

The background of the cover features a pattern of overlapping diamond shapes in various shades of blue, ranging from light to dark. The pattern is most prominent on the left side and fades towards the right.

# **RESOLVING CONFLICT**

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## **Resolving Conflict**

**Angelena Boden**

**What is conflict? What causes conflict? Techniques for handling conflict, when emotions run high, personality clashes, silent conflict.**

**Case studies :- Five work based conflicts, one domestic conflict, one social conflict. Analysis and suggestions for resolution, resources and recommendations for further reading.**

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## What is Conflict?

I hate confrontation and I hate conflict! I get a queasy feeling in my stomach. I either can't eat anything or I go hunting down the biscuits. I can't settle to do anything until the conflict is resolved. The problem is that we solve one issue and breathe a sigh of relief only to be faced with another soon after.

Life is full of conflict. Even the best relationships will experience disagreements which if not handled properly can balloon into all-out wars.

What do you think of when you hear the word *conflict*? Something negative, destructive, power struggles or anger maybe?

Conflict means there is something wrong in a relationship whether it's with our partner, parent, colleague, boss or even just someone on the road.

If you are like me you probably think it's always your fault and you are quick to apologise for something you haven't even done. How many times do I say sorry when someone bumps into me? Maybe it's time to reconsider how conflict arises, who is really responsible but more importantly how we can handle all kinds of confrontations and conflict and create a win-win for both parties.

Here is an interesting definition of conflict.

*A serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one: "the eternal conflict between the sexes".*

I agree with the bit about it being protracted but it's not limited to being between the genders. Some of the bitterest and unresolved conflicts I've witnessed in my 30 years of training are between women.

Conflict is certainly about disagreement. It's also about threat, real or imagined, and it's about fear. Fear that our needs are not going to be met or that we are not going to be taken seriously.

Conflict isn't just about a clash of expectations or misunderstood facts. It's a complex emotional experience which attacks our sense of self; – our ego. Much of it is about perception i.e. how the other person sees the situation and how that clashes with our own perception. "I'm not wrong" we cry. *They just don't get it!*"

Conflict, wherever it occurs, but especially at work and home cannot be dismissed as something that will pass and that we will get over it. Whether it's active aggression or the more insidious, covert, stonewalling type – i.e. passive aggression, if left unresolved it can have a significant impact on our mental, emotional and physical health.

The first point to remember is that ***Conflict is complex and involves emotions at a deep level.***

Here's an example of a recent conflict which apparently I had triggered, unwittingly via the dreaded email.

I had been running a big training programme involving several teams and needed to email some instructions to both groups and to a few individuals.

To keep it simple, I named these people in the main body of the email. That was fine. However, someone took offence to how I had worded something. She came back at me, guns blazing and said, *"Are you referring to me as a non-team player? I have helped everyone in my group. I am very offended by your tone and I shall be making a complaint..."*

I was taken aback so I checked and double checked my email messages as I am very aware of how things can be misconstrued by the recipient. I had to look hard at the nature of my language and yes, I agree, I could have put it better so I picked up the telephone to apologise. She wouldn't take my call and said everything had to be in writing from now on. Bemused, I stared at my keyboard for a while, paralysed. What had happened? How was I going to put this right before it got out of hand? Had she been waiting for me to slip up? Or was this an attempt at creating conflict hiding a bigger plan that she was hatching?

In the end I wrote a letter of apology, admitting that my suggestions were open to interpretation (personally I didn't think they were) and rephrased them.

She replied demanding a public apology.

This was getting out of hand. I gave it a considerable thought and this was my final reply.

*Dear Unhappy Lady,*

*I am sorry you are dissatisfied by the way I attempted to empathise with your feelings on this matter and to correct a mistake which has led to this misunderstanding.*

*I would like you to consider whether this role is suitable for you. At our next group meeting I will allocate some time for us talk through these issues face to face.*

*Kind regards*

Unhappy Lady didn't come to the group meeting but instead decided to withdraw from the project. I didn't realise it at the time, but the rest of the team were relieved. Clearly she had set up the conflict with me to provide an excuse to withdraw. Guess who got the blame...?

Think back on some similar situations you've experienced.

- Did you see it coming?
- How did you handle it?
- Did you make it worse?
- What was your part in it? ( if any)
- How did it make you feel?

Remember conflict is closely linked to feelings of threat, inadequacy, fear, sense of injustice and other strong emotions.

Some people have the type of personality which allows them to just shrug things off.

“They’ll get over it... now’s where’s my tennis racket”, sort of attitude.

Others brood, sometimes plotting a well timed kick-back or revenge.

### **What causes conflict?**

Charles Darwin put it down to our biology and that the struggle for existence is the main cause of conflict. Psychologists of the past have linked conflict with man’s in-built aggression.

Humankind shares many characteristics but we are not all the same in regards to temperament, attitude, expectations and aspirations. Our thinking is driven by our background, the messages we received when growing up and the socio-economic context of our lives. If we grow up with a sense of entitlement this can lead to conflict when our desires are not met. We may confuse need with want and desire. Emotions such as jealousy can create conflict. “Why have you got it and not me?”

Conflict is also created through cultural differences. I may prefer my fish to be grilled but you are used to eating it raw. A debate about which tastes better breaks out but will this lead to conflict? Not as a single incident. You might just joke about it. However when parents from two different cultures and indeed religious backgrounds start to experience conflict over ways of raising children, then this can lead to very serious outcomes. Even then, children get caught in the middle of a war which is more to do with power than the child rearing.

I know this from raising half Middle Eastern daughters. As soon as they reached a certain age, their father began to control their lives in a way he hadn't done before. Growing up in the UK, this caused endless arguments and eventually fights. He reverted back to his upbringing and what was considered the "right" way for girls to behave and of course I drew on my own experiences of being a liberal western woman.

Age is another issue which can generate conflict. The generation gap is a term coined in the 1960s to explain the differences between two generations, usually parents and children. Teenagers needing to find their identity and their space become rebellious and create conflict within the household in order to achieve independence.

Conflict can arise over a number of different issues such as positions at work, territory in the case of wars or even boundary disputes between neighbouring properties, ideologies of supremacy and religious beliefs. Disputes which don't get resolved become ongoing conflicts.

What part do we play in these situations? Are we responsible for someone's bad attitude to us at work because we were promoted or given a sabbatical? No. We are only responsible for our part in it. However, if we behave badly then yes, we are responsible to adding fuel to the fire.

We aren't going to be examining ways of resolving world conflict or even corporate disputes. We can only do what is in our power.

***A key message is to lead by example. Put the ego back in its box and stop playing the power games.***

It has taken me forty years to fully understand this.

## Approaches to Conflict.

Not everyone goes into a confrontational situation with guns blazing. Much will depend on behaviours learned from parents and role models and also on the type of person we are.

If you don't like conflict then maybe you should **avoid it**. This is an approach adopted by passive people who hope that by pretending it doesn't exist or remaining silent, the problem will evaporate in the mists of time.

Personally I like to use an **accommodating** approach. I like to smooth things over by being diplomatic. I use my words carefully and say nothing which will inflame the situation. The problem here though is that you can end up being walked over by the same people you are trying to help. Being diplomatic is one thing. Being a doormat is another.

What about the **power surge** approach? You have to win at all costs. It doesn't matter if you damage a relationship in the process. Getting your needs are paramount. This can be a dangerous and damaging approach.

I prefer the **compromise**. It's a give and take solution even if we can't get in the mind set of the other person. We appreciate they have needs and likely feel threatened in the same way as we do. Here we work to give them a little and keep a little for ourselves. If we can find a shared goal, so much the better.

I mentioned at the beginning that I get a sickly feeling when faced with conflict. This is not the only physical symptom people can experience. Other symptoms can include tension in different parts of the body; especially head and neck, shallow breathing and pain in the chest. These symptoms may well be the start of an anxiety attack or general feelings of being unwell.

Relaxation and stress management techniques play a key role in helping you to maintain the calm you need to deal effectively with conflict.



I breathe. That is I breathe properly, from the diaphragm and not the chest. Look up Pranayama breathing which is used as part of yoga.

<http://www.abc-of-yoga.com/pranayama>

It's about breathing in and out through the nose and not the mouth and keeping the oxygen in the body. It helps keep mind and body calm. Better still, join a yoga class!

*"When the breath wanders, the mind is unsteady, but when the breath is still, so is the mind still." - Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

If you are in a state of hypervigilance wondering when the next attack is coming you are at risk of doing serious damage to your health.

People in high conflict lives;- war, acrimonious divorce, abusive homes, bullying and hostile workplaces, for example will end up being exhausted, sick and possibly with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.(PTSD)

For some, there is no real recovery. It is to be avoided at all costs.

As well as physical and emotional responses to conflict, we also experience changes to our thinking and expression.

The person we liked and thought was very reasonable suddenly becomes a "total idiot" because he cut in front of you and you are now going to show him exactly what you think of him.

The accountant in a wheelchair who made a mistake with your payments is now the subject of your tirade against employing people with disabilities and you become offensive to the point of being disciplined.

Are these your inner voices? Are you showing your true colours?

Voicing these thoughts is going to create a serious confrontation and maybe an irreparable conflict. Emotions and thoughts link together to create unpleasant physical symptoms and inappropriate behaviour.

Whatever the nature of our conflicts we need to handle them safely whether that is from a physical emotional and psychological perspective.

The need to keep dignity intact on both sides and recognise individuals as human beings with feelings, desires, needs and fears must be at the forefront of what we say and what we do.

Choosing our behaviours carefully means we are in control of ourselves and are not allowing prejudice, opinions, attitudes, value systems or beliefs to affect our interaction with people in this delicate and potentially dangerous of interpersonal transactions.

Later in this book we will look at some different case studies and consider how they can be handled.

It maybe that some conflicts can never be resolved and reconciliation cannot take place. This will be discussed in our conclusions.

## Some general techniques for handling conflict

1. **Separate the person from the conflict** and from their behaviours which are driven by strong feelings. This person may be so overwhelmed by feelings of insecurity, anxiety and fear that they cannot express themselves well. Most of us have some idea of what this feels like. It's important to remember that they want a solution as much as you do but they are coming at the situation with a different set of values and expectations from yours. Perceptions may be clashing but it doesn't mean people have to.
2. **Do you know everything about the situation?** Are you working on assumptions and presumptions? Investigating the facts is an important part of conflict resolution at work but when you are dealing with your partner, for example, this is likely to make matters worse. Do you know how he or she is really feeling and why? Empathising can be perceived as patronising so be prepared to listen without interruption, even when you feel accused of something you haven't done. They think you have so just **listen**. (more about listening shortly).
3. **Think about the words and expression** you are going to use. Are they conciliatory. Eg:- *"I can understand what you are saying"* or inflammatory *"You've no xxx idea what you are talking about."* Are your expressions loaded with criticism, defensiveness, denial and blame or do you try to show understanding, reasonableness and acceptance of the other person's point of view. *"I can see where you are coming from"* as opposed to *"Don't point the finger at me mate."*

4. **Your tone of voice** will say more about how you really feel than your words which might be carefully chosen. We often don't realise how we sound to others. Direct tone might be read as abrasive. Your increased pitch might be heard as confrontational even though you are just trying to get your point across. People who shout often don't realise it. It maybe because they have grown up in a family where raising the voice is the only way to get heard. What about the sarcastic, cutting or biting tone of voice? This can be responsible for much of the discord within families and the workplace. How do you react to people who use their vocal tone to intimidate and humiliate you? Do you mirror it, challenge or walk away from it. I refuse to deal with anyone until they choose a more positive way of speaking to me. Most people prefer to talk to someone who has a calm, friendly and considerate tone to their voice, whether in the spoken word or in writing.
  
5. **Non Verbal signals** in a face to face situation speak volumes. Be aware of your facial expression. If your eyes are like slits and the pupils contracted, the muscles tense around the mouth and a nerve in the jaw is twitching, it gives a good indication that you are angry or about to get angry. This will put the other person on the defensive or the attack. Folding arms, pointing, glaring, foot tapping, finger tapping or other gestures to show irritation, annoyance and anger will send out messages that you are not in a calm and receptive frame of mind for mediation or resolution.
  
6. **Be magnanimous and gracious.** A lot of conflict is over small things which build up. Concede points to the other person. Ask why the matter is so important to them. Is the matter the real issue or is it hiding something else e.g. lack of attention, feelings of being invalid or invisible.
  
7. **Above all be calm.** Pick your battles. Remember that ego and pride is at stake so be respectful.

## **The Importance of Listening.**

We often say we are listening when in fact we are just hearing what's been said against a lot of background noise and distractions. Active listening requires you to:-

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- Focus
- Read between the lines
- Acknowledge both facts and feelings
- Show understanding and empathy
- Respond in a way which shows you are listening
- Ask questions to clarify understanding
- Remove your own filter
- Fix quality time so that you are not fitting someone in
- Make the speaker feel important and validated

The one big mistake so many people make is interrupting the person before they have finished speaking. This is usually because they disagree or want to get something across in case they forget it.

The best way is to allow the person to say everything they want to say in whichever way they can, then pause for a second or two.

Silence is a powerful communication tool used in different parts of the world for reflection. In the UK, we interpret silence as a weakness. It also makes us feel uncomfortable and we struggle to think of something to say to fill the gap.

How can we ever know the full story – the facts and the feelings if we don't let the person finish it?

Not only that, but it is ill mannered to cut across someone and in conflict management it can make the situation much worse.

***“You’re not even listening to me are you?”***

Maybe you have tuned out because you have had a number of dealings with the person and it always ends up the same:- further arguments, upsets and storming out of the room. Maybe that’s down to you not actively listening and your facial expression is saying, *“here we go again.”*

### **When emotions run high**

What about dealing with conflict situations when you are angry?

Firstly, anger is damaging to your health. It raises your blood pressure and clouds rational thinking. The whole point of being calm is that it brings an inner peace and confidence and allows you to analyse and evaluate the situation clearly.

### **Tips**

1. Cool off. Walk away from the situation and disengage but say what and why you are doing it. *“I feel angry at the moment and am going to take a break. We can come back to this later.”* Do your yoga breathing or whatever technique works for you but don’t attempt a discussion when emotions are running high. If you feel you can’t control your anger then seek help. [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
2. State how you feel. *“I came in late and saw the dishes in the sink for the third time this week. I am tired after work and annoyed that you haven’t done what you promised”.* Focus on the problem not on the person.

3. In a conflict situation that is escalating, most people have to share responsibility. Own up to that and apologise. *“I am sorry I didn’t clear up. I’ve been busy but I know that’s no excuse. I will do it now.”* Your response:- *“OK. I am sorry I shouted. Let’s eat first then try to work out a proper rota.”*
4. Follow through on this and come up with ideas between you. Negotiate the most practical ones and agree to follow through.
5. Avoid embarrassing or humiliating the other person. The idea of **saving face** is ingrained in the cultures of the East but we all need to keep our self esteem intact.
6. Peace starts with each of us. As Gandhi said, “We must be the change we wish to see in others.”

### **Personality Clashes**

Carl Jung said, *“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”*

Or as Robbie Burns said, *“O wad some Power the giftie gie us. To see oursel as ithers see us!”*

Do you know who you are? Have you done the Myers-Briggs personality test at work? How would others describe you?

Personality is one of the biggest variables we have to deal with. It’s like putting your hand in a giant sack hoping for an exciting present and snake bites you.

We are all like kaleidoscopes. You just never know how some people are going to shake out from day to day. Mr Snappy on a Monday, Mr. Big Hearted on a Friday night.

Most of us try to keep our dark side under wraps – the Mr.Hyde bit we are aware of but don't want others to see. However, he pokes his head out when under pressure.

Personality clashes are blamed when two people just don't get on with each other. They have different ways of communicating and behaving in the world – extravert 'vs' introvert - one will annoy the other!

It's good that we are not all the same. We can benefit from other viewpoints and learn. Look at a problem from all angles.

Saying, "*I can see what you mean but I don't necessarily agree with you*" can mean the first step to conflict resolution. You are showing flexibility and a willingness to take a step towards negotiation.

### **What you can do**

- See the good qualities in the person and try to let out your own lighter side.
- Accept the fact that we are complex and human.
- Ask yourself if you are projecting your undesirable traits onto the other person. You think they are being stubborn when in fact it is **you** that's being stubborn.
- Don't blame conflict on personality clashes. Look at the conflict not at those involved in it.
- You don't have to like the person but you can show that you are willing to work with them to find solutions.
- Learn more tolerance. Ask the other person what it is that annoys them about you rather than stating why they irritate you so much.
- If all else fails, limit your time with that person and agree to disagree.



Above all, try to widen your perspective so that it incorporates some of the other person's way of seeing the situation.

### **Is conflict ever a good thing?**

Problem solving might be seen as a form of conflict. In order to move forward we need to go through a process of conflicting viewpoints otherwise we remain stuck. Maybe you are not dealing with conflict at all but a complaint or even a comment. Hearing negative thoughts being voiced can put us in a challenging mood.

Conflict is needed when we reach a stalemate situation in any form of relationship. Sometimes we need those "time to speak out moments". It can be used as a way of wanting to improve a situation but we have to make changes in the way we've operated or behaved in the past.

My elder daughter studied reconciliation and conflict transformation in Belfast, Northern Ireland as part of a sabbatical and I remember her saying, "*Mom, we need to readjust the way we relate to each other from now on.*"

I panicked. Was this the end of the status quo? What was she really saying? I heard her imply I had been a bad mother but all she was really saying was, "*we can have an even better relationship than before.*"

### **Preventing Conflict**

Often we pretend that everything will be alright if we just turn away from it and pretend there isn't a problem. This is not helpful as it can lead to an escalation of the problem.

- Acknowledge and face up to the problem so it can be dealt with as soon as possible.
- Are you the sort of person who people can approach or are you standoffish and aloof? Make sure people know you are open to discussions and want harmony whether it's at work or at home.

- Learn to read the signals people send out. Are they frustrated? Negative and uncooperative? Have you considered that they might be feeling hurt and excluded. Creating conflict can be a clumsy way of addressing these feelings.
- Be aware of the signals you send out. Be open in your body language.
- Keep an open mind and again avoid making assumptions.
- Focus on what can be changed instead of going over old ground and complaining about things out of your control.
- Are you prepared to take some responsibility or are you a blamer? This will create conflict especially if it's unjustified. It's easy to make judgements about other people and make a case for problems being their fault alone. Blaming others devalues people and creates a lack of balance between the two parties. Keep to the facts and be objective. Leave opinions at the door.

Avoid labelling people as lazy, incompetent, uncaring, passive, aggressive etc as often they will live up to that label. If you want to prevent conflict as much as you can then be open, upfront and don't talk about people behind their backs.

### **The Silent Conflict**

I would like to draw your attention to a strange and very disturbing kind of conflict which involves the silent treatment from the other person. This is part of the passive-aggressive set of behaviours which uses silence to control another person or a situation. Users adopt this so that they don't have to get into a conflicting situation.

My personal experience of this was in a very painful marriage and it continued for years. My ex husband stopped speaking to me, stopped going to work, stopped doing anything in fact until as he put it, "*I get my divorce*", yet he wouldn't even co-operate with the process. The silence and refusal to engage with anything was a severe form of control. In Scott Wetzler's book, *Living with the Passive-Aggressive Man*, he talks about the rebellion through the "sins of omission" and not taking any responsibility for anything. This covert type of conflict involves convoluted logic, procrastination, making you or me a non person, making out that he or she is the victim all the time – it's crazy making.

This is clearly not the behaviour of a grown, rational person. I was convinced that it was a form of madness. In a personal relationship the silent treatment is a total withdrawal of love, care or consideration. You no longer exist in this person's mind.

It's anger not being discussed. It's a cowardly way of handling conflict. It's a way of getting back at you without telling you what you are supposed to have done.

The silent treatment is about power and manipulation and requires a very different approach from other forms of conflict. It can cause serious psychological harm and trauma.

So what can you do? Indeed what should I have done?

I will give you the benefit of my hindsight and experience.

- Don't blame yourself. This person is choosing this behaviour and is choosing to handle problems in this childish fashion. Imagine he or she is in the playground sulking and refusing to play even when coaxed. You are witnessing the grown up version.
- This person has used this behaviour every time there is a dispute which most normal people would want to resolve so it's not about you. It's about them.

- Stop trying to engage with them. I spent five years begging and pleading with my ex husband to talk to me so that we could sort out the paper work for the divorce which he wanted. I made myself ill and hurt my children in the process. I didn't understand what was happening. I even called in the doctors! **Disengage. Walk away. Tell everyone what is happening and get them to help you. Do not be intimidated or play into this person's hands.** That is what they want you to do. Simply stop playing the game.

### **Passive Conflict at Work**

This kind of behaviour can be seen in the workplace although the perpetrator is less likely to get away with it. Sulking, disappearing, not being available for meetings or phone calls, not contributing to meetings i.e. just being there as a heavy presence, is hard work for everyone.

Most of us try to be tolerant and excuse the behaviour blaming something wrong in their private lives. Little do we realise that we are the ones being punished!

So what should we do when faced with this situation?

As this is not an emotional relationship it is easier to stay calm and in control. Don't let your frustration show at all.

- Choose assertive language. State the facts about what they are doing and ask them to stop it. Remind them of the consequences. E.g. *"I need the report by 5pm tonight"*. No threats, just straight forward language.
- Don't fall into the trap of empathy. It doesn't work and it strengthens their position.
- Say your piece and disengage. Avoid dialogue not relating to the matters in hand. Be very clear about what you want to happen next.
- Always have a contingency plan when it comes to projects which are being sabotaged by this person. Let them know that their behaviour is only hurting them and not the project or the team.

- Follow through on consequences. Be very clear about what you can and can't do. You don't want to end up in a tribunal with the person saying, *"but I didn't do anything."* That's the point... that's the problem... he or she committed a sin of omission – hence the problem!
- Keep repeating yourself. Be the broken record if needs be until the penny drops that you are not playing the game and you are not being controlled.

I once heard an apocryphal story about a passive aggressive man working for a candy rock factory in England. His job was to put the lettering through the sticks of rock. When eventually he was fired for many of the behaviours I've just described, he just had time to put some very rude lettering through the candy. Even though he never spoke to his colleagues, he was allowed to have the last word!

My final thought on this matter before I leave you to consider the case studies is;- what if someone doesn't want the conflict resolved? They enjoy it for some reason? We can't ever know what goes on in someone's mind but I've had experience of people who simply thrive on confrontation. Once one is resolved, they go onto seeking out or creating another.

The same techniques apply. Don't engage in their game playing. Whether it's overt or covert conflicts they are involved in they just want to draw you into the game.

I would say that some people have conflict within themselves and that isn't something for you to resolve. It is their problem.

*"I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies: for the hardest victory is over self." Aristotle.*

Sometimes we are battling our own conscience or are torn between pleasing too many people. Imagine the conflict faced by people who live away from their own countries. In the beginning it may be an adventure to carve a life out in a foreign country but when the call from home whispers in your ear – *"it's time to come back"*, it's almost impossible to resist. Wings have been flapped and now roots are tugging.

We can't make the decision so we need someone to make it for us. We project our internal conflict onto others as it is too great to contemplate. It may mean that we actually create conflict so that we can return exonerated because "they" made us do this.

We try to justify our actions as being acceptable when put into the context of people who behave much worse than we do. It's necessary to resolve the conflict within ourselves before we fully understand conflict created by others.

Here is a selection of conflicts drawn from experiences. Are they disputes, confrontations or full blown conflicts? Study the case studies and analyse the real source of the problem, who has contributed to it, who is making it worse and what you think should be done about it.

See what The Fifteen Minute Trainer suggests at the end of each one.

## **Work based Conflicts**

### **Conflict 1**

Kyle, 18, had just finished a training programme to help him get a job. He had grown in confidence, learned some good customer service skills and was eager to start his working life. He was given an opportunity to work in a busy restaurant cleaning tables, serving customers and training to be a barista.

Kyle was a willing worker but like many young people didn't want to cut his hair short. He agreed to tuck all his hair under the company headwear and make sure that he was well presented at all times.

He enjoyed his first week, working alongside his team leader who was a relaxed and helpful girl close to his own age. The team had a laugh and on the Friday night they all went out for a drink after work.

The following week Kyle went into work and sensed there was something different about everyone. Apart from serving customers and getting on with the work, no-one was talking and seemed tense. Kyle was told to work behind the till in the morning even though he had only done it before under supervision.

The queue was building up to pay and the more people expressed their frustration with waiting, the more Kyle felt under pressure. This led to him making mistakes.

The owner of the restaurant, Mr Tonks, came in and seeing the queue, pulled Kyle off the till and called someone else to take over. He told Kyle to go in the back room as he wanted a "chat."

*"I don't know why I took you on," he stated. "Look at the state of your hair. It's a mess. If we get complaints about hair in the food then it will be your fault."*

Kyle opened his mouth to speak but was cut off.

*"You young people are useless. You don't even get into work on time and when you do you are tired or have some other excuse."* His voice was getting louder and he was starting to go red in the face..

This wasn't fair as Kyle had never been late for work and in fact had stayed over to help with a party. Alison, the supervisor was called for. She stuck up for Kyle but was so upset she was shouting at Mr Tonks.

*"I want you gone. NOW!"* He turned to Alison. *"As for you, I'm going to bring in someone who is competent from my other shop to manage the staff here.. You can go back on counter duty"*. With that, he stormed out, slamming the door. The customers watched him go and gave Alison and Kyle sympathetic looks.

### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says:-**

Kyle is a young person starting his working life and doesn't really understand how things work. He needs to be mentored and supported as opposed to being shouted at and told he's useless. Mr Tonks is the professional with years of experience and needs to think back to when he first started out. His attitude and behaviour are unacceptable. He's clearly a bully and takes it out on the most vulnerable member of the team. He uses threats to control and get his own way. This is poor people management.

Alison made matters worse because she resorted to the same behaviours as her boss.

### **What should have happened?**

If Mr Tonks cared about his workforce and really wanted to help young people, he would have appointed someone he trusted as Kyle's mentor. He would have made sure that Kyle had full training on the till and ensured there was someone to shadow him until he felt confident on his own.

Mr Tonks is responsible for creating and escalating the conflict and needs to learn to control his anger and frustration in the workplace. He should have chosen a time to speak to all the staff about standards and looked for ways to build team spirit. If he felt it necessary to speak to Kyle he could have done it in a more constructive way by pointing out some of the things Kyle had done well and discussing ways he could improve.

Mr Tonks doesn't realise that his customers won't approve of his behaviour and may decide to take their custom elsewhere. The main problem is, he doesn't care.



## **Conflict 2**

Katya, 29, is a deputy accounts manager with a private bank. She's originally from Poland and has worked hard during her time away from her native Krakow. Her driving ambition is to save enough money so she can go home and have a house built. Katya puts in long hours and is well respected by her team.

The department is being restructured and an opportunity for promotion arises so she decides to apply for it. Katya is successful and wants to take her team out for a drink to celebrate. Everyone but one is happy for her and readily accepts her invitation.

Sue is not happy at all. She's been with the bank for 20 years. She likes Katya well enough but feels that promotions should go to "locals" as she puts it. However she is fearful of being branded discriminatory or even a racist. She makes excuses not to go to the pub with the others and goes home furious.

The following few weeks, Sue decides to express her resentment through non-co-operation. She misses deadlines saying Katya never made herself clear, spends a lot of time on the internet instead of working and in general goes on a go-slow reminiscent of strikers in the 1970s.

Her friend decides to confront her.

*"You seem to have changed Sue. What's bothering you?"*

Sue carries on reading her magazine and shrugs her shoulders.

*"Nothing. Why should there be?"*

*"Because since Katya became manager you've become cold and distant with everyone. To be honest, you are making us all feel like we're walking on eggshells?"*

*"It's in your head, Maggie. Now, if you will excuse me..."*

She went back to her desk with a heavy heart. Sue was going to make life difficult for everyone and she really didn't know what to do about it.

### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says:**

This is a difficult situation as Sue's sudden change in manner is subjective. No-one can find anything tangible with which to confront her apart from some missed deadlines and a lack of enthusiasm for work.

Sue is a coward. She is using a powerful form of control to make everyone feel uneasy and she's enjoying it. This is passive-resistant control which is destructive if not handled correctly. Maggie points out that everyone is tip toeing round her but Sue claims she doesn't know what she's talking about. Inside however she is secretly pleased she's caused conflict. No-one can pin anything on her so she can't be disciplined if she's careful. This is her way of expressing her anger.

### **What should have happened?**

Katya should have approached Sue herself and said, "*Sue, I really value you on my team. I've got a particular project (or similar) I would like to hand over to you. Could we have a coffee on Friday lunchtime to chat about it?*"

Sue would have felt less rejected and she would have had an opportunity to say how she felt in an informal setting. She might have found that out that Katya wanted to make her deputy manager (which she did).

If that initial action didn't prevent Sue from taking up her position of a passive-aggressive combatant, then Katya should have called a team meeting to assertively reframe the way they were to work under her direction. If Sue failed to come up to expectations, she should have been politely warned then put on disciplinary if necessary. Everyone else in the team should have ignored her game playing and not shown that they were bothered by her behaviours.

It is right to challenge this behaviour in someone and let them know you understand a) what's going on and b) that it won't be tolerated.

### **Conflict 3**

Mark is an experienced customer services advisor in a big shoe outlet. In fact his favourite job is handling complaints and dissatisfied customers and making them smile!

One Saturday, Mark goes into work not feeling too well. He has a terrible headache but knows how understaffed the store is at the moment and doesn't want to let anyone down. He puts on his best smile and prepares for the day.

He's ready for his first customer of the day and ... here he is!

The customer pushes a pair of shoes across the counter but says nothing. His face is closed and Mark, being good at reading body language, concludes that the customer might be on the verge of an angry outburst.

*"Good morning sir. How may I help?"*

The customer points to the shoes.

*"Are these the wrong size?"*

*"Can't you see? No eyes but all mouth."*

Mark let the customer's rudeness wash over him.

*"Do you have your receipt please?"*

*"It's in the shoe,"* he barks.

*"Sir, you bought these shoes over 2 months ago from a different store. Were these a present?"*

*"None of your business. I want them replaced. They are too tight."*

*"Have you been wearing them?"*

The customer swears and bangs his fist on the counter.

*“Well obviously or how would I know they were too tight.” “ No brains either, “ he mutters.*

Mark has come across rude customers many times but none as unreasonable and as confrontational as this one.

### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says:-**

Mark is one of those positive, helpful people we all like to have as friends. No matter how he is feeling, he wants to do a good job and try to help his customers. He uses his customer service skills well and is used to dealing with grumpy people. In fact, Mark loves turning such people around and making them smile.

On this occasion he anticipates that this customer isn't going to be easy. He stays calm and does his best to ignore the man's rudeness.

When the customer gets caught out about trying to return shoes to a place he didn't even buy them from, he goes on the defensive and becomes unreasonable. Mark is determined not to rise to the bait which makes the customer even angrier! He is picking for a fight.

### **What should have happened?**

Mark was within his rights to say, *“Sir I am trying to help you so would you please not be so rude to me.”*

He could have suggested that the customer returned to the store named on the receipt to see if they could help him. He needed to stand his ground as this customer was using intimidating behaviour to get what he wanted. You can't reason with impossible people. He could have said, *“Sir, I am sorry I can't help you further,”* then moved onto his next customer.

If the man continued to be abusive, Mark could have called for a senior member of staff or security. He had the other customers to think about.

The main consideration for Mark is not to take it personally or think he had failed. He hadn't. He did really well!

#### **Conflict 4**

Teams rely on each other to work together and understand the need to appreciate other people's targets, timescales and work styles.

Some team members are task orientated i.e. just want to get the job done, whereas others are people oriented i.e. want everyone to be involved in *how* it's done.

This in itself can cause conflict. It's often quoted in leadership training programmes that there is no I in TEAM yet in team building activities all kinds of personalities emerge: - the loner who doesn't want to talk to others but just get on with the task, the opter-out who sits back and lets others do the work, the workers who do what they are asked to do and the visionaries. All of these personality types can trigger conflict as their perceptions and ways of doing things are so different.

A team of hotel staff are given the task of planning an event for a special occasion. Marjorie, the Events Manager wants to lead on it and she has her own ideas of how it should be done. The Food and Beverage team is a well motivated and creative one and has its own ideas on menus and restaurant decor for the occasion. The part time staff just want to get home to pick up their children and don't see what the event has to do with them.

An argument breaks out at the meeting.

*"I've had 5 years of running events and I know what works and what doesn't. Your idea of a singing competition during the meal is not going to work. We'll just get loads of complaints."* Marjorie, folds her arms and is clearly not open for discussion.

*“You aren’t even listening. That wasn’t what we said. If you look at the plan we’ve drawn up you’ll have a better understanding”* shouts Franco.

*“I’ve got to go. My son has to go to the dentist at 4pm. “*

*“Everything ok? Good, good,”* smiles the duty manager who hastily disappears into the backroom.

In the end, the staff tell Marjorie to do whatever she wants and return to their duties frustrated and annoyed. It’s always the same. Franco decides he’s had enough and announces he is going to look for another job.

Others agree with him.

### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says:**

Marjorie is not a team player. She prefers to run the show and tell everyone what to do. Her communication skills are poor as she puts the others down and folds her arms in a defensive, unapproachable gesture. Clearly she feels threatened.

It’s clear that this isn’t the first time this situation has occurred and the Duty Manager knows it. He can obviously sense the tension but decides to ignore it. This makes him a poor leader.

The company is going to lose Franco who is one of the best workers.

### **What should have happened?**

Marjorie needed to recognise that she could make her life easier by involving the whole team in the exchange of ideas and planning. It would show good leadership and help develop the team.

She needs to ask herself why she feels threatened and maybe discuss her role with her senior manager. If she started to listen to other people she might realise that they value her input and would look to her for guidance and approval.

Franco needed to keep his temper reigned in. Shouting in meetings is not acceptable behaviour. It might have given Marjorie the ammunition she was looking for.

The Duty Manager should have spent a few minutes finding out what was happening then arranged to meet with the group at a convenient time. He could have talked to Marjorie about her approach and maybe arranged for her to go on an external leadership training programme.

Marjorie created conflict so that she didn't have to co-operate.

## Conflict 5

Phil had been with the engineering company for 25 years. He was tired and had a lot of domestic problems. In the past year, he had take over four months' sick leave with a bad back and although he never told his boss, he had been diagnosed with depression. He'd started to drink a bit more than usual at night and occasionally at lunch time. Alcohol made him moody and belligerent but he denied it. Phil is so stressed he feels he is about to snap.

David, his Senior Manager calls him into his office late one Friday afternoon.

*"Phil, take a seat."* There is no smile and David seems uncomfortable.

*"Is there anything wrong?"*

*"We've had a complaint from your colleagues. They say you've been difficult and aggressive with them lately... and that you've been drinking at work."*

*"Oh did they???"* replied Phil sarcastically. *"Obviously it's a conspiracy to get rid of me."*

*"I'd like you to tell me what's going on Phil. You've not been right for months".*

The dam bursts. Phil stands up and bangs his fist on the desk. The feelings he has bottled up for over two years pours out like poison; the lack of promotion; the way he's been treated; no one listens to him anymore or gives him interesting work... He calls David spineless and worse. He then accuses him of having an affair with Phil's ex wife and says he's been eyeing up Phil's 14 year old daughter.

David jumps to his feet and grabs Phil by the collar.

*"I should smash your face in for that remark. You're disgusting now GET OUT."*

*YOUR FIRED!"*

Phil is about to leave but slowly turns round. He picks up the chair and lifts it over David's head.



### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says:**

Put very simply, Phil is at breaking point. It was an explosion waiting to happen either externally or internally.

David handles the situation very badly. He knew Phil was struggling but seems to have made no attempt to talk to him before this. He goes straight on the attack.

This is the red rag to Phil who cannot hold in his emotions any longer. He feels he has nothing left to lose so let David have the full force of his anger.

Whilst Phil was wrong to verbally abuse his superior, it was equally totally unacceptable for David to react. Tempers were a boiling point and neither man was in a place to be able to back down. Phil is so stressed that he is unable to reason.

### **What should have happened?**

David should have dealt with this situation much sooner through a series of performance reviews and informal discussion. He could have offered Phil help and together they could have drawn up an action plan.

David should have considered a much better approach when he invited Phil into his office.

*“Phil, how are you?”* would have been a more productive starting point.

When attacked by Phil, David should have terminated the conversation immediately and arranged it for a time when both parties would be calmer and more in control. This could have been done over a coffee or lunch.

## **Domestic Conflict**

### **Conflict 6**

Living with other people is never easy. No matter how much you love and care for someone, they will have their irritating habits as indeed do you.

Usually we can just laugh at them and maybe request that they do or don't do things which irritate us.

Arguments about not putting out the rubbish or leaving dirty cups all over the living room can lead to more serious disputes often around lack of respect.

Let's listen in to this conversation.

*"You have no respect for me. You don't listen and just think I am here to pick up after you all the time."* Diane is near to tears.

*"I work 12 hour days. You're here from 4pm after the school run. Do you want me to come home just to collect the xxx cups?"* Joe slams the door as he leaves the house and is seen going into his workshop.

Diane picks up one of the offending cups and smashes it against the door. She is sick to death of Joe. She follows him into his workshop.

*"You always walk away when I want to talk to you."*

*"Nothing to talk about Diane. I heard you the first time."*

He carries on with his painting, ignoring the fact that Diane is crying.

*"Fine,"* she says at last. *"I can't go on like this. You have no interest in this family or in me. We used to work as a team. Now you are either at work or in here. Joe. I've decided I want out."*

### **The Fifteen Minute Trainer says;**

This conflict isn't about rubbish or dirty cups. That's just the excuse. It's about feelings of being taken for granted and feeling unloved. It has been going on for a long time. Joe hasn't noticed the signs of his crumbling relationship but he has been feeling very unhappy and not wanting to come home at night.

Neither of them has suggested sitting down and talking about the problem so it's been allowed to fester. Resentment has built up and overflowed.

### **What should have happened?**

Either Diane or Joe should have booked a night away from the children so they could talk as a couple about the things that were bothering them. Open and honest communication is the only way forward in these situations even if the messages are painful.

Diane allowed her emotions to run riot as soon as Joe walked in the house. It was not the right time to talk about rubbish or dirty cups or indeed anything else. It was time to sit down with a drink and relax for a few minutes before dinner.

Joe reacted emotionally. He was angry and fed up with all the hassle. Home was no longer a sanctuary. It was becoming a battle ground. His refuge was his workshop. He could have said, "*Diane, I see you are upset and we should talk about it but just for now, I am going to my workshop to chill out. I've had a hell of a day.*"

Following someone who is angry and upset and clearly needs to get away is a very bad idea. It stokes the fire of resentment. Diane should have left him alone to cool off and waited for him to emerge in his own time.

This was the wrong conversation at the wrong time in the wrong place.

## **Social Conflict**

### **Conflict 7**

Friendships are not always equal. There are some friends who are “fair weather friends” i.e. they are with you during the good times but soon disappear when you are in trouble. Some friends are takers. They let you pay for drinks, dinner, shows and always offer to return the favour but don't. There are friends who use you to get into places, meet influential people and climb the social or career ladder.

Fran, Naomi and Michelle had been friends since university. They met up every four months and it was great fun for a couple of years when they were single and forging ahead in their careers.

Naomi announced at one such get together that she was pregnant. She expected her friends to be really happy for her but they just looked astonished.

*“I'm getting married... to Pete,”* she explained.

*“But you're only 28. What do you want to tie yourself down for?”*

*“It's what I want,”* said Naomi, feeling as if she had to apologise.

*“You're mad,”* declared Fran. *“You'll be divorced in two years then where will you be?”*

*“I thought you would be happy for me.”*

Fran got up to leave.

*“I've got an appointment at 3pm. Better go.”* She bent to kiss Naomi but it was without any warmth.

*“We are happy for you,”* said Michelle, putting on her coat. *“It just won't be the same though.”*

Naomi stood up and looked long and hard at both of them.

*“I guess that’s the end of the road then. I don’t want to fall out with you. We’ve had good times but there is no going forward if you feel like this. Good luck.”*

**The Fifteen MinuteTrainer says:**

Is this a case of the “green eyed monster?” Naomi has broken the bonds of friendship by moving ahead in her own life without sharing her ideas, thoughts and decisions with her friends. In other words, she’s grown up and is leaving her friends behind.

The two women attack because they want to make her feel bad about herself and feel that she is making a huge mistake. It’s most likely that they wish they had met a “Pete” and were settling down to have a family.

Naomi handled herself well. She judged the situation quickly but decided she wasn’t going to get into any argument. It was time to draw a line under the friendship.

Sometimes, that is the only way forward.

## **Resolving Conflict Checklist**

- Always, always, always, stay calm and in control of your emotions
- Disengage or agree to talk later when a conflict escalates
- See the person not the problem
- Try to empathise with the other person's feelings
- See the situation from their perspective
- Ask yourself if you are contributing to the problem
- Listen carefully to what is being said and not being said. Show you are listening
- Choose your words carefully. Avoid saying anything which might trigger a negative reaction, especially critical or blaming language
- How do you sound? Attacking? Accusing? Defensive?
- Be aware of your body language. Choose open, helpful gestures
- Time and place are important in conflict resolution
- Ask the other person how they would like to see the conflict resolved
- Try to find common ground
- Compromise and negotiate
- Avoid attacking the other person at all costs
- Realise when there is no resolution and agree to end the relationship or at least put some distance between you

## **Resources and suggested reading**

To go in here....