Find a way to forgive yourself and others, while not forgetting what happened. It is not "forgive and forget" but "remember and forgive." This is something you do not for your opponent, but to release yourself from the conflict and get on with your life.

Don't surrender just so the conflict will go away.

The point is not to avoid conflict but to turn it into collaboration and an opportunity. Conflict resolution does not mean giving in to your opponents. When you surrender you cheat yourself and your opponents out of opportunities for learning and transformation which you can only achieve by confronting what the conflict is trying to teach you.

Recognize larger organizational and social issues

These issues often express themselves through conflict, and discover how your committed actions and acceptance of responsibility contribute to a more peaceful world. You are not an island unto yourself. As organizations and society become more complex, problematic, and riddled with conflict, examine your conflicts more closely to see how they reflect these larger problems, yet are experienced by you as interpersonal. Examine your own role in contributing to change, organizational collaboration, and social justice, and engage in committed actions that allow you to grow and feel connected to others.

Search for completion.

Your conflicts may go on and on because you have not completely communicated what you think or feel, or because you do not believe you have been heard. Summarizing what the other person said, asking them to feed back to you what they think you said, and making sure nothing is held back are useful strategies in allowing you to end the conversation and walk away feeling something has been transformed.

Many of these steps will doubtless appear counterintuitive to you. We know that embarking on these steps requires support and guidance as well as self-knowledge and strength. We also know we can't be there to help you when you are on the spot, when you haven't the foggiest notion what to do or say. In that moment, our only advice is to speak from your heart, let your spirit shine, reach out to those on the other side, and trust your intuition. The rest will seem easy.

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