

EMBRACING CONFLICT

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Who wants to dance and play with conflict? C'mon, don't you love the discomfort of disagreement? I haven't met anyone who welcomes conflict; even those who don't mind it aren't out there seeking it. So how does it happen? How do we end up in conflict with each other? Conflict arises from differences — some big, some small. Duh. That's the easiest statement I've written lately. Conflict is more than that, though. Conflict occurs when there is disagreement over values, motivations, and perceptions.

So, if I want to quickly resolve (or eliminate) conflict, I benefit from examining myself. If you want to step up into higher leadership roles, stronger management skills, and more robust personal relationships, then consider exploring these values, motivations and perceptions in yourself.

VALUES There are plenty of times when I've landed in conflict with someone at work without really understanding what caused it. Oh sure, you've been drinking the last cup of coffee and not making a new pot for a long time now and I've been annoyed about it for an equally long time. Is that really what is causing me conflict? Or, maybe you've been my assistant for many moons and you still never say good morning or goodbye. Is that what is causing me conflict? Chances are...not so much. The surface is easy to point to — the conflict over typos or showing up late is the surface. You've likely heard an attorney complain about these surface items over and over. In fact, you may have taken performance management actions based on surface clashes. However, consider that it is actually values that are the source of the conflict, and when there is clarity about values, there is a great understanding of conflict.

So, show me some *respect* by putting a new pot of coffee on when you drink the last cup. Show me some *thoughtfulness* by checking in and checking out with me in your day. Show me *accountability* by being on time for your workday, and by owning your mistakes and correcting your process so they are not happening over and over. These bold words are values and in the values there is opportunity.

Now that I understand which of my core values has been impacted, I can open a conversation about it. And it sounds differently than before. Previously I may have said — “why don't you just make a new pot of coffee?” “Why can't you get to work on time?” Now I can say, “It feels disrespectful when I see you leave the kitchen after pouring the last cup of coffee and not starting a new pot” or “I see a lack of accountability when you show up late to work”. These approaches to resolving conflict come through values statements and also personal responsibility for those values.

And, you are resolving the conflict for yourself. This is no guarantee you are resolving conflict in your colleague, if they are in conflict at all. Having this conversation may open them to dialogue about their own conflict with you, so be prepared to listen for their values to show up and be honored, much like you are asking them to listen and honor yours.

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-KENNETH
KAYE-



MOTIVATION We all have unique styles and motivations and, particularly in our communications, we may find ourselves in conflict over them. I may be motivated to quickly move forward on an initiative, where you believe we need some time to look at all the angles and gather more information before making a decision. You may be motivated to have regular meetings to update everyone involved in the project where I may prefer to send an email update when a new decision must be made. Are either of us wrong? Nope. Are either of us stifled by the motivations of the other? You bet! I may land in conflict with you over the frequency and duration of meetings on this project and you may not even know it!

Here is my opportunity to understand how I am motivated. When I have the emotional intelligence – the internal awareness of how I move through the world – I am equipped with the skills to manage and resolve conflict. And, there is another layer here because my motivations may change in conflict. I may be motivated by that quick progression on a project and, if I am stalled, I may become motivated to accommodate you in having those regular meetings that I initially pegged as a waste of time. What? Talk about confusion! This is exactly why leadership isn't for everyone and explains how leadership is amorphous and difficult to define, let alone master.

As I grow to understand my motivations, especially where I am differently motivated in conflict, I grow in my ability to communicate through the conflict to a clearer understanding. Now consider this - what if you aren't even aware I'm in conflict? You are pleased that I'm now attending the regular meetings without pushback, so it doesn't occur to you that there is conflict inside me.

Now, I have an even bigger opportunity to approach and address the conflict through my motivation. I may approach you with something like this, "I'm not clear the purpose of these regular meetings. I've been going along with them because I was tired of fighting them. Can we create a clear agenda and outcome for each meeting so I understand the purpose of them?" Now I've declared my motivation (have an outcome) and asked for what will help me feel good again about this project while identifying that I have been operating in an accommodating capacity in my conflict.

PERCEPTION Perception is reality. It's not a new phrase, and it's getting a lot more attention in the last several years. If you've ever had the opportunity to provide an apology with something like, "I was only trying to help" or "I thought I was doing the right thing", then you have experience with perception being reality – for someone else! When I go to work each day, you are left to decide what motivates me to be there and your perception is created by your own filters around career and work.

You may be the consummate professional – each day in a suit and habitually arriving early and staying late. What perception does your staff have of you? Do they see you as professional or stuffy? What about your leadership team? Do they see you as professional or difficult to keep up with? Their perception, which is their reality, can cause them conflict with you.

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How do you see your staff? The ones who show up right on time, leave right on time, meet the dress code (even though some days you wonder...) – how do you perceive them? Your filter creates your reality and in this instance you may deem them less professional than you are. Is that the lens they would look through?

When I'm addressing productivity performance in an employee, I am approaching the conversation through my perception. To have a different view, I need a different lens, so I ask instead of answer. The conflict that exists about your productivity starts with a conversation about how you see your contributions, how you feel you are delivering your responsibilities, and how you believe you are perceived by those you work for and with. The clarity of a new lens gives me guidance in managing the conflict.

Perhaps my newest staff member is confident his performance is well above standard. This may very well have been the case in his previous role, but in my firm I know the standard is much higher than he is reaching. Once he identifies that he sees himself as soaring high above the bar, I can address the bar location for this firm. Now we have the opportunity to shift perceptions – both his and mine – to resolve the conflict without diminishing our relationship or anyone’s self esteem.

Conflict management isn’t conflict avoidance. And, it’s not conflict suppression either. If we really want to grow as leaders in both reputation and career of legal managers, this is one to embrace and practice. Understanding our values, our motivations, and our perceptions is framework to delving deeper into resolving disagreements and misunderstandings in our relationships - both work and home. Start with one thing - do a values exercise, listen for what motivates your closest comrade, ask others to point out where they see you have a perception that is different than theirs. One thing. You got this. Let me know how I can support you, together we can shift a profession.

For more information and further reading on Communication & Conflict Management, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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