

Day 3 - The 4 Types of Conflict

You are probably thinking: “Only four types of conflict? There is way more than four. There could be hundreds, maybe thousands, of types of conflicts!” What should we have for dinner, which bills to pay first, should we move to New York so you can take that job, to what stage of pregnancy should abortion be legal, my partner wants us to manufacture a certain new product and I don’t; the list goes on.

I believe all conflicts fall into four categories:

1. **Misunderstandings or assumptions**
2. **Values**
3. **Things**
4. **Needs or psychological issues**

Now, again, let me tell you that it takes two to tango, and it takes two or more to make a conflict. That means we are all part of our conflicts. The trick is to observe yourself as you are having the conflict. See yourself from that eagle-eye perspective, from outside of yourself. You can learn to classify conflicts to make them easier to resolve.

When I was job coaching people who were unemployed, I realized just how many people lost their job due to a conflict. (In Florida we are an at-will state, so employees may be terminated for any reason, as long as it’s legal to do so.) When a conflict began, no matter if it was with a co-worker, supervisor, or employee, many people were not trained to know what to do, or how to classify the type of conflict they were involved in, and the conflict escalated, resulting in them being fired or quitting. Everyone needs basic knowledge of conflict resolution to navigate life with.

Let’s get into more detail about the four types of conflict.

1. **Misunderstandings or assumptions**

With a misunderstanding or assumption conflict, you do not really know what is going on; you are operating on information that may not be correct. Instead of asking questions, you are guessing about the other person or a situation. You may be on the Victim - Villain - Hero Conflict Triangle (more on that later) and not know it.

In this type of conflict you hear things such as:

- “*I thought...*”
- “*Well, you...*”
- “*Didn’t you...*”
- “*Maybe she...*”

Misunderstandings or assumptions happen all the time. When you realize that is why you are having a conflict, the easiest thing to do is to say “*I’m sorry. I think we are having a conflict over a misunderstanding (or assumption). Let’s back up. Did you say you did, or did not, want to include a skills test when we hire for that position?*”

Sound easy? Well here is how this relatively easy-to-solve type of conflict can explode out of control. If the misunderstanding or assumption hits a hot button in the other, and instead of asking questions to clarify they take it personally or they jump to even more assumptions, you could see a heated argument, a fight, or someone stomp or slip out of the room. Even these confrontations or escalated conflict situations are resolvable, as we will see later.

Assumptions or misunderstanding misheard as an attack > Hot buttons pushed > Taking it personally > Conflict!

I heard a great expression: “When in doubt, ask it out”.

SUMMARY

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1. Misunderstandings or assumptions
2. Values
3. Things
4. Needs or psychological issues

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To resolve conflicts over misunderstandings or assumptions:

1. Apologize
2. Name the conflict
3. Back up
4. Ask a lot of questions
5. Listen with an open and clear mind
6. Talk it out

2. Values

Values are our beliefs and standards of behavior that we hold very dear to us. Many times, values are passed to us from our parents and family, religion, schools, friends, political party, or anyone or anything else that we identify strongly with. Many times our identity is tied to our values, and to compromise (or even the perception of compromising) our values can be subconsciously felt as disrespecting the person or institution that we feel gave us that value, as well as lose touch with who we think we are.

The days are gone where we only interact with people who hold similar values to us. How do we coexist with others who have values different than ours? What do we do when we are in a conflict over values?

In this type of conflict you hear things such as:

- “I believe that...”
- “You should...”
- “People should...”

In a values conflict, you are arguing about deep, ingrained “should” rules for life. Polarization, or dividing into two opposite camps of opinion and taking opposite views, is commonplace.

Have you heard the expression: “Do not talk about religion or politics in ‘polite’ company”? When discussing value-laden topics, it is easy to explode out of control, like in the misunderstanding or assumption conflicts. Who does not want to defend their values when one feels they are under attack?

Perceived or real attack of values > Hot buttons pushed > Taking it personally > Conflict!

There is no reason to avoid discussions or conflicts over values. Now more than ever, we all need to know how to take everyone’s considerations into mind and form agreements we all can live with. It can be very difficult to negotiate conflicts based on values. How do we resolve conflicts based on issues such as abortion, religion, how to raise children, or what the corporate culture should be?

When you realize you are having a conflict over values, the road to rationality is to say *“I am sorry. I think we are having a conflict over values. Let’s back up. I will listen with a clear and open mind. Can you tell me again how you feel about ——?”*

You can talk about your beliefs and why you hold them. One technique for listening with compassion in a conflict is to imagine the other as a little girl or boy, and what it was like to be her or him growing up. Our values, personality, and history comes from somewhere. Listen deeply to the needs under the values being discussed.

Then, you can agree to disagree, and be done. Or, if you are having a conflict over an issue that needs to be resolved, you can work on a negotiating a multi-faceted agreement that takes everyone’s needs into account. This is tricky, and you must work together despite your deep disagreements.

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To resolve conflicts over values:

1. Apologize
2. Name the conflict
3. Back up
4. Ask a lot of questions
5. Listen with an open and clear mind
6. Talk it out
7. Agree to disagree, or negotiate a multi-faceted agreement that takes everyone's needs into account

3. Things

When there are abundant resources, or even perceived abundance, conflicts over things (scarce resources) do not occur frequently. What is a scarce resource, or thing, that you might have conflicts over? Some examples are food, water, attention, time, money, affection, housing grant applications, the corner offices, one new sweater that siblings must share, or one spot left on the team.

In this type of conflict you hear things such as:

- *"I deserve the last one..."*
- *"It's not fair, I want it..."*
- *"There is not enough for all of us..."*

You can ensure abundant resources or make trade-offs to prevent conflicts over things. If you are already in this type of conflict, you can begin to provide what people need. If that is not an option, everyone can talk about what they need, and why, and then negotiate a multi-faceted agreement that takes everyone's needs into account.

There can be enough for everyone, yet people are still used to thinking in terms of either/or, and in terms of scarcity (us against them), so there are people still deprived of things or needed resources. Collaborative conflict resolution allows you to use compassion and inclusion: everyone involved in the conflict gets a chance to be heard, acknowledged, and have their needs met. Also, collaborative conflict resolution means that power is shared, while allowing everyone to retain power. In this manner, we can also allow everyone to share things, and resources, even if it means changing existing systems and power structures to ensure inclusion for everyone.

To resolve conflicts over things:

1. Apologize
2. Name the conflict
3. Back up
4. Ask a lot of questions
5. Listen with an open and clear mind
6. Talk it out
7. Negotiate a multi-faceted agreement that provides resources for everyone's needs

4. Needs or psychological issues

The three other types of conflicts we discussed may also have elements of needs or psychological issues at their cores. Many times a conflict can fall into more than one type of conflict. If you are trying to analyze what type of conflict you are in, and it does not seem like one of the others, or using the above techniques is not working, you may be in conflict that is rooted in a much deeper unmet need or issue.

It is important to know that many times a conflict based on needs or psychological issues is disguised as some other conflict on the surface, but if you get out your conflict shovel and start digging - WOW!

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Take personality differences. They seem simple; I just do not get along with that type of person. But why is that? Is it that simple? You may be dealing with someone emotionally unstable, who may or may not respond to collaborative conflict resolutions. On the other hand, I personally feel that if you have recurring conflicts over personality differences, and respond to the other person with anger or some other way that prevents you from seeing anything beyond the other person's personality, you may have an interpersonal conflict that deals with deeper issues. Perhaps you just need communication, relationship, or conflict resolution skills to deal with this person. They may need the same.

Also, conflicts that seem harmless, like over who does the dishes, leaving the toothpaste uncapped, when to start the weekly meeting, a schedule for the conference room, or what dance lessons to take, when recurring, and examined deeply, can be about all kinds of issues you never thought existed! No wonder many people avoid conflicts!

Many people would rather avoid a conflict than dig deep into the reasons the other is agitated. It is quicker to make a garden by pulling a few weeds, digging out a few rocks near the surface, and begin the planting. But if we get out the shovel, and dig really, really deep and take out the rest of the rocks, the rest of the weeds, we will have a soil that is prepared better, and yields a better crop. It is like that with conflict. The Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small."

Have you ever had a conflict with someone and talked it out so completely that after you both felt cleansed, renewed, and like magic had occurred? That is the feeling when you open up during a conflict to understand each other completely and work to satisfy everyone's needs. That is the feeling the participants and I have after a mediation. I see that magic has occurred, the magic of the people truly reaching out to, and connecting with, the other people involved, and having their needs met while maintaining respect and dignity.

So, I say: dig in! Grab your conflict shovel, your compassion, and your listening skills, and listen deeply to what the others have to say about the conflict, and about themselves. Listen beyond their words, to what happened when they were little girls or boys. You can gain a world of insight into them, and even yourself, with that kind of deep listening.

Under the surface of what people say the conflict is about, you will hear the real cause of the conflict: neglect, respect, power, self-esteem, core conflicts, image, identity, how do we relate to each other, transference, projection, hot buttons pushed, not attending to each other's needs, recognition, appreciation, independence, acknowledgement, belonging, and more. Most conflicts have an issue relating to power, respect, or self-esteem underneath. Remember this when you listen to the other person. Resist the temptation to think they are just stubborn, or stupid, or a problem person. They may have a deep wound that prevents them from relating to people in a normal, productive way. Try to talk deeply, talk freely, and make a multi-faceted agreement that meets everyone's needs.

Resolving conflicts provides everyone with what they need, and you will sleep easier without the weight of conflict around your neck. I know I do. When you have a conflict, you will be better equipped to work through it, rather than have it lingering without resolution. Your relationships will become deeper and more meaningful, with a clearer flow of energy. You will work as a team to approach conflict as something outside you, which you can work on together.

To resolve conflicts over unmet needs or psychological issues:

1. Apologize
2. Name the conflict (if you feel it is appropriate)
3. Back up
4. Ask a lot of questions
5. Listen with an open and clear mind
6. Talk it out
7. Negotiate a multi-faceted agreement that provides resources for everyone's needs

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It is possible that these kinds of conflicts may occur many times with not enough progress made to meet the needs. You may be involved in conflicts that are patterns, not one-time conflicts. There may be a deeper overall problem underlying the series of conflicts, that you are not able to unearth on your own. In this case, you might look into therapy or using a mediator to help you work through your issues together.

When you find yourself in your next conflict, stop to think about what type of conflict you are in, and use the techniques. Remember, it takes two to tango, and you have a role in your conflicts. You can see your conflict and your role in it as if you were an outside observer. You can guide the people involved through the conflict, using this flow of dialogue: I feel, I need, I promise. Everyone can talk about how they feel, what they need, and make a promise or agreement that everyone will be happy to honor.

TRY IT!

The 4 Types of Conflict

Make a list of your conflicts. Who are the conflicts with, and what type(s) are they?

Is there a pattern to your conflicts and who you have them with?