

A close-up photograph of a heavily rusted metal structure, possibly a bridge or industrial framework, with a large orange-red rectangular overlay on the left side.

Chubb Construction Risk Engineering

Conflict Resolution

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Conflict Resolution

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Overview

Why is conflict resolution important? Whether you realize it or not, a substantial amount of your time and effort as a supervisor is devoted to this activity:

- 30 to 42% of a manager's time is spent reaching an agreement during a conflict¹
- More than 65% of performance problems result from strained relationships between employees - not from a lack in an employee's skills or motivations
- Studies show that:
 - 33% of managers spend 10+% of their time handling workplace conflict issues
 - 44% of managers spend 20+% of their time handling workplace conflict issues

A number of surveys show that workers in all occupations report that the most uncomfortable, stress-producing parts of their jobs are the interpersonal conflicts they experience on a daily basis between themselves and co-workers or supervisors.

According to a nationwide study, the average jury verdict in wrongful termination cases is more than \$600,000 and companies lose 64 percent of the cases.

12 Skills

Conflict Resolution is based on 12 skills which may be relevant to solving any conflict. Pick and choose the skill or skills appropriate to each issue or crisis:

- The Win-Win Approach: Identify attitude shifts to respect all parties' needs.

- Creative Response: Transform problems into creative opportunities.
- Empathy: Develop communication tools to build rapport. Use listening to clarify understanding.
- Appropriate Assertiveness. Apply strategies to attack the problem not the person.
- Co-operative Power. Eliminate "power over" to build "power with" others.
- Managing Emotions. Express fear, anger, hurt and frustration wisely to effect change.
- Willingness to Resolve. Name personal issues that cloud the picture.
- Mapping the Conflict. Define the issues needed to chart common needs and concerns.
- Development of Options. Design creative solutions together.
- Introduction to Negotiation. Plan and apply effective strategies to reach agreement.
- Introduction to Mediation. Help conflicting parties to move towards solutions.
- Broadening Perspectives. Evaluate the problem in its broader context.

Approaches

Win-Win Approach

Opponents or Partners: The Win-Win Approach is about changing the conflict from adversarial attack and defense, to cooperation. It is a powerful shift of attitude that alters the whole course of communication. One person consistently applying a joint problem-solving approach can make the difference. You will probably be that person, redirecting the course of the conflict. The first person you have to convince, therefore, is yourself.

Until we give it attention, we are usually unaware of the way we argue. We often find ourselves with a knee-jerk reaction

in difficult situations, based on long established habits combined with the passing mood of the moment. When challenged, we experience separateness from those around us - a feeling of "you or me" - a sense that if one person is right, then the other person must be wrong. The conflict becomes a power struggle. What is needed is to change the agenda in the conversation.

1. "Managers as Negotiators," by C. Watson and R. Hoffman, *Leadership Quarterly* 7 (1), 1996).

"Without Just Cause: An Employer's Practical Guide on Wrongful Discharge," Bureau of National Affairs.

The win/win approach says:
I want to win and I want you to win, too.
The challenge now is how to have this happen.

The most important win-win maneuver you can make is to change course by beginning to discuss underlying needs, rather than only looking at solutions.

Addressing each person's underlying needs means you build solutions that acknowledge and value those needs, instead of denying them. Even where solutions cannot be perfect, the person feels quite differently about the outcome.

Redirect the discussion by asking questions like:
"Why does that seem to be the best solution to you?"
"What's your real need here?"
"What's the outcome or result you want?"

The answers to these questions significantly alter the agenda on the discussion table. It places there the right materials for co-operative problem-solving.

Win-Win: I want what's fair for all of us. The Win-Win Approach is certainly ethical, but the reason for its great success is that it works.

Where both people win, both are tied to the solution. They feel committed to the plan because they participated in developing it.

Even when trust between the parties is limited, the Win-in Approach can be effective. If there's some doubt about the other person keeping their end of the bargain you can make the agreement reciprocal. "I'll do X for you, if you do Y for me." X supports their needs, Y supports yours. "I'll drive you to the party, if you clean the car." "I'll help you draw up those figures for your reports, if you sort out these invoice queries."

Creative Response

The Creative response to conflict is about turning problems into possibilities. It's about consciously choosing to see what can be done, rather than staying with how terrible it all is.

Usually we are quite unaware of how our attitudes shape the way we see the world. Two dramatically contrasting attitudes in life are "Perfection" versus "Discovery". Let's call them attitude "hats".

- The Perfection hat says: "Is this good enough or not?" (Usually not!) "Does this meet my impeccably high standards?"
- The Discovery hat says: "How fascinating! What are the possibilities here?"

The search for Perfection sets up Winners and Losers. Such yardsticks can be used to make decisions about traffic jams, your partner, the kids, the boss and - above

all - you. The process of Discovery invites Winners and Learners.

Are you judgmental and critical of your mistakes? Children who are continually protected from making mistakes can grow up dependent and overly cautious. Bosses who are overly critical of errors often get "yes" people to serve in their organizations. This doesn't mean you don't point out errors, or go through a correcting process. It means the error is regarded as a splendid opportunity for learning.

Life is not about winning and losing: it's about learning. When you fall down, you pick yourself up and note where the pot-hole was so you can walk around it the next time. A person who has gone "too far" knows just how far they can go.

Empathy

The Tasks of Active Listening. Empathy is about rapport and openness between people.

Without it, people are less likely to consider your needs and feelings. The best way to build empathy is to help the other person feel they are understood. That means being an active listener.

Information: Getting the picture

- **Ask Questions:** try to find out about needs, instructions, context, timing, costs, etc.
- **Check Back:** to be sure you have heard and understood the relevant details.
- **Summarize:** to make sure you both agree on the facts. To get a "Yes, that's what I want" so you are both clear.

Don't jump straight into solutions. Collect information. Find out how it is on the other side first.

- Ask about their needs in the situation.

- Ask about their concerns, anxieties or difficulties.
- Find out their view of the needs and concerns of other relevant people affecting the situation.
- Ask general questions that encourage them to open up e.g. How do you see it all?
- Ask specific questions that will give you significant pieces of information e.g. How much does it cost?

Affirmation: Affirming, acknowledging, exploring the problem. Recognize the other person would be helped by you taking time to hear their problem.

- **Listen** - attentively to the other person who will benefit from having their problem acknowledged by you.
- **Reflect back** - to the other person's feelings, and the content of the problem with a single statement of acknowledgement periodically.
- **Explore** - to unfold the difficulty in more depth. If time permits, assist the speaker in finding greater clarity and understanding for themselves. To get a "Yes, that's what I feel" so they explore what they are saying and they know they've been understood.

Keep in mind:

- Don't ignore or deny their feelings.
- Read the non-verbal as well as the verbal communication to assess feelings.
- Check back with them about their feelings as well as the content even though they may only be telling you about the content.
- If you're not sure how they feel, ask them: "How do you feel about that?" or "How did that affect you?"
- Reflect back to them what you hear them to be saying so they can hear themselves, and know you understand. If you get it wrong, ask an open question and try again, such as "How do you see the situation?"

- When time permits, direct the conversation back to the point if the person drifts to a less significant topic because they feel you don't understand.
- Allow silences in the conversation.
- Notice sighs and body shifts. They usually indicate insight or acceptance. Pause before asking something like, "How does it all seem to you now?"

Inflammation: Responding to a complaint or attack on you. Choose the most useful response when someone is telling you they are unhappy with you, criticizing you, complaining about you, or just simply yelling.

- **Don't Defend** yourself at this point. It will inflame them further.
- **Deal first with their emotions:** People shout because they don't think they are being heard. Make sure they know they are and that you are hearing how angry or upset they are. Label accurately the emotions/feelings as you perceive them.
- **Acknowledge their side:** This does not mean you agree with them, only that you are registering their viewpoint: "I can see, if you think that was my attitude, why you are so angry" or "I can see why the problem makes you so upset."

Draw them out further. Explore gently with them if there is more behind the emotion. Once the heat is out of the conversation, you might say how it is for you without denying how it is for them.

Ask what could be done now to make it okay again. If they heat up again, go back to Active Listening. Move towards options for change or solution. Ask what they really want, or what they want now. To get a "Yes, that's what I said" so that they know you have taken in what they said.

For them to change first I must change.

- One of the first things I might need to change is my approach.
- Don't rise to the bait, and retaliate.
- Don't start justifying and don't act defensive.
- Go into Active Listening mode and stay there till they've calmed down.
- Use phrases like "It's making you really mad", "I can see how upset you are", "You feel like you've reached your limit", "Have I got it right?", "So when I do... you get really frustrated with me."

Keep on reflecting back as accurately as you can until they come down from the high emotion. If you are doing it right, they will explain everything in some detail, but as the interchange continues the heat should be going out of the conversation.

Appropriate Assertiveness

When to use "I" Statements

The essence of Appropriate Assertiveness is being able to state your case without arousing the defenses of the other person. The secret of success lies in saying how it is for you rather than what they should or shouldn't do. Attaching the statement, "The way I see it...", helps.

When you want to state your point of view helpfully, the "I" statement formula can be useful. An "I" statement says how it is on my side, how I see it. There's no advantage to guessing how the other person will respond. Just be sure that you haven't used inflaming language likely to cause a negative response. Because you don't know whether the other person will do what you want, the cleanest "I" statements do not to force them to fix things, but state what you need.

Use an "I" statement when you need to let the other person know you are feeling

strongly about the issue. Others often underestimate how hurt or angry you are, so say exactly what's going on for you - making the situation appear neither better nor worse.

What Your "I" Statement Isn't Your "I" statement is not about being polite. It's not to do with "soft" or "nice," nor should it be rude. It's about being clear. It's the opener to improving rather than deteriorating relationships.

What you can expect is that an appropriate "I" statement made with good intent:

- Is unlikely to do any harm;
- Is a step in the right direction;
- Is sure to change the current situation in some way;
- Can open up possibilities you may not yet see.

Sometimes the situation may not look any different yet after a clean, clear "I" statement it often feels different, and that on its own can change things. The next time someone shouts at you and you don't like it, resist the temptation to withdraw rapidly. Resist the temptation to shout back to stop the onslaught, and deal with your own rising anger.

The best "I" statement is free of expectations. It is delivering a clean, clear statement of how it is from your side and how you would like it to be.

Co-Operative Power

Responding to Resistance from Others

When faced with a statement that has potential to create conflict, ask open questions to reframe resistance. Explore the difficulties and then re-direct discussion to focus on positive possibilities.

Explore - Clarify Details [Finding Options]	
It's too expensive.	Compared to what?
Too many/much/little/few.	Compared to what?
I want the best.	What would be best for you?
You can't do that around here.	What would happen if we did?
He/She would never...	How can we find ways for it to happen?
They always...	Are there any times they don't?
We've tried that already.	What was the outcome?
This is the only way to do it	Yes, that's an option. What else could we consider?
Redirect - Move to the Positive [Go back to Legitimate Needs and Concerns]	
It will never work	What would it take to make it work?
I won't...	What would make you willing?
It's a failure.	How could it work?
It's disastrous.	What would make it better?
He's/She's useless.	What is he/she doing that is acceptable?
It's impossible.	What would it take to make it possible?
I can't.	You can't see a way to do it at the moment?
I don't want to.	What would you like?
He's/she's a hopeless case!	It's hard to see how to work with him (her)?
You fool (and other insults)!	What do we need to do to sort this out?
How dare you do such a thing!	What do you dislike about it?
It should be done my way.	What makes that seem the best option?
His/her place is a pig's sty!	He/she puts a different emphasis on tidiness to you?
He/she doesn't do their fair share.	Where do you think his/her priorities may lie?

Managing Emotions

Handling Yourself

Five Questions to use when angry/hurt/frightened

1. Why do I feel so angry/hurt/frightened?
2. What do I want to change?
3. What do I need to let go of this feeling?
4. Whose problem is this, really? How much is mine? How much is theirs?
5. What is the unspoken message I infer from the situation? (e.g. they don't like me, they don't respect me.)

Five Goals in communicating emotions

1. Aim to avoid the desire to punish or blame.
2. Aim to improve the situation.

3. Aim to communicate your feelings appropriately.
4. Aim to improve the relationship and increase communication.
5. Aim to avoid repeating the same situation.

Ask yourself: If communication for any of the five goals is not appropriate, what other action can I take?

Handling Others

People's behavior occurs for a purpose:

- They are looking for ways to belong
- They were looking for ways to feel significant
- They are looking for ways to protect themselves.

When people perceive a threat for their self-esteem, a downward spiral can begin. People can be led into obstructive behaviors in the faulty belief that this will gain them a place of belonging and significance. How we respond to their difficult behaviors can determine how entrenched these become.

The secret is to break out of the spiral by supporting their real needs without supporting their destructive faulty beliefs, and alienating patterns of reaction.

Faulty Belief Behind It	The Downward Spiral	Better Alternatives
Seeking Attention "I only belong when I am being noticed."	You feel annoyed and react by coaxing. They stop briefly, and then resume behavior and demands - perhaps in a new way.	Avoid undue attention. Give attention for positive behavior especially when they are not making a bid for it.
Power Plays "I only belong when I am in control, when no-one can boss me!"	You feel provoked or threatened and react by fighting or giving in. Their aggression is intensified or they comply defiantly.	Disengage from the struggle. Help them to use power constructively by enlisting cooperation. Support their selfworth and autonomy.
Seeking Revenge "I am significant only if I make others feel hurt like I do."	You feel hurt by them, and retaliate. They seek further revenge more strongly or with another weapon.	Convince them that you respect their needs. Build trusting relationships. Support their need for justice and fairness
Appear Inadequate "I won't be hurt any more, only if I can convince others not to expect much from me."	You give up, overwhelmed. They respond passively, show no improvement, and stay "victim".	Encourage any positive attempt, no matter how small. Focus on assets. Provide bite-sized learning experiences they can succeed at.

Mapping

- Define the issue, the problem area, or conflict in neutral terms that all would agree on and that doesn't invite a "yes/no" answer, such as "Filing" not "Should X do filing?"
- Alongside Who: write down the name of each important person or group.
- Write down each person's or group's needs. What motivates him/her?
- Write down the concerns, fears or anxieties of each person or group.
- Be prepared to change the statement of the issue, as your understanding of it evolves through discussion or to draw up other maps of related issues that arise.

Designing Options

What is the range of options? Use the tools below to generate ideas.

Clarifying tools

- Chunking: Breaking the problem into smaller parts.
- Researching: More information; extent of resources; constraints.
- Goal-setting: What is the outcome we want?

Generating tools

- The obvious solution: To which all parties say "yes".
- Brainstorming: No censoring, no justifying, no debating
- Consensus: Build a solution together
- Lateral thinking: Have we been practical, creative?

Negotiating tools

- Maintain current arrangements: With trade-offs or sweeteners.
- Currencies: What is it easy for me to give and valuable for you to receive?
- Trial and error: Try one option, then another

- Establishing alternatives: What will happen if we can't agree?
- Consequence confrontation: What I will do if we don't agree.

Selection: Consider:

- Is it built on a win/win approach?
- Does it meet many needs of all parties?
- Is it feasible?
- Is it fair?
- Does it solve the problem?
- Can we settle on one option or do we need to trial several?

Negotiation Skills:

Five basic principles

5. Be hard on the problem and soft on the person
6. Focus on needs, not positions
7. Emphasize common ground
8. Be inventive about options
9. Make clear agreements

Keep in Mind:

- Consider what your needs are and what the other person's are.
- Consider outcomes that would address more of what you both want.
- Commit yourself to a win/win approach, even if tactics used by the other person seem unfair.
- Be clear that your task will be to steer the negotiation in a positive direction. To do so you may need to do some of the following:
- **Reframe.** Ask a question to reframe. Examples are: "If we succeed in resolving this problem, what differences would you notice?" Request checking of understanding, such as "Please tell me what you heard me/ them say." Request something she/he said to be re-stated more positively, or as an "I" statement.

Respond not React

- Manage your emotions.
- Let some accusations and attacks pass.
- Make it possible for the other party to back down without feeling humiliated (e.g. by identifying changed circumstances which could justify a changed position on the issue.)

- **Re-focus on the issue.** Maintain the relationship and try to resolve the issue. (One example: "What's fair for both of us?" Summarize how far you've gotten. Review common ground and agreement. Focus on being partners solving the problem, not opponents. Divide the issue into parts. Address a less difficult aspect when stuck. Invite trading. Explore best and worst alternatives to negotiating an acceptable agreement between you.

- **Identify Unfair Tactics.** Name the behavior as a tactic and address the motive for using the tactic. Change the physical circumstances. Take a break. Change locations, seating arrangements, etc. Break into smaller groups. Meet privately. Call for meeting to end now and resume later, perhaps "to give an opportunity for reflection."

Broadening Perspectives

- **Respect and value differences.** People have distinctive viewpoints that may be equally valid. Each person's viewpoint makes a contribution to the whole and requires consideration and respect in order to form a complete solution. This wider view can open our eyes to new possibilities.

- **Recognize a long term timeframe.** Consider how the problem or the relationships will look over a substantial period of time. The longer timeframe can help us be more realistic about the size of the problem we now face.
- **Assume a global perspective.** If we believe that the actions of one individual are connected with everyone else, we can have a sense how our actions can have meaning in conjunction with the actions of others. We can look at the overall system, which may be the family, the organization, or the society. Consider what needs this larger unit has to function effectively.
- **Deal with resistance to the broader perspective.** Taking up a broader view can be scary. It may make us less certain of the rightness of our own case. We may fear that we will lose all conviction to fight for what we need. We may have to give up the security we got from the simple way we previously saw the problem. We may need courage to enter the confusion of complexity. Many fears of taking the broader perspective prove ungrounded once we analyze them carefully.
- **Open to the idea of changing and risk-taking.** By taking a broader perspective you may be confronted with the enormity of the difficulties. Identify what you can do to affect a particular problem, even if it is only a small step in the right direction. One step forward changes the dynamics and new possibilities can open up.



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