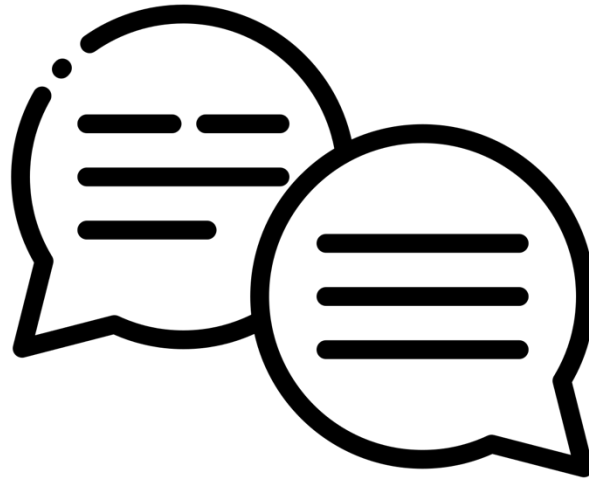


Coaching & Feedback



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“The single most important thing is to shift your internal stance from ‘I understand’ to ‘Help me understand.’ Everything else follows from that.” – Douglas Stone, author of *Difficult Conversations*

A Snapshot of Conflict in the Workplace

“Employees in United States companies spend approximately 2.8 hours each week involved in conflict. This amounts to around \$359 billion in hours paid that are filled with – and focused on – conflict instead of on positive productivity. The figure is the equivalent of 385 million days on the job going toward the goal of arguing, as opposed to being put toward collaboration. A full day of productivity each month. This is 2-1/2 weeks of productivity each year” ([CPP Inc., 2008](#)).

“Managers spend an average of over 4 hours per week dealing with workplace conflict. Poor communication is the primary cause of conflict, and extended conflict negatively impacts job satisfaction and a sense of inclusion. Compared to a study in 2008, workplace conflict has become more common, with 36% of individuals reporting frequent conflict experiences” ([CPP Inc., 2022](#)).

“Our analysis estimates the overall total annual cost of conflict to employers (including management and resolution) at £28.5 billion. This represents an average of £1,028 for every employee in the UK each year, and just under £3,000 (£2,939) annually for each individual involved in conflict. It is important to treat this figure with some caution as it is based on a number of assumptions” ([Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2021](#)).

First Things First

- This is a team sport
- Timing matters
- Location matters
- Your audience matters/What’s their currency?

The Role of Emotions

- What are the downsides of difficult conversations? Why do we avoid, gossip, and work around?
- The Rider & The Elephant:



Feedback & Coaching

Because stress and conflict are often present in teams, leaders skilled at having difficult conversations have a distinct advantage. This is a simple process for navigating difficult conversations – and it provides a framework for combining **feedback** (backward-looking, behavioral, and directive) and **coaching** (forward-looking, ongoing, supportive, and developmental). **Feedback** tells you what happened and how it landed. **Coaching** helps you decide what to do next and how to grow.

It's important to remember that *how* you approach the conversation can make all the difference. Based on Thomas Kilmann, there are five basic approaches to navigating some interpersonal and issue stressors inherent in leadership. Note: each of these has a time and a place. The key is that you *intentionally choose* the appropriate approach for the situation.

- **Compromising** – This approach requires that each party gives something up. While this approach may be a quick fix to some of the challenges facing opposing sides, each party likely feels slightly unsatisfied with the outcomes.
- **Avoiding** – An individual using this approach chooses not to confront the negative behavior of another or the group.
- **Forcing** – Individuals who engage in this conflict style are willing to advocate for their perspective strongly.
- **Accommodating** – An individual using this style will often give in to the wants/needs of another party.
- **Collaborating** – Often perceived as the best approach to navigating conflict, the opportunity here is to ask: “how can we both get our needs met in this situation?”

As a reminder, the goal is to provide a general framework so that you have a robust [mental representation](#) of how the process can work. Rarely is it clean and smooth. Sometimes, all steps may not make sense, may not be needed, or may come in a different order. For this session, please practice the model as defined.

Important: The first three steps can be used to highlight the good someone has done! Feedback does not have to be negative. Naming the good can enhance behavior.

Feedback

- Feedback is information given to someone about their past behavior or performance. It highlights what worked, what did not, and what could be improved. The purpose is to raise awareness and reinforce or redirect behavior.

Communicate the behavior (Step 1)—A goal of this step is to communicate the individual's behavior in a way that does not make the other feel defensive or disconfirmed. This means that you will have to regulate your emotions (ride the elephant), which can be challenging, especially when you are feeling frustrated, angry, sad, or disappointed with the other person. You must name the specific, measurable, observable behavior/outcome (SMOB) (e.g., negative attitude, late to work, not living up to commitments, missed deadline).

Own your statement (Step 2)—Be sure to communicate in a way that does not involve anyone but you and the other individual. The discussion can get messy if you bring others who are not present into the conversation (e.g., friends or co-workers). *If possible*, keep the dialogue focused on the two of you and your specific observations of the other person's behavior. Avoid accusatory statements that could inflame the situation during this step. Stick with “I” statements (e.g., “I’ve observed,” “I feel that…”).

Name the impact (Step 3)—The other person should be led to understand how their behavior has impacted you (e.g., lost time, hurt feelings, mistrust, a missed opportunity, increased stress) and the negative consequences. Again, if possible, you will want to keep this between you. Involving others not in the room can confuse, muddy, and divert the conversation. Note: the first three steps do not need to take long. A common pitfall is that the person confronting says too much in these first three steps.

Fully listen (Step 4)—After you move past the first three steps, ask for input or agreement and fully listen to the other person. This is where your improvisational skills come into play. The other person may admit fault, lash out, and deny all charges. It's vital that you pause and actively listen so you can work to understand their mindset. While you do not have to agree, it's critical that you do not interrupt and provide the other person the space to respond. In this step, it is also essential to maintain eye contact and control the pace (the conversation can speed up when emotions are involved).

Reflect and respond (Step 5)—Based on how the other person responds (realistically, unrealistically), it is essential to remember to regulate your emotion and move forward to the next step (if there is agreement) or go back to the first step if the other person disagrees with your perspective. *If the other person responds in a*

way you were not expecting, it is realistic to pause and ask for some time to gather your thoughts. Likewise, at some point, you may need to “agree to disagree” and focus on moving forward.

Coaching

- Coaching is a developmental conversation focused on helping someone grow, improve, and reach future goals. It uses questions, guidance, and support to build skills, expand thinking, and increase ownership.

Options moving forward (Step 6)—Assuming normal circumstances, this step involves a simple question – “How can we ensure that we are not in this situation moving forward?” Even if you and the other person cannot agree on the facts, the two of you must understand and decide on some options for a better future. Thus, this step concerns the two of you searching for a win/win, if possible. Note: this step may take some time. However, it's critical that you brainstorm 4-5 options to move forward.

Negotiate solution/Gain agreement (Step 7)—Through the dialogue, agree upon 2-3 options and, if possible, ensure that they are win-win toward a mutually agreed-upon outcome. If appropriate, frame using specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals (SMART). The specifics will help you gauge progress and set the stage for the follow-up conversations. Once you think you have clarity, you can do a talk-back (the listener repeats back what they heard to the speaker to confirm mutual understanding). You will also want to follow up with an email to ensure both parties understand the path forward.

Thank you (Step 8)—Thank the other individual for their time and communicate your desire for a better future. After all, this conversation could start a better future for both parties. You have expressed to the other individual that you care about their well-being.

Five Reflection Questions

1. In your opinion, which step of the process is the most important? Why?
2. Why is Win-Win so critical to the negotiating *solution* step?
3. When is it appropriate NOT to use some of the steps mentioned above?
4. After thoroughly listening, do you think it's appropriate to ask for some time to reflect on their answer? Why could this be your best option?
5. The first three steps of CONFRONT could be just a couple of sentences. How can this help you?

References That Have Helped Inform CONFLICT

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Case Studies

Directions:

- Take five minutes and quickly review each case
- Each of you chooses one that resonates (you should each choose a different case)
- Over the three rounds, each one of you plays the role of initiator/responder/observer
 - Initiator of the conversation – follow the model and engage
 - Responder – play one (or a few) of the characters
 - Observer – Take notes and share observations for the initiator (how did they do on the process?)
- Take 10 minutes for each case.
 - 5 minutes to role play and 5 minutes of debrief
- Please call me over with questions!

Samples:

Manager Consistently Missing Client Deadlines

Background: A senior manager has repeatedly missed important filing deadlines for several key clients despite having sufficient staff and resources.

Challenge: These lapses threaten client relationships and the firm's reputation for reliability. The Partner must address the issue directly while maintaining the manager's confidence and fostering a culture of respect.

Ultimate Goal: Have an honest conversation to clarify expectations, find root causes, and develop a clear plan to avoid future issues. Reinforce the company's commitment to quality and timeliness while supporting the manager's success.

High-Performing Senior Associate Resisting Business Development

Background: A senior associate produces excellent technical work but consistently avoids engaging in business development activities, such as networking events, prospect meetings, and cross-selling opportunities.

Challenge: Without early client engagement, the firm's pipeline and succession planning are at risk. The Partner must confront this resistance while avoiding alienating a key technical contributor.

Ultimate Goal: Help the associate see business development as a key part of career growth. Work together to find small, manageable steps to build confidence and skills in client-facing activities.

Equity Partner Not Pulling Their Weight in Business Development

Background: An equity partner, once a top rainmaker, has allowed their client portfolio to plateau while relying heavily on others to generate new business.

Challenge: This causes tension within the partnership and risks revenue growth. Tackling it requires honest peer-to-peer communication and a focus on shared accountability, which can be uncomfortable in a partnership environment.

Ultimate Goal: Have an open conversation that promotes business development as a shared responsibility. Set clear expectations and discuss ways to re-energize the partner's market presence, ensuring the firm's long-term growth and a fair effort distribution among partners.