



# Book Conflict Management

Baden Eunson  
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## Recommendation

Wanna fight? This book says you should and shows you how you can benefit from conflict. Author Baden Eunson clearly defines his topic and breaks it down into easily digestible components. He analyzes conflicts from various perspectives to show how they can evolve and build up strength. He explains how the involved parties can either gain from or succumb to the powers unleashed by conflict. *BooksInShort* recommends this highly understandable, practical guide to those who need help navigating through the minefield of conflict. And if you'd rather avoid a fight and work out your differences in a more controlled atmosphere, Eunson dedicates a good portion of the book to the negotiating process, so you can decide whether you prefer bare-knuckles warfare or a more civilized alternative.

## Take-Aways

- Conflict is an inherent part of personal relations. It can be either negative or positive.
- Charles Darwin and Karl Marx pointed out that human evolution and class conflict can be the engines behind evolutionary and social progress.
- The way you respond to conflict is indicative of your character.
- Conflicts develop slowly, often starting as the result of small disagreements.
- In some cultures, negotiations are part of any ongoing business relationship.
- Conflicts can end when one party defeats the other, surrenders, yields to the other side, or reaches a stalemate or deadlock.
- Negotiators must know the difference between interests and positions. Understand the difference between what the other side says it needs and what it will settle for.
- Experienced negotiators package their options by including such variables as when the other party will get the money or reward in question.
- Effective negotiators listen to what is said and to what is not said.
- Prompting a showdown between parties can produce positive or “functional conflict.”

## Summary

### Positive and Negative Conflicts

Conflict is an inherent part of personal relations, and even though it is stressful, it can serve a positive purpose. For example, it can release emotions and frustrations, while opening the door to a wider discussion about common problems. It can expose the parties involved to new perspectives, and invigorate fresh discussions and approaches to problems.

“In negotiations, as in most human interactions, the other side is a partial mystery to us, just as we are a partial mystery to the other side.”

Since conflict can produce positive results, some negotiators actually create conflict. In fact, some people advocate managing conflict instead of resolving it. This may, however, increase the conflict. Many arguments cannot be “managed” because it is so difficult to control human behavior. Conflict arises when parties argue over limited resources, economic hardships, poor communication or perceptions of unequal treatment. Sometimes people become more irritable or aggressive in the face of overcrowding, heat or illness. People respond to conflict several ways:

- **Avoiding it by ignoring it or leaving the scene** – For example, a person might leave the house and walk around the block to dodge a family argument.
- **Being abusive or conquering the other party** – In business, driving a competitor out of business might resolve the conflict.
- **Acknowledging defeat** – Cut the conflict off by surrendering or simply withdrawing.

- **Getting a judge** – Litigate, negotiate or arbitrate with the help of an experienced third-party mediator.
- **Going on strike** – Use civil disobedience or physical confrontation as a way to resolve the dispute.

“If differences between partners in a conflict are not perceived to be insurmountable, then a new synthesis, a combination of the energies of differing people (synergy) can take place.”

People cope with disagreement five distinct ways: “competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding or accommodating.” Your ability to balance the other party’s concerns with your concerns shapes your conflict style. For instance, an unassertive, uncooperative person might try to avoid conflict, where a cooperative, assertive individual would try to resolve it.

## How Conflicts Develop

Conflicts usually develop slowly, often as a result of small disagreements, gossip, sabotage, whining or a physical altercation. These events escalate in a spiral, evolving from circumstances that often go unnoticed until they appear as full-blown public disagreements. As the conflict matures, it goes through certain stages. First, people tolerate the irritants that eventually lead to conflict. Over time, tolerance fades and resistance to the aggravating situation replaces it. In a business, this spiral might begin with gossip, and escalate into actual arguing and public expressions of anger. This sets the stage for a critical incident to develop, such as a physical confrontation or an accident that sparks a public reaction.

“The best way to mismanage conflict is to think that it can always be managed.”

Along the way, the parties in the conflict engage in “selective perception,” focusing primarily on another person’s shortcomings. As the conflict spiral grows, the parties may begin to link related issues or former concerns to the current situation. Such linkages can accelerate the conflict. The use of “hot button” words or phrases, which are emotional sore points, can escalate the conflict into open, heated discussion. The end stages of the spiral involve pushing the other party to respond, either by a physical action such as shoving or jeering, or by being provocative, such as parking in someone else’s spot. Retaliation, which is usually intended to extract revenge, can spark another confrontation, particularly if it is disproportionate. The highest spot on the spiral is overt violence, commonly directed at an opponent, but occasionally self-damaging. For instance, people may destroy their own property to keep the enemy from getting it.

“The essence of all good negotiation is preparation and the essence of all good preparation is research.”

Conflicts can arise in business situations when people work in different departments, at different managerial levels and at different tasks. Experts say that disagreements and misunderstandings about roles and departmental goals can cause conflict even when two departments have good communication. The problem is that the departments’ personnel disagree, and even though their disagreement festers, they never take the additional step of resolving the conflict.

## Building Bridges

You can resolve conflicts with several established methods. The method you choose depends on the power balance between the parties, the intensity of the conflict, the goals involved and each party’s willingness to negotiate. To reach a resolution, first account for a few flash points, such as cultural and gender differences. Try to arrange meetings between the aggrieved parties. Determine if one party has a subordinate goal that could be elevated to outweigh the most visible, contentious goals. For example, when the U.S. and U.S.S.R. both realized the destructive power of nuclear weapons, they developed the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. It had been a subordinate goal, but making it a primary goal helped resolve the conflict.

“If we do not want to lose, we need to plan.”

Reciprocity is another power conflict resolution tool. The GRIT approach, which stands for “graduated and reciprocated initiatives in tension reduction,” was developed during the Cold War. It consists of using specific steps to reduce deadlocks without making either party look weak.

Just as some events can escalate the conflict spiral, you can defuse conflicts by working down the spiral with a variety of techniques, from offering simple apologies, to asking forgiveness or praising the other party. Depending on the type of conflict and the issues involved, parties can use a negotiator, make concessions or find solutions, such as identifying new resources if the conflict centers on dividing limited resources. Another technique is to relocate the opponents away from each other, say, in different parts of the office.

“Fail to plan, plan to fail.”

Conflicts end when one party defeats the other, surrenders to the other, or when the parties reach a stalemate. Compromise is another form of resolution. A compromise involves splitting the difference with the other group, but it may not work if one side demands more than the other or if the weaker party insists on a large share of the contested assets.

“Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” [– John F. Kennedy]

Sometimes encouraging conflict is healthy. Prompting a showdown between parties can produce positive or “functional conflict.” This kind of conflict can encourage better communication and creativity. Organizations may benefit from this approach if they suffer from too many “yes” people, focus on consensus, lack ideas, or have managers who believe in simply perpetuating the illusion of functionality and peace inside the unit.

## The Power of Negotiating

Negotiating is a form of bargaining. If you know the basics of negotiations, you’ll use that information often. Negotiation is the watchword when you ask for a raise, when your child asks for a favor or when nations discuss questions about national borders. Conflict is part of modern game theory, complete with winners and losers. A zero-sum game has a winner and a loser. In a positive-sum game, both parties win, and in a negative-sum game, they both lose.

“Splitting the difference can...be lowest-common-denominator decision making.”

A positive-sum outcome happens, for example, when labor negotiators gain a wage concession in exchange for increasing productivity. If this means more profits, each side gains. Negotiators know that to get concessions, they have to make some, too. This is not weakness; it is a necessary part of involving the other party to create a positive outcome. This is especially true in merger negotiations, where you will have to work with the other side’s negotiators after the deal closes.

“Provocation – also known as coat-tailing, winding up or incitement – is deliberately teasing or needling someone, sometimes with a view to evoking a physically violent response.”

People enter negotiations when they believe they can do better resolving a matter on their own than they could do, for instance, in court. They seek an “alternative to a negotiated settlement” or the “best alternative to a negotiated agreement” (BATNA). The “worst alternative to a negotiated settlement” is the result you get when negotiation would have produced a better outcome, at least for one party. This happens, for example, when a union goes on strike even though it does not have money for the workers’ strike fund.

“Always be ready to walk away either as a temporary tactic or to disengage permanently from the process.”

In all negotiations, identify as many strategies and BATNAs as possible. When a party refuses to negotiate, sometimes a third party or a shift in the negotiation’s focus can break the logjam. Research is the key. You need facts to ascertain the opposing party’s character, motives and values. Know what you are willing to sacrifice.

## Reaching the Bottom Line

All negotiations are predicated on making concessions. A concession is something of value that you give your counterparty in exchange for something else. The problem is that the other side may not recognize your concession as valuable. Effective negotiators find out what the other side considers valuable and uses it in trading concessions. Try to trade away your cheapest assets.

“Extremists may find it more beneficial to keep conflict going than to end it.”

Good negotiators know the difference between interests and positions, and what the other side says it needs versus what it will settle for in the end. Discover this information by listening and questioning. Location is critical in any negotiation, but the choices present both pros and cons. For instance, if a union negotiation takes place in the employer’s office, it is more difficult for the employer to walk out. If they take place at the union’s offices, an employer might feel obligated.

“One paradox may be that extremists on both sides, in fact, have more in common with each other than with the moderates on their own sides.”

Bargaining depends on each party’s influence. Power can stem from the number of people being represented, but weak opponents often gain the upper hand by using “asymmetrical resistance” tactics, such as delays or walking out. Other tactics that can alter the balance of power include using rewards and disincentives, working to split the unity of the opposing team and involving charismatic personalities, experts or leaders. Additionally you can induce stress in the other party, set deadlines to pressure them and identify which of their constituencies will be affected by the negotiations.

“The wheel of fortune always turns – try not to be under it.”

Inexperienced negotiators often focus on price alone. This is a mistake. Experienced negotiators package their options by including such variables as how and when the other party gets the money or reward it seeks. In labor negotiations, a union may focus just on gaining an hourly pay increase, when benefits, time off or job security easily could be positioned as more valuable than an hourly pay increase alone.

## Making Your Case: Basic Negotiating Styles

Negotiating styles can range from coercive to persuasive to gentle or powerful. The Warner style of negotiation ranges along continuums of two variables – energy level and empathy level – to promote, bully, manipulate or suggest certain positions and areas of concessions. Psychologists Joel Aronoff and John Wilson developed a negotiation style model based on 11 personality types. Their model applies to negotiating teams on both sides of the bargaining table. You can use it to identify an individual’s weaknesses, flexibility and rigidity. The model also takes into consideration how people share information, and whether they prefer to work alone or with a team. These factors make up a matrix of four different negotiating styles: revealing, concealing, cooperative or competitive.

## Tools of the Trade

Effective negotiators listen to what others say and what they don’t say. They are good at reading nonverbal communication, asking good questions and understanding which issues the other party is avoiding. They are persuasive and they can detect signals that indicate contradictions. For example, the statement: “As it now stands, your offer is ridiculous” could mean the offer will not be considered but “as it now stands” also acknowledges that the offer is still open.

The tactics you can use in a negotiation vary widely, from making gains in small increments to shifting the focus of discussions, using disinformation, overwhelming the other side with details, feigning an action, making grand statements which appeal to the public or even walking out. Whatever you do, however, must be well-planned. Practice by using role-playing and imagining how your opponents would react to certain tactics or offers.

Usually, the final stage in negotiations is reaching agreement. But, in some cases, no agreement is possible. Consider temporarily walking away. This shows that you are not locked into the current offerings. The last stage is to formalize the agreement, preferably in writing. Even when you reach a settlement, view the negotiations as one stage in an ongoing process. In some cultures, negotiations are part of the ongoing relationship.

## About the Author

**Baden Eunson** teaches in the school of English, Communications and Performance Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He also runs a training and consultancy business. He is the author of numerous books, including *C21: Communicating in the 21st Century*.

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