

MANAGING CONFLICT



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Conflict gets a bad reputation - and for good reason!

Many of us have learned to avoid conflict, having seen the negative impacts when it's handled poorly. Others have learned to "jump in and enjoy a good argument" - but that's not necessarily healthy either.

Handled well, engaging mindfully in *productive conflict* is one of the healthiest things a team can do. It surfaces better ideas, tests our thinking, builds trust, and produces stronger relationships *and* better results.

The discomfort that comes with conflict is often a sign that something real and important is on the table. Whether it's disagreement about the topic at hand, or a personality clash, or (as is often the case) a matter of emotional disruption - *something important is happening*.

The problem is rarely conflict itself. The problem is that the conflict is either avoided - so issues fester unspoken - or it gets personal, so trust is damaged.

The challenge is to keep conflict in the healthy middle: honest, respectful, and focused on challenges and ideas rather than people.

Objectives: *To that end, we will focus on four objectives in this course:*

- 1. Reframing conflict** - from negative and to-be-avoided to healthy and beneficial.
- 2. Recognizing your lens** - and try to "see the conflict" from others' perspectives.
- 3. Shifting from Debate to Dialogue** - engage to understand, not to win.
- 4. Applying appropriate strategies** - to address conflict at the appropriate level.

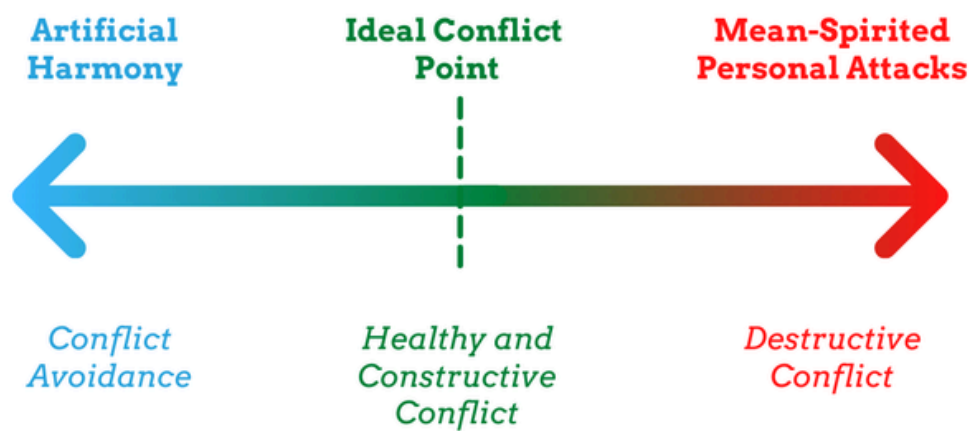
This workbook is a practical guide to help you reframe how you think about conflict, get clear on the lens that shapes how you see a situation, practice shifting from debate to dialogue, and build a personal set of strategies (your "conflict tool kit").

Remember: Managing conflict well isn't about preventing conflict. It's about *harnessing it* - turning disagreement into better ideas, deeper trust, and real results."

The Conflict Continuum



Patrick Lencioni lays out a **Conflict Continuum** that clearly displays two unhealthy extremes when it comes to conflict:



Conflict Avoidance: On one end of the continuum is the individual or team that never has a disagreement, but never explores differences of opinion, never seeks out contrasting possibilities, and lets unaddressed conflict fester. This end of the continuum is a leader and/or team that protects a sense of “artificial harmony”.

Destructive Conflict: On other end of the continuum is destructive conflict, where differences of opinion and personality are indeed brought to light but in a way that's counterproductive and even destructive. Again, not a healthy way of engaging in conflict.

Healthy & Constructive Conflict: At the midpoint is what Lencioni calls the “ideal conflict point”. This is the balance point where there's sufficient willingness to engage in constructive conflict by openly discussing, and gaining value from, contrasting opinions and personalities. Effective leaders - and teams - see to reach and sustain this balance.

Sustaining this balance point means that the team continues to openly address differences, but that the dialogue doesn't slide off-balance to become counterproductive, personal attacks. This balance is challenging to attain, and even more challenging to *maintain*.

But first let's start by assessing your team's practices and behaviors as they are right now.

Where is your team currently when it comes to managing conflict?

Activity: The Conflict Continuum



Does your team avoid conflict? Have a healthy level of conflict? Engage in destructive conflict?

Read each of the statements in the brief assessment and determine where your team falls on the Conflict Continuum shown on page 3.

- **[CLICK HERE to take the](#)**
- **[Conflict Continuum Team Assessment.](#)**

OR use this
QR Code:



Share your findings below:

What is your own reaction to conflict?

IDEAS FOR ACTION:

Ask your colleagues for their perspective. *Do they see things the same way you do, or do they see it differently?*

What steps can you take to help your team get to the “ideal conflict point”?

Activity: Build Your Conflict Management Tool Kit



INSTRUCTIONS:

STEP 1: Make a List

On the following page, make a list of all the “conflict situations” that come to mind - major, minor, and everything in between:

- *Conflict situations you’re currently involved in*
- *Confrontations or feedback conversations you’re avoiding*
- *Conflicts you know you need to address at some point*

NOTE: Include the “significant” conflicts and breakdowns that come to mind, but also include more “minor” misunderstandings and miscommunications, etc. These are an important opportunity to “build your conflict management muscles.”

STEP 2: Rank the Conflict Situations

On pages 7-8, rank each of these conflict situations from Level 1 (“Minor”), to Level 2 (“Moderate”) to Level 3 (“Major”), in the left-hand column.

Be open-minded - there may be some Level 2 or Level 3 conflicts you’ve been avoiding, or would really rather not address... include those as well!

STEP 3: Build Your Tool Kit

Once you’ve developed your list, we’ll offer a wide range of tools and strategies on pages 9-14 for addressing conflict at these various levels. Some of these tools and strategies are useful at any level, and others are most useful in addressing conflict at a *particular* level.

IN THE RIGHT-HAND COLUMN>>>>

**Activity:
Build Your Conflict
Management
Tool Kit**



PART 1: Make a comprehensive list of all the conflict situations that come to mind - include major altercations, minor disagreements, *and everything in between!*

**Activity:
Build Your Conflict
Management
Tool Kit**



PART 2: Rank the Conflict Situations:

Level 1: MINOR CONFLICTS

Tools to Use:

Level 2: MODERATE CONFLICTS

Tools to Use:

**Activity:
Build Your Conflict
Management
Tool Kit**



Level 3: MAJOR CONFLICTS

Tools to Use:

IDEAS FOR ACTION:

What specific steps can you take to initiate on some of these conflict conversations?

Tool #1: Check Your Lens



We are ALL wearing a LENS - the “lens” of our *perceptions*. And nowhere does it shape us more than in conflict.

Our lenses distort what we see. That’s a fact.

You’ve heard the expression, “Perception is Reality”? Well, it’s not. We *think* it is.

We perceive - and mis-perceive - every situation through our own lens. And everyone else perceives the situation through theirs!

What shapes our lens? Our brains are efficient: they turn past experience into quick assumptions so we can act fast. That keeps us moving -

But in a conflict it means we often misperceive the situation. Our lens causes us fill in the other person's motives, make assumptions, and react to the story in our head instead of the facts in front of us. Our history, our role, the pressure of the moment - they all tint what we see.

CHECK YOUR LENS: *So before you react, ask yourself:*

- ***What might I be distorting?*** Taking it personally, making it a big deal, etc.?
- ***What am I seeing that might not be there?*** Bad intent, disrespect, an attack - when something else may be going on?
- ***What might I be missing?*** Overlooking key info, not hearing their side, etc.?
- ***What does the situation look like from their perspective?*** Am I willing to really listen to how it looks through their lens?

Checking your lens means moving into “dialogue mode”.

Stop trying to defend your position, ask genuine questions, and then *really listen*.

Tool #1: Check Your Lens

Tool #1: Check Your Lens



One Conflict - Two Stories

Show me a conflict - at any level - and I'll show you two different stories of what the problem is. And we each believe that our version is the "truth".

My Perspective

"I sent him my draft on Monday and asked for comments by Thursday. Obviously he doesn't think my deadline matters. He's a perfectionist who can never just give quick feedback and move on. Now I'm stressed, the customer will blame me, and the whole project is going to be late because of him!"

Their Perspective

"She dropped a long draft on me Monday afternoon and wanted it back in three days. Obviously, she just wants me to rubber-stamp it, not really review it. She is always impatient and fires things off and expects everyone to drop everything. Now I'm buried, and I'm getting blamed for a crisis she created!"

Think of a current conflict situation you're in: What does it look like through your lens? What might it look like through their lens?

My Perspective

Their Perspective

Tool #2:
Use EQ -
***not* IQ**



The four domains of EQ work together - and nowhere are they tested more than in conflict. The first two are internal (managing yourself); the last two are external (engaging others).

1. **Self-Awareness:** Knowing your triggers - what sets you off in a disagreement, and how your reactions land on others.
2. **Self-Management:** Choosing your response under pressure instead of reacting - the pause that keeps conflict from turning personal.
3. **Social Awareness:** Reading what the other person actually feels and needs - the empathy that lets you understand before you respond.
4. **Relationship Management:** Where the first three come together - staying in dialogue, rebuilding trust, and working through conflict productively.

	Self	Others
Awareness	Self-Awareness	Social Awareness
Actions	Self-Management	Relationship Management

In a conflict situation, ask yourself these 4 questions:

1. **Self-Awareness:** *How am I feeling about this? Fearful? Stressed? Calm?*
2. **Self-Management:** *Am I acknowledging and managing my emotions?*
3. **Social Awareness:** *How are they doing? What are they feeling?*
4. **Relationship Management:** *How can I help them feel safe? Calm? Heard?*

Tool #3: Use Dialogue - *not Debate*

Tool #3: Use Dialogue - *not Debate*



Debate

Goal is to WIN (and NOT LOSE!)

Other participant is OPPONENT

Make points to prove other wrong;
hide weaknesses

Ask pointed questions to expose
weakness of their thinking

Listen to gain advantage and find
weaknesses

Entrenched in point of view

Accepting other's point shows
weakness

Decision is made when one party
wins the debate

Dialogue

Goal is to UNDERSTAND, then
decide

Other participant is PARTNER

Share points to expose my thinking
so others can examine

Ask questions to learn and gain
understanding of their thinking

Listen to gain new awareness and
find understanding

Open to changing point of view

Accepting other's point shows
willingness to listen and learn

Decision is made when there is
shared understanding, even if there
is not agreement

Ask yourself: *What is my true objective in this situation? Do I need to "win", or am I trying to build trust, understanding and strengthen this relationship?*

Tool #3: Use Dialogue - *not Debate*

Tool #3: Use Dialogue - not Debate



Debate Statements

"I'm right! You're wrong!"
"I'll show you the flaw in your thinking."
"Here's where you're wrong."
"Why on earth would you think that's a good idea??"
"You're missing the whole point!"
"Where in the world are you getting your information?!"
"That is absolutely not true."
"I think it's obvious that we should do it my way."

Dialogue Questions

"What am I missing?"
"Can we identify the merits of each perspective?"
"What are you seeing from where you stand?"
"Can you help me understand...?"
"What could help us move forward?"
"Can you share the data that you're drawing on so I can see how you're reaching this perspective?"
"Can we agree to disagree agreeably?"

Add some of your own:

Additional Tools



Review your list of Conflict Situations on pages 7-8.

Look through this list of tools and strategies, and consider which ones to add to your own “tool kit” to manage your conflict situations.

ALL LEVELS of CONFLICT:

- **Check Your Lens**
- **Use EQ - *not* IQ**
- **Use Dialogue - *not* Debate**
- **Conflict Management Ground Rules** - Every team should have a set of guidelines to handle conflict well.
- **The 20-60-20 Model** - Map your working relationships - some are easy, some are really hard, and most are somewhere in between.
- **Killman's Conflict Styles** - make an intentional choice about which approach to take in a given conflict situation.

LEVEL 1: Minor Conflict

- **Appreciate Personalities, Styles & Strengths** - Raise your awareness of your own style and strengths, and the styles and strengths of your colleagues, to identify where communication gaps and style differences can be causing friction and misunderstanding.
- **Ask Effective Questions** - Use open, genuine questions to surface what's really going on beneath a disagreement, drawing out the other person's perspective, needs, and concerns instead of assuming or arguing.
- **Active Listening** - Give your full attention and reflect back what you hear so the other person feels genuinely understood, which lowers defensiveness and keeps a disagreement from escalating.
- **SMART Agreements** - Turn vague expectations into clear, specific, mutually understood commitments, so "I thought you meant..." misunderstandings don't harden into conflict.
- **Building Partnerships** - Some partnerships are easy - but there are many partnerships that can be challenging, but highly valuable.

Additional Tools



LEVEL 2: Moderate Conflict

- [SBIDR Feedback](#) - Offer clear, non-blaming feedback by walking through the Situation, Behavior, Impact, Desired outcome, and Result, so a sensitive message lands as a constructive request rather than a personal attack.
- [Crucial Conversations](#) - Use a proven approach for high-stakes, emotionally charged discussions, staying in honest dialogue and keeping it safe when opinions differ and emotions run strong.
- [Accountability Pathway](#) - Hold yourself and others to clear agreements and follow-through, addressing missed commitments directly and early before they harden into bigger conflict.
- [Setting Healthy Boundaries](#) - This free mini-course (30 min) will help you take responsibility, take courage, and take action to set healthy boundaries in the workplace.
- [Make Reasonable Requests](#) - Ask clearly and specifically for what you need, framed in a way the other person can actually say yes to, instead of hinting, demanding, or letting frustration build.

LEVEL 3: Major Conflict

- [The Drama Triangle](#) - Recognize when you've slipped into the Victim, Rescuer, or Villain roles that keep conflict spinning, and consciously step out of the drama into a more empowered, self-directed stance.
- [Avoid Common Mistakes](#) - Learn the ten critical missteps supervisors make when dealing with a federal employee in trouble, so you can sidestep the errors that escalate a situation or create legal exposure.
- [Be Assertive - not Aggressive](#) - Express your needs and stand your ground clearly and respectfully, addressing a serious issue firmly without crossing into aggression that damages the relationship.
- [Understand the Options](#) - This DOT article walks a Federal employee or supervisor from informal to formal routes, opening with the line "*Doing nothing is the least advisable course.*"

Conclusion



Conflict is not the enemy.

Avoided conflict and destructive conflict are. But the honest, respectful disagreement - in the “healthy conflict” middle ground - is where teams sharpen each other, do their best thinking and build their deepest trust.

Managing conflict well is not about preventing it. It's about *welcoming, appreciating* - and even *celebrating* - the practice of healthy conflict and harnessing it toward better ideas, stronger relationships, and real progress.

Catch yourself (and your team) when you're drifting toward avoidance or escalation. Remind yourself (and your team) about the value and importance of *healthy* conflict - and step into it!

Check your lens, draw on your EQ, and get curious about how the other person(s) sees the situation. Shift from debate (trying to win) to dialogue (trying to understand).

Use your tool kit! Put these strategies to match the level of conflict in front of you. Pick one. One conflict, one strategy, one first step. That's how healthier conflict - and a healthier team - begins.

Going Deeper

DO A SHARED ASSESSMENT: Ask your colleagues to review one or more of the models for Healthy Conflict. Share your perspectives on your team's conflict culture. Come up with specific steps that you can take to strengthen your culture around healthy conflict.

Forming/Storming/Norming/Performing **Thomas-Kilmann** **Creative Abrasion**

PRACTICE AS A TEAM! Want to get better at something? Practice! As a team, walk through various scenarios where you typically have, or are likely to have, conflict. Keep it “generic” - don't name names. Discuss the challenging situations. Then, *practice walking through those situations as a team*. Practice living up to your Operating Agreements, staying calm, using appropriate responses, and helping each other as colleagues. You'll be better prepared when you then encounter these situations!



[Sample Operating Agreements & Ground Rules:](#) Review this list and consider how your team can formulate a useful set of guidelines for yourselves, to support a culture of "healthy conflict."

[Conflict Culture Assessments:](#) Have your team review one or more of the models of "healthy conflict". If you and your team would like to take the full assessments, contact us and we can help (jr@johnriordan.com).

[Forming/Storming/Norming/Performing](#) **[Thomas-Kilmann](#)** **[Creative Abrasion](#)**

[Why Virtual Teams Have More Conflict:](#) In this article Deborah Peterson highlights why virtual teams are more likely to have conflict, and offers ways to manage it, such as setting clear goals and assigning appropriate tasks for the team.

[How to Manage Conflict in Virtual Teams:](#) Keith Ferrazzi underlines different methods for managing virtual conflict, including protecting the privacy of the team, assigning a "point person" for particular issues, diverge then converge, and creating a focal point for the team.

[How to Prevent Conflict in Your Virtual Teams:](#) In this article Julia Carter identifies different common sources of conflict in virtual teams, and offers six methods to prevent virtual conflict.

[5 Ways to Effectively Handle Conflict in Virtual Teams:](#) The Virtual Hub highlights different ways to handle conflict, including leading from the front, having regular team meetings, creating space and time for people to voice their concerns, having a shared work space, and taking time to celebrate.

[6 Strategies to Deal With Employee Conflict at Work:](#) This article published by Officevibe outlines the common causes of conflict, the signs of employee conflict, conflict management strategies, steps to implement conflict resolution, and strategies to prevent employee conflict going forward.

[Managing Conflict in Teams:](#) In this video, Lindred Green educates the viewers about different signs of conflict, including escalating emotions and fighting over trivial issues. Green also outlines about the phases of conflict to raise awareness.

[How to Manage Conflict in Virtual Teams in 7 Easy Steps:](#) In this engaging video, Fahd Alhattab discusses various strategies for managing conflict, including changing attitudes, communicating your feelings, trusting coworkers, and more.

RELATED COURSES TO EXPLORE

Creating Your Leadership User's Guide

What Makes You Tick?

- What Core Values drive your decisions and actions?
- What are your most valuable Strengths?
- What are your most relevant Personality Traits?

If you're not clear on these fundamental building blocks, you should be.

[Learn More](#)



Communicating Across Differences

It doesn't take much to see that we have major challenges communicating across differences. Here's the problem: At some point, we will have differences with everyone!

If we don't learn how to courageously initiate effective communication across differences, then we're left with the only option of increasing division and decreasing capacity to work together effectively to achieve results.

[Learn More](#)



Strengthening Your Virtual Emotional Intelligence

Learn the importance of being mindful of your own emotions, and how you manage them, amidst whatever challenges you may be facing in the virtual context. Develop strategies for strengthening your listening skills as you work with remote team members. You'll also explore options for responding appropriately, across a range of emotions.

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