

Conflict Resolution

For “ER Docs and Crucial Talks”

Introduction to Conflict

- **We all know about conflict.** We know how emotional, complicated and difficult conflict can be. In families, businesses, hospitals, neighborhoods, book clubs, societies and nations...you name it.
- Conflict has a **well-deserved negative connotation**, but in fact it often moves us to **new and better outcomes and mutual understanding**. From a conflict you might learn a valuable truth about a situation, for example, that this party has ulterior motives, or this relationship will never work out, or that my perception of the other party isn't true. On the other hand unresolved conflict can also lead to verbal and physical warfare that is irreconcilable.
- We will assume that the parties are **relatively sane**. The drunk who attacks you we'll consider a special case. The horrifically conflicted political scene we'll leave to you to sort out, but some tips may help.
- **People handle conflict in different ways**...there isn't a cookie cutter solution, but we'll give you some ways to look at conflict and tips to prevent and resolve it.
- I'll also cover how **conflicts escalate and how to prevent that from happening**
- **Think about a conflict you've been in recently.**

Friction in Relationships

- First of all let me preface conflict resolution, by distinguishing disagreements that are **really day to day relationship problems that can build into conflict.**
- **Let's imagine a family with children.** Both parents work, have a long commute, deal with children's schedules and all the household tasks. **Lots of pressure and fatigue.** Disagreements that in a calm setting wouldn't matter lead to arguments. There is also **work problems.** Stress Builds. Tempers flare.
- Then there are **differences in personality types.** In fact, people often are attracted to an opposite type—extroverts marry introverts, the habitual tardy marries the always early, people pleasers marry the task masters, and thinkers marry feelers. Neither gets up in the morning vowing to make life miserable for the other. They just react differently by nature and that irritates the other. Give each other a break.
- There's **gender difference:** A man doesn't see things, like the snow tires in the living room or the cobwebs in the corner, whereas the woman notices it all. That's why she can find things in the refrigerator. He can only find beer.
- Then there are our **moods.** I feel angry, anxious or tired, stressed out. I live with low-grade irritability; or, I'm lazily comfortable. Moods lead to flare-ups: aggressive or passive aggressive reactions.

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Thomas-Kilmann Model

So how can we understand the dynamics of conflict? I've found the **Thomas-Killmann model** a helpful way is to understand the dynamics of conflict. You can google "thomas kilmann conflict mode instrument" and select the **You tube video** that lasts 2.35 minutes. He'll draw the model for you. I'll explain it here.

The TK model is based on the **degree of each party's assertiveness**--getting the **result**; and their **cooperativeness**—preserving the **relationship**. In other words, how much one gets what they want and how much the other gives up.

Websites

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFlydyH2H8Y> In 2.35 minutes he draws a visual grid of Thomas-Killmann model.

<https://kilmanniagnostics.com/overview-thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument-tki/> Scroll down about 20% and find the visual model with definitions

Build Out of the Thomas-Kilmann Model

- If one party displays a high degree of assertion, and very little cooperation, we call that **competing**—I win; you lose, "my way or the highway." Good when a decision has to be made, say about safety.
- When one party shows the converse of that, high cooperation and low assertiveness, that's **accommodating** behavior—you win, I lose. Good when the relationships will be preserved.
- If both parties display a high degree of assertion and cooperation we call that **collaborating**, seeking win-win. Good with complex or vital decisions.
- If we see moderate assertion and cooperation, that leads to **compromising**—each gets something of what they need. Both win and lose. Ok when differences are hard but negotiable, and/or time is limited.
- If low on both assertiveness and cooperation, we are **avoiding or withdrawing**. Good, often a strategic withdrawal, or exit when emotions are high. Or avoid—decide not to raise an issue that might lead to outbursts.
- **All approaches at different times are appropriate**. However, if you are **stuck in one response** in conflict you won't get a productive result.
- Depending on the situation and degree of assertion and/or cooperation, we can get a **good feel for how conflict resolution** is playing out in the moment.

The Appropriate Approach?

What's appropriate? Here's some situations and you tell me the most helpful approach—competing (hi assertion, low cooperation), collaborating (high-high), compromising (moderate-moderate), accommodating (Low-high cooperation), avoiding (low-low). What would you say in the following examples?

- Parents in this pandemic are trying to decide whether to send their children to **classroom learning, or virtual learning**. Each has a different viewpoint. *Requires assertion and cooperation—collaborating. Listening, expressing and considering viewpoints, control of emotions, respect for each other, willingness to come to a conclusion and live with it.*

- A person in a crowded store is not wearing their mask? *Avoid.*

- When an employee you supervise becomes very angry ⁶ about an issue? *Probably a time to hold off until later. Lets*

The Appropriate Approach? Page 2

- To complete the **staffing on two large projects**, six top performers are available. Each of the competitive project directors want all six on their project.
Collaborate or compromise—3 & 3, 4 & 2 depending on need.
- A father wants to take his son and daughter fishing, but mother sees there are many home projects unfinished and homework for the kids. How would you figure this out?
- ER Doc examples.... ?

What Drives Your Response?

- **Your conflict style**—do you generally compete, accommodate, compromise, seek to collaborate, or avoid? Can you adapt?
- **The situation, its seriousness, and its history**—is it important, straight forward or complicated, petty, worth a lot of effort
- **Your value system**—unfair, fit the rules, hurt others, moral, anything that touches your hot button. (I'm fairly adaptable and accommodating, and often seek to minimize or avoid conflict, but will compete vigorously when a value is threatened.)
- **Your genetic wiring** that conditions your adaptability, fear, impatience, level of self esteem, introversion, extraversion, self confidence
- **Your mental tapes from the past**, going all the way back to childhood —painful family conflict, having to stand your ground, criticized, pushed to excel, abandonment, affirmed often (Most of us have an inner wound, a psychological or moral weakness or addiction, or a blind spot.)
- Given all of this, **what one or two beliefs or actions would help you to better manage conflict?**

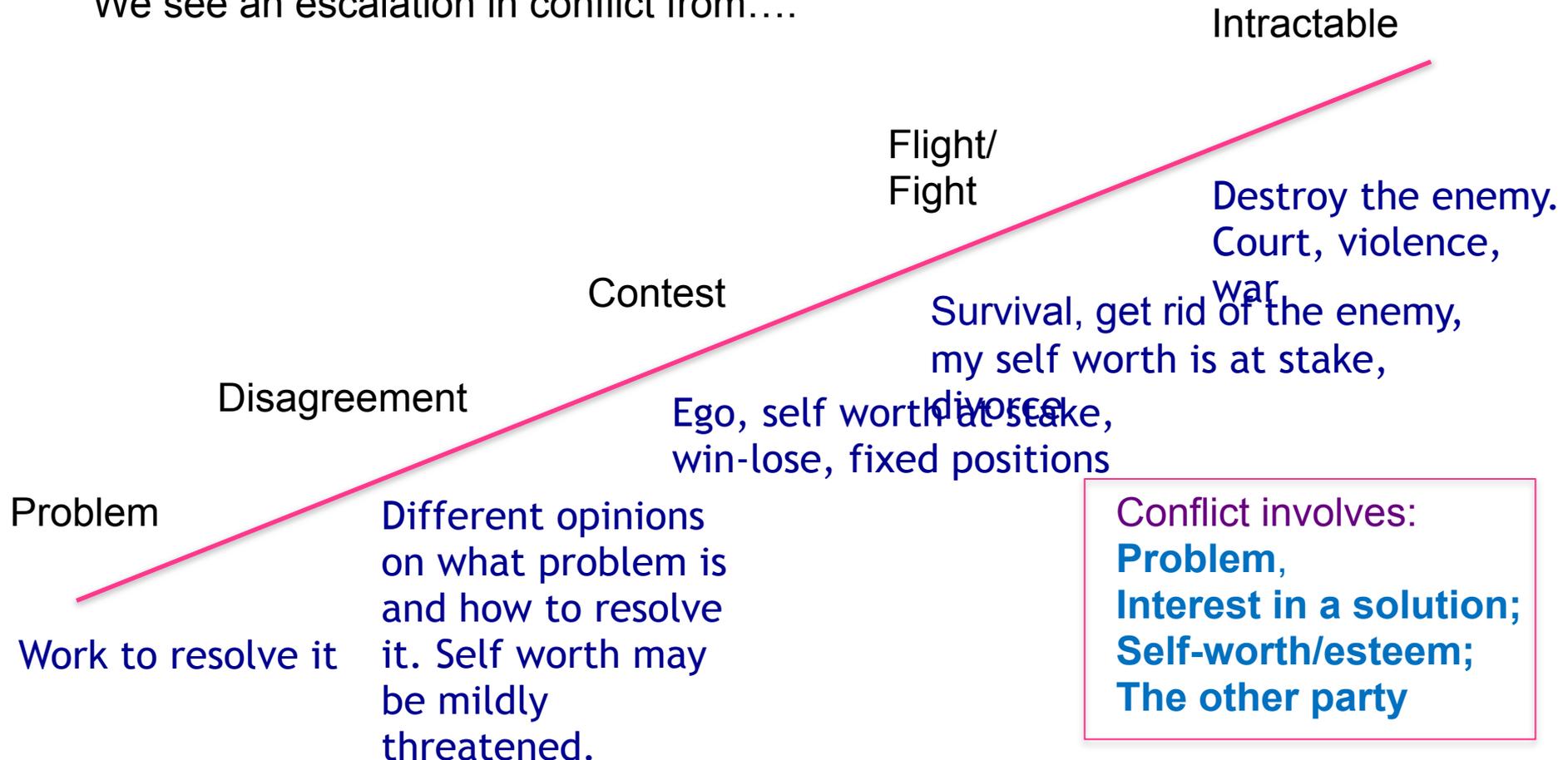
Conflict 101

- **We respond to conflicts based upon our perceptions...** not necessarily an objective view.
- Conflicts often **trigger strong emotions**. Can we manage our emotions?
- Conflicts continue to **fester when ignored**. Do we have the courage to step up?
- Conflicts **present an opportunity for improvement and growth**. Builds trust, the relationship can survive difficult challenges.
- **A serious conflict is usually more than just a disagreement**. Both parties perceive a threat. Is it real?

Let's look at the **levels of conflict**.

Levels of Conflict

We see an escalation in conflict from....



Escalation Stages Explained

- In any conflict there's the **problem**, the party's **interest in a solution**; the party's **self-worth/esteem**; and, their concern for the **other**. **Perceptions** play a big role.
- **Problem:** May be differences, but all parties have interest in the issue, and have concern for the other. **STICK WITH THE PROBLEM**, find new way to look at it, get more data, follow expertise.
- **Disagreement:** interest in solution still in play, self-worth may be mildly threatened, concern for the other less certain, but still operative. **REFOCUS ON THE PROBLEM**, realize there is no threat to self or other.
- **Contest:** perceived/felt threat to one's self-worth, win-lose, I must win my position. **PULL BACK EMOTIONS AND EGO. REFOCUS ON THE INTERESTS OF THE OTHER PARTY, NOT THE POSITION EACH HAS TAKEN**, What do you hope to gain, what's the benefit? Here's what I hope to gain.
- **Fight/Flight:** This is about survival. The problem/issue doesn't matter. It is time to defeat the other, destroy the their self worth, and preserve my own at any cost. Or flee, get out, get away. Divorce.

Escalation Stages Explained Page 2

- **Intractable:** The conflict cannot be resolved, all hope of a solution is gone, or at least, no way is yet seen to resolve. 5% of all conflicts at all levels from interpersonal to international tend to become intractable. They involve acute and lasting antagonism, resist mediation, defy conventional wisdom, drag on and on, worsening over time. Our increasingly polarized political stances are an example.
- **In families I've known,** one sibling decides to "hate" the rest. Over a perhaps serious but usually exaggerated slight an adult child with a family refuses all contact with his/her parents and siblings. In doing so they deprive their own children of the interactions and love of their grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. No level of trying to regain the trust and relationship helps. An intractable tragedy!
- **You must let it go,** after you've exhausted the normal means to resolve. There is nothing you can do to change it.

How to Control Escalation

- Remember the end goal. In a mutual relationship **both results and relationships are on the table.**
- **Stick to the problem/issue; remain objective.** Be aware of your **perceptions** and look foremost at the facts/realities. See it as a problem to be solved.
- **Keep hold of your ego and self worth;** minimize a feeling of personal threat; control your emotions (don't get sucked in)
- At the same time, **maintain self-worth of the other party.** Avoid attacks on the other person's personal vulnerabilities
- **Keep your perspective—live for another day.** Perhaps a strategic withdrawal is the best move.
- Most couples recover from shouting matches; but best to **avoid angry shouting.**
- **Build up emotional bank accounts (EBA).** When you do or **give to the other something they appreciate,** you build up the EBA. That goes a long way when resolving conflicts.

How to Control Escalation 2

- **Define roles and expectations around issues**, for example, whose realm is the kitchen. Agree that person decides the best way to load the dishwasher. Clear roles head off conflict.
- **Stick to the present.** Going back ten years is irrelevant and frustrating.
- **Avoid saying “always” and “never.”** “You never consider my suggestion;” or, “You always get your way,” easily builds resentment.
- **Absolutely avoid personal attacks.** “You can’t decide anything.” “You’re always ugly to me.” Never helpful!
- **When you take time to build a relationship through intentional effort, you help minimize conflicts and escalation.** You build emotional bank accounts you can draw on in conflict. Can’t say it enough!
- A great approach—see:

Google the Five Love Languages by Gary Chapman. Below is a good site:

<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/the-5-love-languages-explained>

- **Lastly, reduce stress.** Walk, jog, do pilates, yoga, meditation, whatever.

Preventing Conflicts at Work

- Clarify your expectations ahead of time
- Ask questions to make sure the other person understands and agrees. Listen attentively.
- Check in with the person periodically
- Tell your team members your hot buttons
- Take the time to build relationships with coworkers, customers and bosses; good relationships help minimize conflict
- Minimize name-calling, sarcasm, foul language and threatening behavior within the group; don't tolerate it
- Give to the other party muffins, boxes of donuts or share breakfast tacos. Works wonders.

Creative Ways to Manage Conflict

- Deal with **one issue at a time**
- If there is a past problem blocking communication, **list it** as one of the issues in this conflict
- Avoid reacting to unintentional remarks
- Be wary of resolutions that come too soon or too early
- Anticipate what emotions might arise and keep your cool
- Agree to disagree, and don't insist on being right
- Change the intensity by diversionary tactics, like humor. (E.g., **grandma Bracken with her pastor**. Saving Private Ryan—when the Captain releases the German, and a corporal in disgust decides to leave the team.)

CR in a Relationship

- **Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or "being right."** Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than “winning” the argument, should be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.
- **Listen for what is felt as well as said.** When we listen we connect more deeply to our own needs and emotions, and to those of other people. Listening in this way also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us..
- **Focus on the present.** If you’re holding on to old hurts and resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, focus on what you can do in the here-and-now to solve the problem.

CR in a Relationship Page 2

- **Pick your battles.** Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worth your time and energy.
- **Be willing to forgive.** Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive and let go. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- **Know when to let something go.** If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

Conflict: A Story of the Brackens

Lets look at an example. This will take you back in history to the 1890's. It's a **true story** about my maternal grandfather, John Bracken, and my grandmother, Laura Carbrey Bracken. And it fits right in with Bourbon on the Rocks.

John Bracken emigrated from Canada to Jackson, TN as a young man, and became a union master mechanic/boilermaker who kept railroad engines running. He was an Irish Catholic of relatively few words, who said yes when he meant yes and no when he meant no. He never judged people; he trusted people and they naturally trusted him.

Brackens page 2

He frequently travelled to a railroad maintenance yard in Gulfport MI. He stayed with other men in Carbrey's boarding house, where a pretty young girl, Laura, daughter of the owners, waited table. Laura was energetic, quick witted and never at a loss for words in dealing with the men. Also, she was a Methodist and an active member of the WTCU-- Woman's Christian Temperance Union--which advocated for prohibition of alcohol. Well, John took a fancy to her, they courted, married, and set up house in Gulf Port.

Brackens page 3

The first day after settling in their new home John came home from work, went to a lower cabinet and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. He poured himself a drink and sat in his easy chair to relax.

Laura Bracken of the WTCU went over to him and said, “John Bracken, there’ll be no whiskey in my house,” picked up the bottle of whiskey and poured it down the drain.

Conflict? Two newly weds with fundamentally different value systems just clashed, and it isn’t pretty.

Brackens page 4

So what happened? My grandfather didn't say a word. He stands up, downs his glass of whiskey, puts on his dress hat, and walks out the door. Laura began to think—"where has he gone, has he left me?"

About 30 minutes later John walks through the door holding a another bottle of whiskey, puts it on the table, pours himself a drink, and sits down. Never says a word. My grandmother says to herself, "I'd better let my husband enjoy his whiskey." That was the end of that. They were partners for life and had four children, the youngest my mother.

Bracken's Conflict Debrief

So lets analyse this for a minute using our model of assertiveness and cooperativeness.

Laura at first enforces her will, high assertion. "No whiskey!" She's competing. Its win-lose.

How about John at that point? When he walks out, he's neither competing or cooperating. He's avoiding an argument. His is what we call a "strategic withdrawal."

Bracken's Conflict Debrief 2

When John walks in with **another bottle** of whiskey, he is **asserting his will**, but also, I suggest, he displays a **level of cooperation**--he doesn't directly confront his feisty new wife which shows concern for the **relationship**. I think he is **collaborating** in a modest way.

Laura in the meantime has figured out that "no whiskey in this house" wasn't going to work. John will keep going out and buying more whiskey. So she quickly adapts, "Let this man enjoy his whiskey." With **high cooperation and low assertion** she is "**accommodating.**"

This kind of sums up how the interaction between the concern for the result and/or for the relationship can help us understand what is happening. And in this case we see a calm, non-emotional path to resolution with very little drama.

You can apply it to a conflict you've recently been engaged in.

Wrap Up

What have we covered? What struck you?

- Introduction to conflict: a constant in life, unpleasant; but often conflict leads to good outcomes when understood and resolved
- What is conflict and what contributes to it; the role of relationships
- The Thomas-Kilmann model of assertiveness and cooperativeness, and the five modes of approaching conflict to resolve it
- Application of the model to the newly wed Brackens
- The appropriate application of the five modes in various situations
- The escalation of conflict and how to limit it
- Tips to manage and resolve conflicts at work and other situations; what to do and avoid
- The vital importance of building personal relationships to minimize and resolve conflict; the Emotional Bank Account and Five Love Languages
- Wrap up