OVERCOMING CONFLICT
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Acknowledgments

In the process of preparing for a seminar on conflict resolution I researched quite a few books dealing with conflict. One of the books was titled *Resolving Conflict at Work*. This was my first introduction to Kenneth Cloke.

I was impressed by many of Dr. Cloke’s thoughts on the subject of conflict. As a result, I signed up and attended his mediation training at the Center for Conflict Resolution in Santa Monica, California.

After preparing for and delivering an all-day seminar on conflict resolution I decided to write on the subject. When the manuscript was completed, I reviewed it and thought about various comments Dr. Cloke had shared in his writings and in his classes.

I then approached Dr. Cloke and asked for his permission to include them in this book. I also asked if he would be open to writing a foreword, which he most graciously granted.

Kenneth Cloke is a mediator, arbitrator, attorney, coach, consultant, and trainer. He has taught at the Southwestern University School of Law, Antioch University, Occidental College, USC, and UCLA. He has been involved in mediation work in 24 countries and is the president and cofounder of Mediators Beyond Borders. He has been an arbitrator and mediator for more than 28 years in labor management disputes and is a member of a number of arbitration panels.

I want to publically thank him for writing the foreword and letting me use his quotations, and for his service to mankind.

Bob Phillips
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Every conflict we experience, no matter how trivial, points us toward a crossroads in our lives. One path leads us into anger, fear, confrontation, and bitterness and draws us into quarrels over the past. This path reveals a deep level of caring about outcomes, yet it also encourages adversarial relationships, sterile communications, contemptuous ideas, negative emotions, and unpleasant physical sensations, blinding us and dissipating our energy and spirit. This is the path of impasse, aggression, and antagonism.

A second path leads us into empathy, acceptance, honesty, and mutual respect and draws us into negotiations over the future. This path reveals a deep level of caring about people, and encourages supportive relationships, improved communications, creative ideas, positive emotions, and pleasant physical sensations, making us more conscious and releasing our energy and spirit from destructive conflicts. This is the path of resolution, collaboration, and mutual problem solving.

In addition to these is a third path branching off from the second and largely hidden from view. This path leads us into increased awareness, compassion, integrity, and heartfelt communications and draws us into awareness of the present. It integrates the honesty and caring about outcomes encountered on the first path with the empathy and caring about people encountered on the second. It encourages open-hearted relationships, deep learning, intimate communications, profound ideas, poignant emotions, and physical renewal. It wakes us
up, makes us more mindful of ourselves and others, and nurtures our energy and spirit. This is the path of transformation and transcendence, of wisdom, spirit, and heart.

In this way, every conflict leads us to two different crossroads. In the beginning, we face a choice between fighting and problem solving. Later, we face a subtler, more arduous and far-reaching choice between merely settling our conflicts and seeking to learn from them, correcting our behaviors, and moving toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Initially, conflicts entrap us, tempting us along the first path with rewards that cater to our short-term self-interests with personal advantages, fantasies of victory, righteous anger, vengeful pleasures, and the malignant, self-aggrandizing energy of hatred. Yet by accepting these rewards we place our lives on hold, stroke our anger, and magnify our fear of defeat, shame, and loss of self. At the same time, we gratify our opponents and solidify the very thing we resist or object to, creating knots, insensitivities, and places of blindness inside us. These not only make our pains and sacrifices meaningless, they discourage us from following the more difficult, yet ultimately more rewarding path of negotiation, dialogue, and resolution, and the still more difficult and rewarding path of the heart, leading to transformation and transcendence.

Why do so many of us prefer the first path? Partly because we allow our capacity for respectful communication, openheartedness, and integrity to become conditional and dependent on the reciprocal actions of others. Partly because we reserve the full exercise of our empathy and honesty for pleasant experiences and supportive relationships. Partly because we are encouraged by media and culture to accept adversarial approaches to conflict that are physically injurious, intellectually one-sided, emotionally unbalanced, spiritually self-defeating, and socially divisive. Partly because others reward us for adversarial behaviors with attention, sympathy, special privileges, a strong sense of identity, distractions from self-hatred, excuses for failure, and reasons for preserving relationships that might otherwise fall apart.

More deeply, no one gets into conflicts over issues that don’t matter to them, even if they seem trivial to others. Every conflict therefore involves an element of caring—perhaps concerning content, process,
relationship, or how we are being perceived or treated. Mediators and conflict resolution professionals have largely ignored this element of caring, failing to explore the nature and how it might be possible turn distorted, negative communications into connections that are direct, positive, and heartfelt.

Adversarial approaches to conflict stress our bodies, close our minds, and magnify our negative emotions. They weaken our spirits, silence our hearts and undermine our capacity for honest, empathetic communications and intimacy in relationships. They confuse us with false options and dead-end approaches. Worse, they divide us—not only from each other, but from internal parts of ourselves. They cause us to lose perspective and reject whatever our opponents propose. In response, we act defensively, grow intransigent, and ignore or deny whatever we contributed to making the conflict worse. As a result, adversarial conflicts weaken our will, make us unhappy, and cause us to learn little or nothing—other than how right we were.

By following the first path we discover that the advantages it promises are ultimately false, cloying, superficial, and dissatisfying. By resisting its pull and discovering its hidden dynamics, we reveal the presence of the second path, consisting of constructive engagement with our opponents and a mutual search for resolution. This path allows us to transform conflicts from adversarial contests in which everyone loses into dialogues and collaborative negotiations in which everyone can win or at least bear their defeats equally.

By following the second path we discover the third path and recognize that our true opponent and adversary in every conflict is always ourselves, and that the real purpose of the conflict is, has always been, and can only be to reveal what stands in the way of our learning and growth, our development of character, and our capacity for empathy and honesty, integrity and intimacy, caring and compassion.

In the process, we realize that the very conflicts that get us stuck in pointless, seemingly superficial, adversarial battles are the source of outcomes so weighty and profound, so poignant and beautiful that they are impossible to describe in words, yet nearly everyone has experienced them. We are able to discover, in the thick of discord, how to
free ourselves from its all-consuming grip, and how to gain insight into what got us stuck. This insight enables us to transform the ways we interact with our opponents by experiencing criticisms and complaints as suggestions for improvement, allowing us to evolve to higher levels of conflict and resolution.

Every conflict presents countless opportunities, both to mediators and parties in conflict, to improve their dispute resolution skills, along with their capacity for wisdom, openheartedness, clarity, balance, and inner peace under trying adversarial conditions. Every conflict therefore leads simultaneously to impasse, to resolution, and to learning, growth, and transcendence.

How, you may ask in the paroxysm of conflict, can you find your way to these second and third paths? The answer is to:

- Move skillfully and steadily into the heart of conflict and do battle first and foremost with your desire to travel the seemingly easier, more seductive path of demonization, victimization, powerlessness, and self-righteousness.
- Resist the temptation to compromise or simply settle disputes, or even resolve the underlying issues that gave rise to them.
- Be so deeply committed to yourself and your opponent that you are willing to initiate open, honest, vulnerable conversations and work through your conflict, rather than around it.
- Consider your opponent not as an enemy combatant, but as a teacher, partner, citizen, and collaborator.
- Refuse to accept what is inauthentic or heartless, either in your opponent or in yourself.
- Move heroically into the heart of your conflict, where resolution, transformation, and transcendence suddenly, inexplicably, exquisitely unfold.

Transformation and transcendence are therefore present as possibilities at every moment, in every conflict. To locate these possibilities, we
need to assume that even the most senseless conflicts have the power to significantly alter and improve our lives and, at the simplest level, they do.

As mediators we can help people turn even trivial conflicts into exercises that improve their skills by:

- asking people to pay careful attention to what is done, said, and felt in conflict
- pointing them toward the origin of the conflict inside them and their opponents
- encouraging them to listen with open hearts and minds
- inviting them to jointly search for solutions that satisfy everyone’s underlying interests
- strengthening their personal and social capacity for empathy, honesty, and integrity
- making it possible for each person to forgive themselves and others without condoning the harm they or their opponents have caused
- enabling them to repair and redesign the dysfunctional systems that chronically generated the conflict
- assisting others in avoiding similar disputes in the future

Thus, even minor, insignificant conflicts can be transformed into exercises that improve everyone’s skills in listening, collaborative negotiations, and creative problem solving. Each one can deepen our capacity for integrity, patience, compassion, and forgiveness, and increase our ability to learn from our conflicts and transform them into sources of wisdom, insight, and personal and social improvement.

In short, every conflict offers each of its participants an opportunity to overcome what Sigmund Freud called “the narcissism of minor differences” and become better, more balanced, collaborative human beings.

For mediators, a detailed practical and theoretical exploration of how people learn to transform and transcend their conflicts leads to
increased effectiveness, even in conflicts that are stuck in impasse or likely to result only in settlement and enduring bitterness. Yet while impasse and settlement can easily be externalized and described objectively, transformation and transcendence are subjective experiences that require us, as mediators, to become fully present and self-aware in order to explore and dismantle our own inherited and instinctual conflict responses. Journeying into the heart of conflicts asks us not simply to become better mediators, but better human beings.

For this reason, at its deeper levels, conflict resolution is naturally and automatically a path of character and integrity, of heart and spirit, that begins here and now inside each of us. In the end, of course, there are no paths. The way forward begins wherever you are, and opens whenever you are ready to open your eyes, drop your judgments and expectations, and act authentically.

More fundamentally, we need to learn how to resolve our differences if we hope to ever end the use of warfare and environmental degradation, or assuage national, religious, and cultural hatreds. This requires us not only to focus our resources on learning and teaching the demanding arts of sciences of dispute resolution, but to recognize that we can only succeed in eliminating war and hatred in others by discovering how to eliminate them in ourselves.

Kenneth Cloke

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What Is Conflict?

Peace is the skillful management of conflict.

KENNETH BOULDING

Two old farmers bought property next to each other. One of the farmer’s hens wandered under the fence onto the other farmer’s property. After laying an egg, the hen wandered back home. The farmer looked out his window and saw his hen coming back. He went out to the fence and saw the egg. Just as he started to move forward and pick up the egg, the other farmer came to the fence, grabbed the egg, turned, and walked away.

“Excuse me, that’s my egg. My hen wandered onto your property and laid that egg.”

“I can see that,” the other farmer said. “The egg is on my property, so it’s now my egg.”

“I don’t think so,” the farmer insisted. “It’s my hen, so it’s my egg.”

“Look, where I come from we have a way to settle disputes. We take turns punching each other in the stomach twenty times. The first one to say ‘Uncle’ has to let the other person keep the egg.”

“That’s fair,” the farmer with the hen replied. “Let’s do it.”

The other farmer said, “Okay, I’ll go first.” He held the egg in one hand and proceeded to punch his neighbor twenty times in the stomach with his other hand. His neighbor groaned and grimaced with every punch, but took all twenty. He took a deep breath and said, “Okay, now it’s my turn.” He rolled up his sleeves and took a step
forward. The farmer with the egg extended his hand with the egg and said, “Uncle! You can have your stupid egg!”

That’s not exactly the best way to resolve conflict, but, unfortunately, people don’t always resolve conflict in the healthiest manner. What exactly is conflict? Noah Webster defined conflict as:

- Fight; battle; struggle
- Sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests, ideas, etc.
- Emotional disturbance resulting from a clash of impulses in a person

Other definitions include:

- Competitive or opposing action of incompatibilities
- Antagonistic state or action (as of divergent ideas, interests, or persons)
- Struggle resulting from incompatible needs, drives, wishes or demands
- Hostile encounter

**POINT TO PONDER**

Conflict alternately strokes and crushes our egos, fuels and exhausts our will, energizes us and freezes us in fear. It speaks to a deep, ancient part of our soul that thirsts for power and delights in revenge.

KENNETH CLOKE

**Conflict Comes in Many Forms**

To be alive is to face conflict. It begins when we leave our mother’s warm and comfortable womb. The doctor swats us on our bottom and we are shocked as we gasp our first breath of air. Various forms of conflict follow us through childhood, adulthood, and on to the grave. It’s
been suggested that by the time we’re in our mid-sixties, we’ve spent several thousand hours in some form of conflict. It’s all part of the human experience.

Conflict is quite normal, natural, and to be expected when people live and work together. It doesn’t necessarily mean that one person or a group of people is bad and the other person or group is good. It doesn’t mean that the motivations on one side are negative and the other side’s are positive. Conflict occurs when people…

- care about an issue.
- disagree about an issue.
- misunderstand each other about an issue.

If you lived on an island by yourself, you could do anything your heart desired. You could run around in your birthday suit in freedom and throw sand into the air. There would be no one to complain about your behavior. But if I moved onto the island with you, there would be conflict. Your freedom ends where my nose begins. I might have different needs, drives, and wishes. I might have a conflict with you on values, beliefs, and interests. As more people move onto the island, there is more potential for conflict.

Conflict may occur when there are unclear jurisdictions of responsibilities and authority. When boundaries are fuzzy, people often wander into other people’s territory. Role definitions may overlap. Job descriptions may not be clearly outlined...or followed.

Conflict may occur when two individuals or groups have the same interest in mind. They may need the same resources. The resources may be limited, so one individual or group won’t be able to reach their goals.

Conflict may occur when there are communication barriers. There may be little or no communication taking place. This may be caused by time difficulties or the restraint of distance. Communication may simply be unclear so misunderstandings arise.

Conflict may occur when people or groups of people are dependent on others for the accomplishment of their tasks. They must rely on other people’s performance. If others don’t follow through, the project may be damaged, altered, or uncompleted.
Conflict may occur when different levels of authority are involved. When chain-of-command isn’t followed, disruption may occur. Jurisdictional disputes may create many disagreements. Various levels of power may cause tension, fear, and anger.

Conflict may occur when decisions have to be made by a group of people. This type of discussion requires conflict resolution skills. Each of the parties may be at a different level and ability in making decisions and handling disagreements productively.

Conflict may occur when there must be a consensus among the parties involved. It’s often difficult to get everyone in a group to agree on a subject or solution. And if the group decides on a particular course of action, not everyone may support the action with full participation.

Conflict may occur when there is an excess of regulations. When rules and regulations are imposed, it’s a natural human tendency to rebel or resent those rules. New policies and procedures are seldom received with open arms. Change is difficult for most people. It’s been said that the only one who likes change is a newborn baby.

Conflict may occur due to a history of prior unresolved conflicts between the parties. The trust level may be extremely low. People may
not want to commit themselves to another situation where they might be hurt or embarrassed. Broken commitments take time to be overcome. A Chinese proverb says, “Trust, like fine china, once broken can be repaired...but it is never quite the same.”

Conflict may occur when selfishness is involved. An unwillingness to negotiate, compromise, or work together can turn minor conflicts into war. Individuals are only concerned about their own welfare or interests and destroy family or business unity. The welfare of individuals or groups takes a backseat to their own interests.

**POINT TO PONDER**

Chronic conflicts are systemic, and all systems, be they personal, familial, relational, organizational, social, economic, or political, defend themselves against change, even when it is essential for their survival. Thus, the greater the need for change and the deeper the potential transformation, the greater the resistance, the more intense the conflict, and the more difficult it becomes to even imagine resolving or letting it go.

KENNETH CLOKE

Conflict may occur when different social styles become frustrated with the behaviors of other social styles. Someone may not be making decisions fast enough for someone else. They may not be thinking through their decisions and realizing the conflict that their fuzzy thinking might cause. Differences in behavior inevitably cause conflict.

Conflict seems to break down into four major areas:

1. Misunderstanding and poor communication of information
2. Diversities of values, goals, expectations, interests, and a multitude of different opinions
3. Competition over time, money, resources, and survival instincts

4. Sinful or socially unacceptable attitudes, habits, words, or behaviors

FOUR TERRIBLE TRUTHS ABOUT CONFLICT

Conflict will happen.
Conflict involves risks, costs, pain, and struggle.
Conflict causes and creates dysfunctional strategies and relationships.
Conflict damage is sometimes irreversible.

As you can see, there are many causes for conflict. There are also many perceptions about conflict. Some people see conflict as negative, while others see it as positive. Your family of origin and past patterns of thinking certainly play roles in how you deal with conflict today.

The goals of this guide are to help you:

• understand what causes conflict
• discover and use conflict-resolution skills
• settle differences and issues constructively
• realize the necessity of forgiveness
• reconcile relationships
• develop effective methods for dealing with future conflicts

First, examine the lists that follow and evaluate your assumptions about conflict.
Your Assumptions About Conflict

In the following two lists, place checks in the boxes that most clearly represent your present views toward conflict.

**The Dirty Dozen**
- Anxiety
- Disagreement
- Tension
- Competition
- Threat
- Alienation
- Pain
- Anger
- Hostility
- Destruction
- Heartache
- War

**The Healthy Dozen**
- Exciting
- Strengthening
- Opportunity
- Enriching
- Helpful
- Clarifying
- Stimulating
- Courageous
- Creative
- Growth producing
- Learning experience
- Relationship building

**What Is Causing My Conflict?**
- Anger and yelling
- Child-rearing differences
- Communication barriers
- Conflict with peers
- Delay in decision making
- Difficulties with relatives
- Disagreement with boss
- Failure of others to perform
- Hurtful comments
- Lack of spiritual harmony
- Low trust level
- Marital arguments
- Misunderstanding
- Negative attitude
- Not keeping commitments
- Not listening
- Overspending
- Physical abuse
- Procrastination
- Sarcastic comments
- Selfishness
- Silence and shunning
- Unclear jurisdictions and responsibilities
- Understaffed and limited resources
- Unforgiveness
- Unfounded rumors
- Unwillingness to negotiate
- Other _________
The High Price of Conflict

- Litigation
- Strikes
- Reduced productivity
- Poor morale
- Wasted time
- Lost customers
- Destructive battles
- Stifling rules
- Broken relationships
- Jobs lost
- Reputations ruined
- Marriages broken
- Families destroyed
- Countries at war

How Were You Taught to Deal with Conflict?

Place a check by familiar phrases from your past.

- Stop it.
- Knock it off.
- Act your age.
- Life’s not fair.
- Don’t hit others.
- Just ignore them.
- Stop your fighting.
- Don’t rock the boat.
- Be a man and fight back.
- Knock each other silly.
- You’re driving me nuts.
- You’d better stop it or else.
- Pick on someone your own size.
- Stop that or you’ll get a spanking.
- Good boys/girls don’t act like that.
- Nice boys/girls don’t say things like that.
- Don’t talk to me like that, young man/young lady.
- If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.
- Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.
- Other ________

Our past conditioning may play a large role in our conflict resolution skills. If we have been conditioned to think that all conflict is bad and should be avoided, we’ll most likely do so. If we’ve been conditioned to “bite our tongues,” we’ll often just smile and not say what we really feel.

There are many myths and misconceptions about conflict. In the next section, we’ll look at some of these myths and how to recondition our thinking regarding conflict.
Conflict is a warning light pointing at something in our character, relationship, or environment that is not working, either for ourselves or for others.

KENNETH CLOKE