

Conflict Navigation Techniques

Resources and Frameworks

How to View Conflict

Conflict is a normal, natural human condition. Indeed, conflict is *necessary and inevitable* whenever two or more people interact. There is no one single definition of conflict, but it often has several of the following characteristics:

- Strong emotions
- Disagreements or differences of opinions
- High stakes
- Involves two or more individuals (or groups)

Conflict can be expressed in many ways, with many causes, and should be considered an opportunity to heal and bond. Whatever the underlying causes of conflict, it represents a place where humans can come together to find a greater mutual understanding of each other and healing of inner hurts. It is an opportunity for individual, emotional, community, and spiritual growth.

Conflict represents an opportunity for healing and growth because it reveals much about us, our history, beliefs, and pain. Conflict can arise over nearly any topic or event, harming some people but not others. Conflict arises around *Pain Points* or *Raw Spots* for people, often activating or aggravating old hurts, sometimes from childhood or early life experiences. Sometimes, these *Hot Spots* erupt around seemingly unrelated intersections between people. These eruptions mean that all participants have a chance to look at their pain and presumptions, gain a better understanding of themselves and others, and thus heal and become closer.

In general, there are three ways to respond to conflict:

1. Avoid it or do nothing, allowing it to continue or deteriorate
2. React poorly in a manner that exacerbates the situation
3. React well in a way that reaches for healing and growth

Many people default to one of the first two options without the correct tools, frameworks, and protocols. With the right tools and practice, a third option becomes available to access conflict opportunities. You have a higher chance of success when you have the right tools. For example, you cannot fix a leaking pipe without the wrenches and an understanding of plumbing. Likewise, you cannot navigate conflict without the proper communication techniques and a framework for conflict.

Since conflict is necessary, inevitable, and represents an opportunity for growth and healing, it is essential to view it with respect and courage. While it is natural to fear conflict, it is rarely pleasant. It is more than just an inconvenience to overcome. We should bravely embrace conflict and cherish it. It represents an opportunity to build empathy and connection and improve the world.

How Privilege Impacts Conflict

Privilege takes on many forms. Here is a non-exhaustive list of traits that might alter someone's level of privilege:

- Skin color
- Sex and gender expression
- Sexual orientation and romantic preferences
- Physical fitness and health
- Religious affiliation
- Academic achievement
- Financial status
- Family history
- Attractiveness and height
- Accent, language, and dialect

These are all personal characteristics that can figure into privilege. Our privileges (or lack thereof) directly affect how we approach and react to conflict. Privilege can also influence our vulnerability to conflict. For instance, all cultures respond to conflict differently. Western cultures tend to confer more privilege to emotional composure - those who "lose their cool" also "lose the argument." Contrast this with other cultures that tolerate (or expect) high emotional expression during conflict. In other cases, some folks have the privilege to simply walk away from a conflict, while the matter is life and death for others. The stakes may be entirely different for one party than for the other.

Therefore, it is essential to be mindful of privilege when going into a conflict. It often helps to name privileges plainly, although it is vital to avoid weaponizing privileges. For instance, whichever party enjoys more privileges should acknowledge them when entering into conflict. Acknowledging privilege demonstrates self-awareness and humility to the other party. Likewise, the party with fewer privileges should still acknowledge their perceived advantages, whether material or moral.

Everything, including word choice, tone of voice, and microexpressions, can indicate privilege or be a source of misunderstanding. For instance, one party might perceive a misplaced smile as smugness when it means acceptance of hostility. In this case, the smiling party may have been raised with the cultural more "smile and turn the other cheek." Still, if they

are in conflict with someone who does not understand this idiom, their smile might be misinterpreted.

Aside from personal privileges, there are societal and structural privileges, often due to differences between the majority and minority cultures. For instance, one nation may be primarily white and Christian, which automatically grants privileges to anyone in that nation who are also white and Christian. The law of the land explicitly or implicitly codifies these advantages. Laws about marriage, for instance, favor particular religious worldviews. Unfortunately, in other cases, laws target specific subgroups, such as America's drug laws, which disproportionately impact dark-skinned people. It would not serve anyone to deny or hide these privileges during conflict.

The term "privilege" can itself be provocative to some people, so there can be alternative terms to use for it. One alternative term is "rank," such as "social rank" or "economic rank." Another term might be "power," as in "social power" or "group power." Rank, privilege, and power can be both earned and unearned. For instance, an "earned power" might come from hard work to learn a new skill. Developing communication and conflict skills, for example, can give someone more power in a conversation.

On the other hand, unearned power might come from the conditions in which someone was born. For example, skin color, height, and attractiveness can give someone unconscious social power. "Pretty privilege" is the psychological phenomenon where attractive and tall people are unconsciously perceived as more competent and trustworthy.

How to Use This Document

This resource was composed by reading, compressing, and transmuting several conflict frameworks into a simple list of conversational techniques that anyone can use at any time. The beauty of these techniques is that only one party needs to know them and can implement them on the fly. Humans have a tendency to mirror each other, which means that if you simply tell a story, your conversational partner is likely to reflect that behavior to you. Likewise, your partner will likely follow suit if you want to discuss boundaries.

Use the following techniques in any order as the situation demands it. I put "stories" first because of how compelling stories are, so it can often help by starting here. But again, start wherever seems most appropriate. For instance, if emotions are too hot, it might make more sense to start with technique 3: maintain safety.

There will often be overlap between these conversations. Many things can come out during stories, such as Feelings and Identity. It can be tempting to get off topic and fall into digressions, so staying on topic is critical. The easiest way to do this is to avoid interrupting. Still, sometimes it's necessary to nudge the conversation back in the right direction. For instance, someone may tell their story, uncover a lot of pain, and start asking for boundaries.

Just give them a gentle nudge to finish telling their story when this happens and bookmark the boundaries discussion for later.

Open a challenging discussion with “I want to hear your side of things. Tell me your story.” This opening will profoundly influence the evolution and outcome of the conversation. Once the first party has told their story, they may feel the need to reciprocate and let you tell your whole story. You can then suggest another technique, such as discussing contributing factors (technique 7) or picking apart intent versus impact (technique 6). It is beneficial if all parties are familiar with this framework, but that’s not always an option. For instance, you might be at a contentious work meeting, and you may be the only person in the room who knows these techniques. That means you may naturally fall into the role of facilitator. Conversely, in intimate relationships, it pays for both people to invest in learning these techniques.

Technique 1: Stories

Many conflict navigation books and frameworks focus on the power of stories. We tell ourselves stories about ourselves, about others, and groups. We also tell each other stories about our lives and shared world. Stories are one of the primary modalities that humans use to communicate. We use stories to convey news and gossip from the real world, and we use stories as a primary method of entertainment. In addition, stories can contain morality and parables, critical mythical lessons for our lives.

Before and during conflict, it is crucial to think about the story you will tell. Your story is yours, and no one can take it from you. However, the other side has their personal story as well. All sides of a conflict should share their stories and respect the stories of others. The storytelling phase of conflict should not be interrupted or criticized, or judged. Just listen to the stories. Very often, critical emotional truths emerge during these stories. Listening to a story is the easiest thing that humans can do - we have been sharing and listening to stories since prehistoric times.

When telling stories, one thing to watch out for is making assumptions about the other side. We can easily imagine malicious intent where perhaps there was none. Therefore, it’s essential to tell stories from our perspective. We can do this with a few rules of thumb:

1. Stick to the facts. Say what objectively happened.
2. State how you feel. No one can tell you how you feel, and it may not be apparent how you feel to others, depending on interpretation. Your feelings are always yours.
3. Share how the story impacted you and why. Connecting an external story to your internal reality teaches others about you, which can build understanding and empathy.
4. Avoid blame, assuming intentions, and character attribution. For instance, “You said that *because*,” or “This is your fault.” - Remember to tell only your story, and give the other party space to tell theirs.

All conflict participants can invite others to share their stories and create space for those stories to be heard. This invitation can be as simple as “Please, share your story.” Listening to the story of someone who is hurt, or has hurt you, can be an act of humility and empathy. Delivering a fair story is not always easy, so all parties need to accept the story in the spirit in which it is given. Self-disclosure, vulnerability, and honesty require courage, and therefore even if a story comes out coarsely, it should be welcomed.

Technique 2: Shared Purpose

Establishing a shared purpose can help conflicted parties remain focused on their actual goals or higher purposes. It is easy to shift into fault-finding behaviors and a desire to punish or win when emotions run high. We have these instincts to establish and maintain social rank. If we are not wrong, we can claim the moral high ground. If we have the moral high ground, we are less likely to have our social position threatened or reduced.

While we possess these instincts because we are social animals, we can also rise above them. Maintaining or establishing social rank implies that someone must win while someone else must lose. Conflict, however, represents an opportunity for everyone to win. Everyone can come out of conflict better, stronger, and closer. Therefore, establishing a shared purpose during conflict can help individuals and groups navigate towards an optimal outcome.

For instance, the shared purpose in a business-oriented conflict might be “to build the best company on the planet, maximize revenue, and positively impact the world.” Even if the aggrieved parties disagree over details or have hurts to work through, a transcendent purpose can give them something to orient towards. This shared purpose prevents them from orienting against each other. Discussing a shared purpose can be a great way to open discussions of a conflict. It can help create distance from the immediate emotional pain and remind everyone why they are together in the first place.

Suppose a conflict arises in a marriage or intimate friendship. In that case, the shared purpose might be “to build a safe and loving relationship where safety and mutual support are key.” By remembering this higher goal and shared purpose, the grievances between the spouses can be framed and kept in perspective. The question shifts from “how can I win this argument?” to “how can we build that relationship we both want?”

A shared purpose is like a distant lighthouse that you agree to row towards while tossed about on a stormy sea. Discuss and describe that lighthouse and what it means to each person. It will serve as your cardinal direction during the conflict navigation.

The shared purpose you come up with can be as simple as “Let’s finish building this house by next week” if you’re working with a contractor. Or it can be, “Let’s end up having a loving marriage and die of old age together with absolute trust between us.” Your shared purpose

should be aspirational, something on the horizon that you both intensely want and can look forward to. This beacon creates a light at the end of the tunnel to head towards.

Technique 3: Maintain Safety

While conflict is intrinsically hot, that does not mean that safety is unimportant. Safety for all parties is a *prerequisite* for dialog to happen. Without dialogue, progress on conflict halts. Everyone's safety needs vary depending on their upbringing, cultural background, and individual quirks. For instance, many Mediterranean cultures are comfortable with shouting matches during conflict. Meanwhile, many individuals from these cultures are terrified of raised voices.

Because safety needs vary significantly for everyone and between groups, there are no hard-and-fast rules for maintaining safety. Instead, individuals in conflict, or conflict facilitators, must ask for and maintain safety through conversation, boundaries, and sometimes by walking away. Perhaps the only universal rule of conflict is that it is okay to back off at any time and exit the conversation if safety is at risk. If individuals feel unsafe in a conversation, they should do their best to say so.

Because of the privileges mentioned above, some people are likely to freeze up during conflict and become unable to say that their safety is at risk. In other cases, people might unconsciously take advantage of differences in safety needs. Because of this, it's essential to discuss and negotiate safety needs ahead of time if at all possible. In addition, facilitators can pay attention to conflict participants to check in with them and help maintain safety. One of the most critical roles facilitators can play is referee. They should ensure that a baseline of safety is felt for all participants and allow participants to exit the conversation to regain a sense of safety when needed.

While overt actions, such as aggressive tone, posture, and gesturing, can reduce a sense of safety, many other things can make participants feel unsafe. For instance, tone-policing or pushing back against someone's choice of words can be invalidating or punishing. Similarly, inconsistencies in enforcing boundaries might result in one party feeling like the other is being favored or protected. In other words, attempting to regulate participants can reduce their sense of safety.

Because of these nuances and individual differences, maintaining safety can be one of the most challenging (and most important) tasks during conflict. The following is a non-exhaustive list of things that can reduce a sense of safety for some people. It is important to remember that everyone will have different sensitivities.

1. Shouting or raised voices
2. Posture or facial expressions
3. Policing or pushback
4. Unfair or unequal refereeing

5. Word choice or turn of phrase
6. Blaming or attribution ("you are" statements)
7. Silence or stoicism, appearing dispassionate or uninterested
8. Rushing or accelerating the conversation
9. Blocking, halting, or stymying the conversation

If possible, discuss these safety issues before entering into the discussion. Of course, this is not always possible, or things may change and emerge as the conversation evolves. One of the facilitator's most important jobs is to ask participants if they feel safe and what they need to stay safe. Whether or not there's a facilitator, it is the responsibility of all parties to work towards maintaining a sense of safety. If one party is paralyzed from fear, it is partly the responsibility of the other party to check in with them. All participants must make a good-faith commitment to maintaining safety.

Technique 4: Feeling Conversation

Three words can change an entire conversation and the outcome of a conflict. *I feel attacked. I feel scared.* More often than not, we forget to communicate how we feel. Because of personal differences, we might not intuitively understand how other people feel. Stating how you feel is sharing an immutable fact about yourself. Listening to someone else state how they feel is an act of kindness and empathy. Asking someone how they feel is the most profound love you can show.

Stating how we feel is an opportunity to be heard and seen. It creates an invitation for others to be curious about our inner experiences. When others demonstrate curiosity about how we feel, it shows us that they care about us and genuinely want to understand. Others don't even need to wait to show us their empathy. Instead, they can open with "How do you feel?" These four words are powerful and can be used anytime during a conversation or conflict.

The feeling conversation is meaningful because emotions are the primary signal we have about conflict. We are conflicted because we feel hurt, betrayed, or otherwise wronged somehow. Therefore, pausing to address all emotions is critical to navigating conflict. Ultimately, one of the primary goals of conflict navigation is to feel better. We know that a conflict has been resolved when all parties feel better and their emotions and beliefs shift.

The feeling conversation can be difficult and charged. Because of privileges, some people may be less willing or able to share their emotions. Perhaps their family of origin shamed or attacked them for their emotions. Conversely, someone may be overly externalizing with their emotions, foisting the responsibility of their emotional regulation onto others. Conflict requires us to, at times, contend with both extremes. As with safety maintenance, there are no universal rules to follow. In the former case, where someone is hesitant to share their emotions, work must be done to create a safe enough environment and invite their feelings. Even when the shy person does share their feelings, they may be understated or minimized. Therefore it is the

responsibility of facilitators and other parties to appreciate the significance of the shared emotions fully. Thank the shy person for showing courage.

On the other extreme, participants must work for others to feel safe for people whose emotions are volatile and require emotional labor to process. Sometimes this means creating physical space or slowing down a conversation. Perhaps it also means padding discussions with quiet time or breaks to decompress and process.

Another risk with the feelings conversation is weaponizing emotions. For instance, some cultures or families believe that whoever is angriest or most hurt has moral superiority. In such cases, people learn to weaponize their emotions and demonstrate that they are the most aggrieved. According to their upbringing, they are in the right while the other party is in the wrong.

Conversely, the volatile person might use their emotions to attack or invalidate someone else. For example, they may say, "I'm offended that you're even hurt," which tells the other party that their emotions are unwelcome and invalid. Do not allow one person's emotions to invalidate or attack another's. Everyone is entitled to feel how they feel, and their feelings should never be policed or scrutinized.

Technique 5: Identity Conversation

Invariably, conflict makes us question what we think, believe, and feel about ourselves. For example, a conflict at work might threaten our identity as a productive, valuable worker. Alternatively, a conflict in a romantic relationship might harm our self-perception that we are kind and loving. Lastly, a conflict with our best friend might make us question if we are a good friend. This identity crisis is our ego or self-concept springing into action to restore our social perception. As a social species, we need to keep track of how people perceive us. Discrepancies between how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves can cause strong reactions during conflict.

When a conflict arises, we must first interrogate ourselves. How does this conflict reflect me as a person? Where does it run afoul of my self-concept? What was said or done that runs contrary to my beliefs?

A further step toward conflict resolution is to ask ourselves how our words and actions might run afoul of someone else's identity. We can discover how our behavior may have had unintended consequences by asking ourselves this question.

It pays to have the identity conversation out loud. While maintaining a sense of safety for everyone, sharing our identity and how the conflict has jeopardized it can invite others to empathize with us and clarify their perceptions. More often than not, wounds to our identity feel much more catastrophic than they are. By addressing and repairing these injuries to our ego, we can return to a sense of safety and orient towards our shared goals.

The identity conversation is often the most difficult to have as it requires self-reflection and deep introspection. Sometimes aspects of our identity can pop out unexpectedly, but other times, it requires deep emotional archaeology to uncover the source of these beliefs about ourselves. Furthermore, this innerwork of self-exploration can be incredibly painful, which causes us to flinch away from doing the work instinctively.

We can orient towards ourselves with honesty and courage to perform this innerwork and have the identity conversation with ourselves. But first, we need to understand our own identity and how its affront. Then, we can share our identity and its wounds with the other parties such that they have an opportunity to make amends and demonstrate empathy.

A final point about identity: sometimes, our identity, emotions, and past traumas are wrapped up in a tight web. Carl Jung called these webs “complexes,” which can get activated like falling dominoes if any part of the web is disturbed. These bundles of memories and associations can form complicated triggers and responses in us that take a long time to understand and untangle. Touching on a complex can activate a robust and unexpected response. So pay attention to complexes and work through them.

Technique 6: Impact vs. Intent

Asking the question, “what did you mean by that?” can have profound ramifications in conflict. We humans often mistake impact for intent. If someone says something hurtful to us, we immediately assume that the hurt was deliberate. It takes effort and practice to pause and stop ourselves from making that assumption instead of asking about intent.

Intent can exist on a spectrum from benevolent to malicious, and most intentions lie between the two extremes. Often, people have multiple or unconscious intentions. While there are certainly people out for blood, most are far more innocent. If they wound with their words, they may merely be following the communication templates with which they were raised.

One way to clarify is to ask what they intended. It’s that simple. This question can be followed up with a statement of impact. *Whatever your intention was, this was the impact it had on me.* People frequently miscalculate the effect their words and actions have. We cannot read minds. Therefore, it is easy to imagine bad intentions or deliberate hostility. We must ask what was going on in the heads of others.

Establishing impact can sound like laying blame, so we must be gentle when describing the impact. One way to soften the blow is to use the passive voice. For example, you can say, “I was hurt by that,” rather than “You hurt me.” This change allows the transgressor to separate their behavior from their sense of self. If you say “you hurt me,” that implies that the person is a dangerous, hurtful person, even if that’s not what’s intended. Instead, you might say, “that email really hurt my feelings,” which gives the person space from their erroneous behavior.

Some cultures and languages tend to use the passive and avoid attribution. You wouldn't say, "You broke the cup," you would simply say, "The cup broke." We can borrow these language quirks and speak more factually when discussing intent and impact. Removing agency from our language further disentangles intent from impact. If you say, "That cup was an heirloom, and now I'm very sad," it is more effective than "you broke my grandmother's cup!" Even if someone is at fault, attacking them will likely provoke defensiveness. Fortunately, most people will not be malicious, and we don't want them to shut down and become defensive.

Technique 7: Contributing Factors

It's a natural human instinct to find fault and to blame. This impulse is tied back to our ancestry as higher apes. Suppose we can shrug off responsibility for something and hold someone else accountable. In that case, our social rank is less at risk. However, this primitive impulse no longer serves us well, especially in complex groups and loving relationships.

While we need to avoid finding fault and assigning blame, it is still important to identify contributing factors. Conflict can arise for many reasons. For example, it can be a simple misunderstanding. Both parties were having a bad day, or things triggered people in their past. Therefore it pays to discuss contributing factors when working through conflict.

Contributing factors fall into two broad categories: factors relating directly to the conflict and external factors. A directly related factor may be something that one party said or did that catalyzed the conflict or exacerbated the problem. For example, an external factor may be horrible traffic that day, causing everyone to be grumpy and late. Contributing factors also have a temporal variable. They may be recent and immediate or buried in the ancient past. For instance, if one party is hungry right now, that can contribute to a conflict. But also, if one party had a severe parent who used particular verbal attacks that caused heightened sensitivity and flashbacks, that may contribute.

Discussing contributing factors is more about fact-finding than fault-finding. Fact-finding missions are used in government and business all the time. For example, when NASA's space shuttle Columbia disintegrated on reentry, they launched a massive fact-finding mission. It was more important to identify all the contributing factors to the disaster that caused the loss of life than it was to assign blame. In the case of the Columbia disaster, many people were aware of problems but either declined to speak up or were silenced when they did. NASA's fact-finding mission found structural problems in the command hierarchy. They discovered that under-privileged technical experts should have had more authority to raise the alarm. Afterward, NASA implemented significant structural changes because the shared purpose of NASA was to be the top space program on the planet, not to assign blame.

Technique 8: Needs and Boundaries

One way to move forward is simply to ask what the conflicted parties need to move forward. Very often, the answer may be a boundary. What is a boundary? A personal boundary (or just boundary) is a limitation or rule that one party asks to be respected. Boundaries can cover anything from physical behaviors to verbal and emotional behaviors. For instance, one party might be more comfortable with physical closeness than another. The shyer party can ask for a personal boundary that includes a physical safe zone.

Imagine a married couple. One spouse tends to snap at the other when they feel wronged, threatened, or otherwise hurt in this couple. In most cases, the infraction was innocent, and the snap reaction also caused hurt, so both spouses ended up hurt. The snapping spouse can ask for boundaries around sensitive topics that cause them to snap. At the same time, the other spouse can ask for boundaries about how to respond when triggered.

Snapping spouse: "I'm really sensitive about the holidays. I just have some bad experiences, and I know you love the holidays. So when you bring up holiday plans, please just give me some time to process and prepare myself, okay? That will help me not to snap at you when you want to plan things quickly,"

Other spouse: "Okay, that really makes sense. Sorry, I know this is a hot topic for you. I'll be more careful when planning in the future and try to curb my excitement. In the meantime, if you get triggered by the holidays, please try not to take it out on me. I understand if you need time and space, and I'm happy to give that to you,"

Snapping spouse: "Yes, I think that's fair,"

There's a straightforward formula for recognizing and asking for boundaries. This formula is YES-NO-YES developed by William Ury in his book *The Power of a Positive No*. Ury's framework for boundaries starts with saying YES to yourself. Say yes to your own emotions and needs! You deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. You have a right to self-determination and bodily autonomy. So say YES to all these personal needs. Start by identifying your needs internally through self-reflection, journaling, or talking to a supportive person.

Second, say NO to unreasonable or unacceptable demands or infractions. If someone violates your sense of safety, you are entitled to say no! If someone says hurtful things, you are allowed to say no. Continue the exercise in the same way you identified your YES needs. Say YES to yourself and NO to unreasonable demands or behaviors.

Lastly, say YES to an alternative to move forward. Offer an olive branch of compromise. You can see this in the above imaginary example between a touchy spouse and their partner. *Instead of this, can you try to do that instead?* Come to the table ready and willing to discuss alternatives and compromises since this won't shut down conversations and will keep the dialog going.

Sources

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