



Navigating Conflict is Your Responsibility

Fear. Clashes. Disagreement. Tension. These serve as synonyms for conflict, each having a negative connotation that stems from the great discomfort many cultures feel surrounding the nature of conflict. In other words, it's fairly natural to feel apprehensive or uneasy when moments of discord or friction arise. Fortunately, the ability to navigate conflict is a skill that can be developed.

Brief Fundamentals for Navigating Conflict

By increasing our awareness about what drives conflict for ourselves and others, we're better able to uncover alternative ways of thinking about how we approach it.

This opens to us more options for how we can choose to respond. And being able to make choices then means we can wield greater control over any experience or situation. If we can control how we respond, then we're going to be better equipped to navigate conflict—and more likely to encounter it as an opportunity instead of a threat to our peace of mind. Quoting the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, “Any person capable of angering you becomes your master; he can anger you only when you permit yourself to be disturbed by him.”

For example, when presenting my ideas regarding email marketing to my team, I might take it personally or become defensive when somebody else pokes holes in my reasoning. It feels attacking. What is this person's problem with me? This might create a tension in my chest or provoke some ill feelings in me toward them, but going down that road isn't going to end well. Now, if for instance I become aware that some people explore ideas by challenging them—it's not personal—I suddenly have new options to ponder.

First, I can ask them for the reasons behind their questions or statements: “Zayne, you said that sending out that email campaign might confuse customers. Can you tell me more about your thinking on that?” Likely holding in common a hope for the success of the project, Zayne has an opportunity to reveal some information I may not have considered. Or, perhaps he interpreted differently what I said, and now I have a chance to restate more clearly my recommendation for the project. No love is lost between us and we are likely to have a better outcome.

Second, I can reframe the comments in my head in a more fruitful manner. I might take note of Zayne's attentiveness to our customers' needs—something I also care about—and entertain in my mind a moment of appreciation for him being so focused on the experience of our clients.

I can then choose to ask him clarifying questions and/or reframe his comments, thus maintaining control of my behavior and minimizing my likelihood of becoming defensive. We've now navigated conflict successfully (or prevented a moment of tension from becoming a negative conflict). And, I can look forward to more interactions with Zayne and reaping the fruits of our teams greater success.

Conflict Can Be Something to Fear or an Opportunity

Navigating conflict is difficult, in particular, because many of us are afraid of it. The prospect of conflict engenders fear because we have so many negative associations with it (bad experiences that seem to remain embedded deep in our bodies long after the strife has occurred). This relationship can evoke a fight or flight response from us even upon hearing the simple words from a coworker or a friend: “Do you have a minute to talk?”



Building an increased awareness around the benefits of conflict is a major step forward in thinking differently and, ultimately, finding more success in our relationships (and projects).

Consider a few common reasons people avoid conflict:

- Fear of retribution from a supervisor or friend
- Fear of failure
- Fear of hurting someone else
- Fear of sounding foolish or unintelligent
- Fear of being perceived as unkind, mean, or obtuse
- Fear of having to engage with emotions
- Fear of creating more work for oneself or others

The list extends endlessly, but reflect on how conflict can be viewed when we consider some of its many bounties:

- Opportunity to build self-respect or greater confidence
- Opportunity to reduce groupthink
- Opportunity to practice emotional resiliency
- Opportunity to experiment (“fail small and fail often”)
- Opportunity to receive feedback on how you land with others
- Opportunity to resolve a problem (for your team or customers)
- Opportunity to prevent a bigger crisis from happening

Notice Your Triggers, Then Examine Their Roots

Identifying conflict can be easy. At least, when it comes to the things that cause us discomfort or unease. However, discovering the true sources of friction that are unique to each of us requires a bit of external work and a lot of introspection. It is even more difficult to discern what are moments of conflict for other people, the encounters that threaten their internal harmony to which we might be oblivious. While conflict can manifest in many forms, it's usually triggered by two things: an unmet expectation and/or a values violation.

An unmet expectation takes place when someone says or does something you did not expect, or does not say or do something you did expect. These expectations may be clear and articulated, or unclear, assumed, and unspoken.

A values violation occurs when someone does something that violates a deeply held principle that reflects your ethics and usually creates a strong and negative emotional feeling.

For example, you may anticipate meetings to start on time or for coworkers to respond to your emails within 24 hours. Unmet expectations become discord when your coworker walks into a meeting 10 minutes late or answers your email two days after you sent it. In another situation, you might expect to be publicly recognized when your work is done exceptionally well. You go above and beyond on a project and your coworkers act as if it's ordinary. You're left feeling frustrated or slighted. Expectations weren't met.

On the other hand, values violations create conflict when another person contradicts a value with their behavior. This could be a lapse in judgement on their part, or it could be that they do not share the same values that you do.



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For example, you may value dignity: which to you includes not criticizing someone's performance in public. When a manager reprimands you within hearing range of your coworkers, you're going to feel conflict rise up. Again, your manager may not have realized that you experience this as a values violation: either they don't understand dignity the way you do, or they don't prioritize it (compared to other values) as much as you do.

Keep in mind that we can experience these triggers separately or in tandem. Either one can cause us to react. May the gods help us if both triggers are present, for that only increases the potential intensity of the conflict. By ascertaining whether interpersonal tension is a result of unmet expectations or values violations, we put ourselves on the fast track toward greater awareness and, eventually, to greater control of our situation.

It can be nice for others to navigate conflict for us, for our manager to realize on their own that they violated one of our values, or for our coworker to understand that an expectation was not met; however, we need to take responsibility for what we can control when contention arises. The ability to successfully navigate conflict resides within each of us. Don't surrender your emotional life to somebody else. To again quote Epictetus: "It isn't the events themselves that disturb people, but only their judgments about them."

In review, here are a few things to keep in mind when you encounter your next conflict.

1. Awareness – What are my triggers? Was it a values violation or unmet expectations?
2. Options – What are the different ways I can react to this or reframe it?
3. Choices – What are concrete actions I can take?
4. Control – Doing what is in my control, what is my opportunity here?

By asking ourselves these questions, we can begin to identify our sources of conflict and determine the most effective way forward. We can fight it or avoid it, but we achieve better results, greater productivity, improved outcomes and more self-confidence when we know how to navigate it.