



# Book Listening to Conflict

## Finding Constructive Solutions to Workplace Disputes

Erik J. Van Slyke  
AMACOM, 1999

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### Recommendation

No matter what size your business is, chances are you’ve had to deal with conflicts at work. Relationship-management skills are critical in any business. Author Erik J. Van Slyke examines the underlying problems that cause conflicts and determines that resolution is not about negotiating strategy as much as it is about understanding people. Listening is your primary weapon. When arguing, cajoling and persuading fail to solve a conflict, listening can prevail. Throughout, the book strikes a delicate balance between explaining the psychological roots of communication problems and detailing strategies that can help you guide people in overcoming those obstacles. A series of step-by-step guidelines assists in understanding and employing the author’s suggestions. *BooksInShort* recommends this book for everyone who wants a clear approach to conflict resolution.

### Take-Aways

- Conflict exists when interdependent parties believe that their needs, goals or ideas are incompatible.
- Personal biases cause people to perceive incompatibility.
- Become more self-aware by examining your interpersonal zones.
- Learn to realize when you are entering your hot zone so that you can react rationally instead of emotionally.
- Once you are self-aware, you can begin the journey toward self-mastery.
- With self-mastery, you can use established principles to guide your behavior.
- Learn to separate people from the problem.
- The six levels of listening range from passive listening, which is hardly listening at all, to empathic listening, which is listening with your ears, mind, eyes and heart.
- A collaborative approach creates the best conflict resolutions.
- Make sure that both parties are satisfied before any agreement is finalized.

# Summary

## Incompatibility Equals Conflict

Conflict occurs among parties who believe that their needs, goals or ideas are incompatible. It has three important elements: competition, interdependence and perceived incompatibility.

- **Competition** - This is the process of striving to "win." Winning could mean getting your way, or making sure others do not. Trying to win establishes a competitive environment. Often, competition is unconscious and hard to detect. It may come in the form of syrupy smiles and phony friendships. People develop unconscious competitive behavior tactics over their lifetimes to help them achieve their objectives. However, research shows that cooperation is much more productive than competition, which causes conflict and can really get in the way of a constructive resolution.
- **Interdependence** - At some level, people must depend on each other. Managers need employees to produce results and employees need managers for advice, compensation and feedback. Conflict creates a dilemma. Your preferred outcome requires the other person's participation. But, you would also like to achieve your goals independent of the person standing in your way. When each party's goals are positively interdependent, conflict resolution is more likely. Working together for shared goals also increases productivity.
- **Perceived incompatibility** - The complex nature of the communication process makes it difficult for people to interpret each other's goals. Your personal biases establish obstacles that make common ground hard to find. People generally interpret events in a way that supports a positive self-definition - someone who does good work will feel that he or she has superior ability. But someone who does poor work will tend to blame external factors. To resolve conflict, both parties must accept the validity of the other party's perspective. Total solutions must address everyone's perspectives and objectives.

## Self-Awareness

Become aware of your emotions and your thoughts about them. When you understand the emotions and needs that create your reactions, you can see things you didn't see before. Self-awareness allows you to react consciously instead of reactively. Part of self-awareness is recognizing your inner and outer interpersonal zones. Outer zones represent conscious aspects of your behavior, while inner zones reflect your unconscious preferences.

“Maintaining an inventory of our comfort zones and hot zones helps us identify situations that increase the likelihood that we will engage in destructive behaviors. It also helps us re-create situations that lead to constructive resolutions.”

### Outer Zones

- **Comfort zones** - This is your range of emotions at your best. You are calm, cool and collected. When something doesn't go smoothly, you begin to enter your hot zone. Often, you are forced out of your comfort zone because someone triggers your hot zone.
- **Hot zones** - This is an area of personal vulnerability that causes intense emotional reactions to a certain situations. Hot zones occur when you unconsciously associate an event with a negative memory. You may feel agitated or upset. Outside your comfort zone you react, defend, attack and rationalize to reinforce your standard self-concept.

“As we listen to people with greater depth, we become more accepting of their needs and of our own.”

### Inner Zones

- **Value zones** - These attitudes help you determine what is right or wrong. They form the core of your beliefs and behaviors, and help you make value-based decisions. Become aware of what you truly value so you can act accordingly. If you value time with your family, you will never be happy working 12-hour days.
- **Social zones** - This zone regards your preferences when relating with other people. You might be an extravert who is energized by being around other people. Or you could be an introvert who is recharged by spending time alone. Awareness of your social preference can help you eliminate misunderstandings.
- **Cognitive zones** - The way you gather, evaluate and act on information is your cognitive zone. Some people have a receptive

strategy for gathering information and focus on direct observation and firsthand experience. Others use an intuitive strategy and concentrate on what could be. Some people are analytical when evaluating information to reach an objective, logical decision. Others are empathic and evaluate information in a personal, value-based way. Finally, some people act on information with an organized strategy, while others respond with a flexible strategy that allows for last-minute changes. No overall method is best, but you need to realize that differences in the involved parties' cognitive zones can lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

## Self-Awareness Leads to Self-Mastery

Self-awareness provides the foundation for self-mastery, in itself the foundation for productive relationships. You can use four principles to guide your interactions with others.

- Discipline, desire and patience - Conflict isn't pleasant. Discipline helps us deal with unpleasant activities. With discipline, we refuse to pursue less challenging strategies for solutions because they will produce unacceptable results. Desire and patience make resolution easier. To find a positive solution, both parties must truly want to collaborate.
- Detached responsibility - You must detach yourself from a situation in order to act interdependently and become self-aware. When you are too attached, you worry and remain preoccupied. Personal issues (your boss has a rude demeanor) become intertwined with objective issues (the way you perform your job). You must separate the people from the problem, so that you don't view all problems as personal attacks. Accept some personal responsibility. Control what you have control over and let the other things go.
- Acceptance - The first two principles lay the foundation for acceptance. Demonstrate acceptance by separating the person from the behavior and welcoming the other guy's unique perspective. Instead of disliking people, learn to dislike the way you feel when they demonstrate unacceptable behavior. You might not agree with their perspective, but you must take the time to understand it if you are going to reach a solution. Walk a mile in the other person's shoes.
- Mutual gain - Both parties in a conflict must gain some benefit from interaction. This mutual gain principle is based on satisfying common needs by creating many possible acceptable conflict resolution options. This method is cooperative, collaborative and constructive. Mutual gain is focused on a better way, not "your way or my way."

## Six Levels of Listening

Listening is the only way to get the information you need to resolve a conflict. It will allow you to reframe your needs in a way that makes them important to the other party. Proper listening reduces the impact of personal issues during conflict. It gives your rational mind a chance to work, instead of being guided by your reactive emotional mind. If you show your interest in the other person's thoughts and desires, that person is more likely to listen to your thoughts and desires. Active listening opens the door to mutual understanding. Learn the six different levels of active listening and strive to listen at Level Five or higher. The levels are:

1. Passive listening - The other person's words are little more than a hum in your ear. You might hear a few words and phrases, but you miss the bulk of the message. Despite obvious problems, everyone occasionally listens at this lowest level.
2. Responsive or pretend listening - This is the same as the passive listening level, with the addition of occasional verbal encouragement, such as "Uh-huh," or "I see." Nonverbal responses such as a smile or nod occur at this level. Unfortunately, these responses are not coupled with actual attention.
3. Selective listening - In the first two levels of listening you use only your ears, but at level three you begin to use your intellect. You listen selectively for key words or phrases that support your points. Selective listening is used to argue and debate. Instead of listening to the speaker, you are planning your next words. You are either interrupting to make your point or sitting there half-asleep. The danger is that you never learn enough about the speaker's wants or needs, so your responses are based only on your needs.
4. Attentive listening - This takes selective listening one step further. You still listen with your intellect for key points, but you don't interrupt. You show you are listening with silence and eye contact. You ask leading questions to guide the information the speaker is providing. Attentive listening concentrates on facts and data, not emotional content. The majority of our everyday listening occurs at these first four levels.
5. Active listening - This is the first level in which you try to understand the meaning behind the message. Listen with your eyes by noting gestures, facial expressions, posture and demeanor. Use reflective responses to communicate. Questions such as, "This is what I'm hearing you say. Do I understand the situation correctly?" allow the speaker to maintain control of the conversation. The only downside is that although active listening allows you to accept the message, it does not require you to understand the

messenger.

6. Empathic listening - This highest level of listening addresses the need to understand the other person's frame of reference. Suspend your reality. Immerse yourself in the speaker's reality. Listen with your ears, mind, eyes and heart to become aware of the speaker's feelings and emotions. Empathic listening requires a change in attitude. You can use the third principle of interaction to accept the other person as valuable and likeable.

## Conflict Resolution Framework

Now you realize that a collaborative approach is most likely to bring the best solutions. But how do you go about using collaboration to settle conflicts? Follow these six steps:

1. Prepare for the interaction - Preparing for the resolution process involves understanding interpersonal zones (yours and the other party's), the factors that are affecting the conflict and the nature of your relationship with the person. Make sure you are aware of each of your hot zones. Do you and the other party share any goals? Do you have to maintain an ongoing relationship with the person? Time spent organizing your thoughts can help maintain constructive discourse.
2. Initiate the exchange - People tend to avoid conflict, so it may be up to you to initiate the exchange. Confront the person you are in conflict with and tell the person your problem, not your problem with him or her. State how you feel and describe the situation that caused the feeling. Then, involve the other person by asking for his or her perspective. Once the other person is involved, you can begin to solve the problem.
3. Facilitate the relationship - It is important that both parties are motivated to work together. Build the relationship with open communication and trust. The more you reveal about yourself, the more you will learn about the other person. This is called reciprocating self-disclosure. Sharing interests and needs will help you build a common sense of purpose.
4. Understand the interests - If you learn about the underlying interests and needs of the other person, you can establish the criteria needed for solutions. It is easy to assume that the other person's interests are opposed to yours, but when you take the time to understand their interests more thoroughly, you can find common goals.
5. Examine solutions - Brainstorm many different possible solutions. If you only have one solution, you risk leaving one or both parties unsatisfied. Look at many possible agreements to find the one that is best for both of you.
6. Reach consensus - Do not finalize an agreement unless both parties are satisfied. Your final solutions should address everyone's legitimate needs and should be justly perceived as fair. Make sure everyone is clear about what is in the agreement. Include information in the agreement that covers how the solution will be implemented. If the agreement does not work out after time, go back to step one and restart the collaborative process.

## About the Author

**Erik J. Van Slyke** is a principal with HR Alliance, a human resources consulting and training firm. He has been cited in *The Wall Street Journal* and the *BNA Employee Relations Weekly*.

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