

LionHeart's Conflict Prevention & Resolution Practice

Self-Responsibly Caring for the Concerns of All to Improve Teamwork

Conflict is a divisive, painful, and expensive phenomenon in business. Think about the time and energy that goes into the heated disagreements between individuals, teams, and departments in your organization. The cost of stress in US business is \$300 billion per year. How much of that bill is your organization paying? That is just the beginning: the lost opportunity, disengagement, and work-around costs are likely higher.

Preventing and resolving conflict is simple but not easy; and it's a great opportunity to strengthen people's character and their alignment to your company values. It requires both extra effort and a commitment to learning how to find common ground between valid, but differing points of view. Contrast that, however, with the amount of time and energy you spend listening to people vent when they are unwilling to resolve issues with colleagues on their own.

Fortunately, in reasonably healthy organizations, conflict is an unintended consequence of well-intended people getting stuck in misunderstandings and disempowering stories. Good people often do this from moving too fast, impacting their ability to communicate effectively. Addressing differences appropriately will strengthen your culture and your profitability. However, when avoided, conflicts get fossilized into walls between people and departments. These walls make problem solving, effective cooperation, and optimum profitability virtually impossible.

LionHeart's approach to conflict is built upon a strong commitment to self-responsibility, voluntary accountability, and respectful communication of each individual's needs and concerns. It opens the door to both personal and organizational transformation. Using our guiding principles and practical steps will both break down the walls between people and strengthen your foundation for accomplishment.

Guiding Principles:

1. **Conflict is unavoidable.** Significant differences occur most often with the people we spend the most time with and care a great deal about. Addressing them as soon as they arise is the best way to prevent normal difficulties from turning into conflicts.
2. **Conflict can be intentional or unintentional.** Initially, giving people the benefit of the doubt that they are not consciously or intentionally causing a conflict with you is your best choice. If you discover a conflict is intentional, stronger accountability is necessary.
3. **Our choice of words matters.** Using judgmental and derogatory language to describe others is more informative about our own emotional intelligence than those we are upset with. It disempowers both individuals.
4. **Eliminating blame is crucial.** Every conflict involves a contribution from both parties. It is either something you said or did, or neglected to say or do; and it can be subtle or obvious. Blaming others creates defensiveness and closes the door to learning. Looking for and acknowledging your part can start the process of bringing down existing walls.
5. **Meeting everyone's needs is possible.** We react and engage in conflict when we momentarily believe we cannot get our own needs met or we cannot fulfil our most important intentions. These thoughts are never a true reflection of what is possible. Instead, they are just an indication that we have an important lesson to learn.
6. **A positive approach becomes contagious.** Taking the high road through conflict involves the courage to be vulnerable with what you could have done better. When you do so, the others involved are more likely to look for their own mistakes and learn to negotiate a reasonable solution. The low road of escalation or avoidance is also contagious: it is paved with accusations, defensiveness, blame, and gossip.
7. **Effective teamwork takes time and space.** Sometimes we move at the speed of light to accomplish our goals without considering how we are impacting others. Relationships become transactional, as opposed to trusting and respectful. When we stop relating with people in a meaningful way, our relationships suffer and are not strong enough to accomplish what is possible.
8. **Everyone is responsible for resolving conflict.** Organizations with a healthy culture understand that effective conflict resolution is necessary for both personal fulfillment and business success. They recruit and develop people who are willing to respectfully address differences as they arise to maintain the professional and engaging atmosphere they want to work in.

This practice occurs in 3 phases and 11 steps. You can use the practice unilaterally or, ideally, with your colleague if they are willing to experiment with a new approach to conflict which promises to strengthen your relationship. Initially, an effective, neutral facilitator can provide valuable assistance.

Phase 1 - Thoughtful Reflection:

1. **Notice that you are upset.** Awareness that you are not at peace with something or someone is important. Your internal indicators never lie but you need to tune into them. These indicators are your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that signal you are experiencing distress with what is occurring or has occurred. For example, thinking “I can’t believe this!” with frustration, a clenched jaw, and a red face.
2. **Accept your experience in a larger perspective.** Your feelings and initial assessments of what is happening matter. They need to be accompanied by the perspective that you cannot, in this moment, see or know everything that is happening. While you quietly acknowledge to yourself that you are upset and perturbed, question what could be happening for others at the same time. For example, changing the thought process from only thinking “I am frustrated! She won’t let me contribute and she’s continually blocking us from getting this project done!” Instead, an additional question should be added “I wonder what’s going on for her?”
3. **Focus on observable facts not perceptions.** As quickly as possible, take a breath, and see if you can separate what actually happened from the derogatory assessments of what you think the other person did wrong. Avoid going into the past and getting more upset by reliving your prior experiences that make this event seem worse, such as additional work or a problem you are now left to deal with. Give the individual the benefit of the doubt and accept that these things can happen. Reframe what made you upset as just a moment in time where you need to find an effective resolution. For example, “Our deliverable is due Friday and we had agreed to work on it on Tuesday. She wants to throw away our work and start over. I am committed to meeting the deadline by enhancing our work completed to date. We need to work this out one way or the other.”
4. **Find the learning opportunity and avoid degrading thoughts or comments.** Reframe this scenario as an opportunity to strengthen the positive quality or skill that was missing. This is in contrast to festering on what went wrong. For example, thinking “I know this is another reminder to be more patient with people I don’t easily resonate with. At the same time, maybe I’m not effectively communicating the value I am bringing to this project or not honoring the value she has contributed.”
5. **Focus on your own responsibility.** Inquire into what, even if only a small percentage, is your part that contributed to getting yourself into this situation. Take the time you need to reflect upon this and be ready to calmly share your own misstep and ask your colleague what they think your part is. For example, thinking “Perhaps I have been pushing my agenda too hard without leaving room for your creativity.”

Phase 2 – Respectful Engagement:

6. **Share your perceptions with self-responsibility.** Report what you think occurred as calmly as possible, including what you think your part is. Ask your partner to do the same. Notice that this is Step 6 and you have just begun to openly speak about the conflict. If we do our own work first, we are not likely to react or overreact, and the conversation is likely to go much better. For example, saying “It seems we are not aligned here. I may be pushing my agenda without listening to your concerns. I am not feeling valued for my contribution and you may feel the same. What’s happening for you?”
7. **Practice reflective listening.** If your colleague expresses frustration and makes accusations towards you, listen and acknowledge that you hear and understand their feelings - validate them. You need not agree with everything being said. While doing your best to listen respectfully, you may need to use a reflective practice that keeps you centered under duress to avoid getting triggered into an escalating reaction. However, once you honor your colleague’s perspective and feelings, you are much more likely to effectively engage in a two-way problem solving discussion. For example, saying “I get why you are angry and don’t blame you for being upset. We need to hear one another out, clarify the mistake or misunderstanding, and find a way to make this work for both of us.”
8. **Apologize for your part.** Once you are openly exploring what you each contributed to the conflict and have identified how the mistake or misunderstandings came about, you can express your regrets and apologize for your part with the intention to create a fresh start. For example, “I’m sorry for going silent on you for a while and for being too pushy. I know I get overly stressed whenever a deadline is looming. Can we talk about what we need from one another going forward so we can move together as a team?”

Phase 3 - Empowering Action:

9. **Identify what is most important for each party.** Deeply listening to one another’s concerns and needs is a powerful way to re-establish trust. This step involves more than rehashing what we already have said and know about one another. It involves uncovering the subtler aspects of what is important to us as we continue working together. Often, this deep listening illuminates something very important that neither person had recognized for themselves, and this experience of discovery is empowering to both the listener and the speaker. If your colleague has not yet acknowledged their part of what upset you, ask for it in the most positive way possible. For example, saying “I think you are saying, and I haven’t ever heard you say this before, that my enthusiasm for my contribution can seem to put too much attention on my expertise. I need to make my full contribution without any restrictions, and I understand you want to make sure your contribution isn’t lost in our final product. The truth is we have different talents to bring to this project and we should both feel very enthusiastic about what we ultimately deliver. Is that right?”

10. **Understand and validate one another's needs and concerns.** Granting legitimacy to what everyone involved needs solidifies the fresh start. Now it is time to renegotiate what we are committed to accomplishing, as well as how we are planning to work together more effectively. The new agreement will emphasize what we have both learned so that we give ourselves the highest likelihood of improving our work product by strengthening our working relationship. For example, "I suggest we take care of what's important to both of us by delivering our best work possible by Friday, and accompanying that with a question about the value of starting from scratch in the new direction. Our intention with that proposed question will be to generate greater enthusiasm for whatever we could create with a later due date. That later due date will need to be justified with a vision for a better work product. Can you go with that?"
11. **Use what was learned to prevent future conflict.** Each time you navigate through these types of scenarios using this approach you deepen your understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses, and those of your colleagues. You are also communicating to yourself and the world that you are willing and able to hold yourself accountable to continuous personal growth. Additionally, you will be fine-tuning your skills at listening for and caring about what is important to yourself and others. In short, you will develop the confidence that you can negotiate through breakdowns to form stronger relationships that produce greater positive impact.

Learning from conflict resolution is not for the faint of heart. It is messy and can even be destructive. Most of us do a lot to avoid these conversations, as sometimes things get worse, at least in the short-term, in spite of our best intentions. These principles and steps do not guarantee a successful outcome every time. Occasionally, we find people who are unwilling to approach whatever upsets them in a manner that leads to a positive outcome. In those scenarios, we need to find a way to protect ourselves while being productive, and/or negotiate ourselves into a more empowering environment.

However, from our own experience and years of navigating through organizational conflicts, we know that people can use conflict to strengthen their own character. This also brings the best out of others for the benefit of the entire organization.

For more resources go to: <http://lionhrt.com/resources>

Want to start a conversation? Contact us at: <http://lionhrt.com/contact-us/>