Beyond Blame

Conflicts at Work

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Conflicts at Work

If your primary conflicted relationship is not with someone you love, the next most likely possibility is that it involves someone at work. Perhaps even more than any other setting, the workplace is a territory that is partitioned according to one's position, degree of authority, connections, and power. Conflict is an intrinsic part of individual struggles to determine one's own agenda, to advance oneself above and beyond others, and to maintain control.

Customizing Strategies to Settings and Situations

The program for countering conflict described in this book involves the systematic process of identifying underlying issues, understanding their origins, and taking responsibility for changing both the style of interaction and your reactions to what transpires. Implicit in this method is the realization that you are likely to experience considerable discomfort during the journey toward resolution and that you will have to take some risks in order to experiment with alternative strategies.

However useful this procedure might be, it is still a "generic" program that must be customized to fit your particular needs. What might work for one person will not be appropriate for another. What will prove helpful in one setting or situation may very well backfire in another. What will turn out to be effective with loved ones may not be at all successful with those at work. It will be up to you, therefore, to adapt what has been described in a way that increases the likelihood that your efforts will be rewarded.

For example, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the workplace is the prevalence of a rigid hierarchy of power. Conflicts frequently arise because one or more persons feel that their positions or territory are being threatened. You will most often find yourself in disagreement with co-workers because either they are attempting to exercise control over you or they perceive that you are trying to do so with them. Given this particular climate in which you must deal with such conditions of power and control in conflict situations, you will wish to make some adjustments in the ways you approach skirmishes at work.

1. Identifying What Sets You Off

You will recall that this first stage in the process is where you begin by determining what it is that you are feeling, thinking, and doing that you find so upsetting. In the work setting, these will most often center around feelings that

(a) you are not being appreciated, (b) you are being undermined, (c) someone is attempting to control you, or (d) you are in a win-lose situation in which there is a good possibility that you will not end up victorious. Essentially, all of these areas center around threats to your security and sense of competence in what you do for a living.

Identifying what is at stake, and where and how you are allowing yourself to be set off by the conflict, gives you the edge you will need to regain control of yourself even if you have no control over the other person. Dana, for example, works as an elementary school teacher. One of the more senior members of the staff has taken it upon herself to enforce what she believes are professional standards that everyone should live up to. Dana feels tremendous resentment toward this woman, whom she neither likes nor respects, for attempting to control her.

Recognizing what most consistently sets her off (attempts to control her professional independence, threats to her freedom of movement, attacks on her personal integrity), Dana is in a much better position to react to her colleague in a thoughtful, calm manner than she might be otherwise. Although she has yet to figure out how to deal with this person (it is still early in the process), she has already found some ways to reduce the intensity of her own reactions.

2. Exploring the Origins and Causes

Most of us spend more of our waking moments at work than we do in any other setting. Given this prolonged exposure to people during the very stressful circumstances that usually accompany work, it is highly likely that our unresolved issues are going to play themselves out in this setting in particular. Any needs for affirmation and reassurance? Fears of failure? Sense of futility? Any unresolved issues with authority figures? Any ongoing sibling rivalries? These and a dozen other themes in your life come alive every day during your interactions with others at work.

Dana searches for the source of her extreme reactions to her colleague's attempts to control her. Big deal that she thinks she knows what is best for her and everyone else. Why can't she just ignore the lady and go on about her work?

For one thing, Dana realizes that the hierarchy of power in her school is such that she does not feel safe challenging this woman. Dana does not have the power base she would need in order to assert herself. She feels like an orphan, stranded on her own to fend for herself. It is no coincidence, of course, that Dana was adopted as an infant. However irrational her fears growing up, she could not help but wonder what would have happened if she had been a "bad girl." Would her parents have taken her back to wherever they found her?

Dana became a teacher primarily because she wanted the freedom of not being part of an oppressive system. Prior to this career she had worked in an

insurance agency and had felt smothered by how accountable she was to her bosses and co- workers. Finally she has her own classroom, and yet she still feels helplessly controlled by others. Of course, like so many conflicts, this circumstance is more a matter of her perception than the actual state of affairs. In reality, the other teacher has no more power over Dana than does anyone else in the school. The key to this problem is that Dana *feels* controlled, not that she *is being* controlled.

3. Allowing Yourself the Discomfort

Although feeling uncomfortable with your self-defeating behavior does lead to change, you will probably not wish to show these feelings of vulnerability to others. It is often not safe to telegraph any feelings other than complete confidence and competence at work; otherwise, you may be judged in ways that may jeopardize future opportunities.

There is, naturally, the exception with confidantes whom you trust completely. Dana did feel that there was one person at school with whom she could talk openly. When she unloaded her frustrations to this friend, she did feel better. She remembered, however, that the goal of her efforts was not to *feel* better but to *act* better. Over the weekends, in particular, when she could not confide in her friend, she noticed her anger and frustration growing. While at first these resentments and blame were directed toward her controlling

colleague, eventually they began to turn inward: she started to feel depressed and helpless over the way she was allowing herself to be intimidated.

4. Taking Responsibility Without Blaming

In response to all the manipulation, control, and game playing that go on at work, there is a greater than usual tendency to blame others for acting in ways that you believe are unfair, insensitive, or inappropriate. Because what you do is so interconnected to the assigned roles of co-workers, there is usually a lot of blame to spread around, if that is your intention.

It thus takes even greater self-control at work to resist the temptation to blame others for your problems. There is always somebody around who you believe is not doing his job the way you think he should. Your supervisor could always show more appreciation and consideration for your efforts. The administration could always be more responsive to your needs. The economic climate could always be better.

Dana tried all these excuses and more. Why wasn't her principal showing her more support? Why weren't others in the school standing up to this control freak? Why did she get stuck with a classroom in such close proximity to this lady? It was all so unfair.

Dana accepted that which was not within her power to change. She could

not alter the past, nor could she help the fact that she had been an orphan and had struggled most of her life with feeling alone. Dana could not make this woman act any differently just because she did not like her the way she was. She also could not avoid run-ins with this teacher for the time being; there was no way she could pretend that the problem would go away.

There were, however, several things that Dana could control. She did not have to let this woman get under her skin. It was *her choice* to react so dramatically to behavior that, actually, was only a bit annoying. In fact, she noticed this woman did not treat her any differently from anyone else. She observed several other colleagues ignoring this woman completely. Others simply shrugged off her comments as a mild inconvenience. Clearly it was possible for her, too, to change the ways she reacted to this woman such that major conflicts would be reduced to minor disagreements.

5. Committing Yourself to Act Differently

This is the one stage that is considerably easier to implement at work than at home. Because co-workers are less involved in your life, more compartmentalized, less emotionally connected, it is easier to make changes in the patterns of interaction. Heck, all day long, memos are sent out announcing changes in policy or in the ways business will be conducted. Change is such an integral component of work settings that it is considered business as usual for

an employee to announce intentions to do things differently.

Dana was surprised at how easy it was to tell first her friend, and then later others, of her intention to no longer be so concerned with what others had to say about her style of classroom management (with the exception of her principal). She declared at lunch one day, in front of a fairly large group, that she had been paying too much attention to what others thought instead of trusting herself more to develop her own style. She spoke euphemistically about her resolve to ignore her colleague's attempts to control her.

It was not as if this mere commitment to act differently solved the matter of the conflict with her co-worker. If anything, the woman took this announcement as a challenge to redouble her efforts. This public statement, however, acted as an impetus for Dana to follow through on her plan to no longer allow her unresolved issues to control her present behavior. She finally realized that it was not this woman who was her nemesis: it was her own past.

6. Experimenting with Alternative Strategies

This stage takes a bit of adjustment as well. There are things you might try in attempting to resolve conflicts with family members that you would never try with co-workers. Customizing the change program to work settings means using methods that are consistent with what is expected in that environment.

For instance, direct confrontation was unusual among this group of elementary school teachers; inviting someone to lunch to discuss a matter in indirect terms was more the norm. Many of the "power tactics" to be discussed in the next section may be useful in corporate or other settings, but they would have minimal use in this particular school.

Going through her list of options, Dana decided to try "applying a little sugar" in her interactions with her colleague. Instead of making snappy, cynical retorts, or arguing with the woman directly, she tried an opposite tack: every time an attempt was made to control her, Dana thanked the woman for her concern. Whenever the woman tried to meddle in her affairs, Dana calmly backed down from challenging her directly.

I might add that this strategy did not work any better than anything else Dana had tried previously. As I mentioned earlier, the particular method employed is less important than the determination to keep experimenting until something works. What changed in this example was the way in which Dana processed her experience of conflict internally. She no longer blamed this woman for making her life miserable. Just as important, she did not blame herself for being so acquiescent. Instead, she concentrated on doing the best job she could in her classroom, building a support system of like-minded colleagues, and insulating herself as much as possible from the power struggles that had previously zapped her energy.

Power Tactics

It is impossible to talk about conflict at work without addressing issues of power. Whether dealing with social revolutions, racial or ethnic strife, ideological debates, geopolitical disputes, or interpersonal conflicts, power is at the core of attempts to achieve objectives in the face of competing interests. Each party seeks control of the situation, often at the expense of the other's position. Disputes between states, as well as individual disputes among friends, family, or co-workers, typically involve struggles over possession of limited resources (oil, money, territory, power). In Dana's situation mentioned earlier, her colleague was using intimidation as a way to control that which she coveted most—power within the school hierarchy.

As with Dana's situation, the intent on the part of some people in work situations is to intimidate you into submission. This can be accomplished through explosive anger or, more often, through subtle or indirect means.

> Withdrawal. *If you don't do what I want, or follow where I wish to lead you, I will detach myself from you. I won't respond to you in any of the ways that matter most. Did you say something? I don't care. I have nothing to say. You no longer exist as far as I am concerned. Once you comply with what I want, then I will become responsive again.*

> Criticizing. *I will blame you for everything that is going wrong. It is all your fault. If only you were more intelligent/perceptive/sensitive/competent/experienced/strong (choose one), then we wouldn't be in this situation. I will ridicule you, make jokes at your expense, keep you on the defensive so you remain helpless and*

under my control. Because I am so much better at being critical than you are, you had better not put up too much of a fight, or then I will really turn up the heat.

Overpowering. *I will overwhelm you with my anger to the point where I appear dangerous and out of control. Be care' fid not to push my buttons since I can't be held accountable for what I might do. If you attempt to challenge me, then I will really become frightening. I could do anything. You should just wait until my rage has run its course. We will both feel better that way.*

Undermining. *I will discourage you through indirect methods of sabotage. I will abuse you behind your back, never to your face. I will bad-mouth you to others, all the while pretending to be helpful. I will forget things I don't wish to remember. I will put you down in subtle ways so you cannot be sure what I really meant. If you confront me directly, I will act hurt, as if you are the one abusing me.*

Discounting. *I will ignore you in such a way that you feel like dirt, not even worthy of my attention. I will demean whatever you say, negate everything you do. By my actions, it will be clear to you that I don't think you matter. If you attempt to address this issue with me, I will respond haughtily as if I have no idea what you are talking about. I will twist things you say and interpret things you do in the worst possible light. I will frustrate you to the point where you will do or say something you regret. Then you will look really stupid.*

There are a number of other power tactics that co-workers or supervisors use in conflict situations to influence their result. Once you are able to recognize these common patterns of manipulation, you will be much more able to take a step back from the victim/blaming position and instead offer a counterresponse that defuses the power tactics employed. For each of several manipulative strategies that are used to exert power I have included examples of how you

might parry them.

Postponement

Move: "I would prefer to talk about this later."

Countermove: "I hear that is what *you* would prefer. I would rather we deal with this right now."

Refusal to Acknowledge Conflict

Move: "I don't think we have a disagreement at all"

Countermove: "I am glad you feel fine about this. Since I still have some lingering doubts, I would like you to indulge me and continue the discussion."

Pre-cuing

Move: "I can't believe you even brought it up."

Countermove: "I can see this is uncomfortable for you. Ignoring the problem, however, will not make it go away."

Gunnysacking

Move: "It is not just this one incident. You also…"

Countermove: "Wait a minute. Let's take these issues one at a time. Otherwise we are going to end up bringing up stuff that we can't deal with."

Fogging

Move: "You have made a legitimate point with that first thing. Let's deal with that."

Countermove: "I agree it might be better to deal with the issues one at a time. However, several of them are related, and the first point may be less important than the others."

Labeling

Move: "Why must you be so stubborn?"

Countermove: "I don't think that calling each other names furthers our discussions. Perhaps we could stay with the issues."

Issue Expansion

Move: "Now that you brought that up, I would also like to mention…"

Countermove: "Let's finish the concern that I brought up first, then we can address some of yours."

Tackling

Move: "If you weren't so negligent, you would have seen another way."

Countermove: "Assigning blame is not the issue here. It does not matter who is at fault, but rather what we can do to rectify the mistake."

Reneging

Move: "I never said that. You must have misunderstood me."

Countermove: "Perhaps there was a miscommunication on both our parts. We need to be very clear, then, about what we are agreeing to do."

Backstabbing

Move: "You are going to take what *he* said seriously?"

Countermove: "I am just bringing to your attention what I have heard. To do otherwise would be dishonest of me."

Undermining

Move: "Sorry. I didn't mean to be late. It's just that something *important* came up."

Countermove: "You seem to be implying that what we are doing is not important. I would appreciate it if you could make an effort to be on time in the future."

Coalition Formation

Move: "There are many others who agree with me on this."

Countermove: "It would be better if you spoke only for yourself and let others speak for themselves as well."

Threats

Move: "If you don't let this go, I will be forced to do something neither of us will like."

Countermove: "It would indeed be unfortunate if things got out of control. I do not intend, however, to be guided by threats. It might be a lot more constructive if we could resolve this between us."

Each of these power tactics is used by people to control your behavior. You may have noticed some consistency in the ways that each manipulative ploy was countered by a more direct response, one that:

1. Labeled what was taking place

2. Let the other person know that you understood what was going on

3. Indicated your refusal to be baited on a personal level

4. Expressed your strong preference to move beyond blame

5. Communicated your preference to deal with issues

6. Acknowledged that each of you had the power to make things work or not

7. Clearly articulated your resolve not to back down

8. Stated your intent to address any future forms of manipulation with similar countermoves

People at work who are giving you trouble do not go away just because you ignore them. On the contrary, they may interpret your lack of response as acquiescence or surrender. Until you deal with them in a decisive way, they will continue to do whatever they are permitted to get away with.

The Need for Control

Manipulation is really just a means by which to maintain control. Whether through coercion or threat ("That's fine if you don't want to participate—I'll make sure the others know about your feelings.") or through guile, deception,

charm, or guilt ("No, I don't mind if you don't come. I'll just go alone."), manipulation is used to get you to do things that you ordinarily would not do.

Not only does manipulation help unscrupulous individuals reach their goals, but it can help them control others. They feel powerful when they can restrict you from getting what you want or what you deserve. They love to blame you for standing in their way.

Bill has been established in his job for decades. He gets by on longevity rather than on competence. He perceives people all around him, most of whom are younger and ambitious, as nipping at his heels. He is not far wrong.

Bill uses all the guile and manipulative ploys at his disposal (and his resources in this area are formidable) to undermine or sabotage colleagues whom he perceives might be threats. Since from his perspective everyone is a potential competitor for power, Bill views life as an endless series of battles for control.

For example, Bill "befriended" one unsuspecting new employee with the intention of making certain this new threat was irreparably damaged. When his probationary contract was not extended, the young man had no idea that he had been blindsided by Bill. Another colleague, who was recently promoted, is undermined constantly by Bill, who spreads rumors and sets traps—and makes sure none of them can be traced back to him.

This is not organizational politics as usual: these are the actions of a threatened human being who thrives on power, whose principal motive in life is to control others and thereby give himself an illusion of internal control. He must be potent, after all. Look how he is feared, respected, and given a wide berth by others who are too gutless to take him on.

Even in a book such as this that emphasizes internal control and personal responsibility, it is important to recognize that there are limits to what is within your power to change. If you have a choice, Bill and others like him are not the kind of people you want to spend much time around. The problem is that sometimes you do not realize what you have gotten into until it is too late. You realize that the person you married, who lives in your home, who is in your family, who is your boss or partner or friend, is a person without a conscience, or is so desperate that he or she will do anything to get his or her way.

While these manipulative people may seem like agents of the devil sent to wreak havoc in your life, they are only trying to deal with their own pain. They are so afraid of intimacy, so mistrustful of others' intentions, perhaps so damaged inside that they seek to make others' lives as miserable as their own.

Keeping Your Goals in Mind

When you find yourself locked into a futile struggle in which your goals—and those of your adversary—are blocked, one of the options available to you is

to redefine what it is that you want. Sometimes your original intentions become lost in the irrational desire to win an argument. You become so invested in the struggle that you are unable to back off enough to realize that the fight has become more important than the result.

In dissolving their business partnership, Dinah and Suzanne behaved like two people in the midst of an ugly divorce: they were interested not only in dividing up community property but also in inflicting some damage on one another. Each felt angry that the other one had not acted in their mutual interest. The two partners felt that perceived injustices must be righted before they could go their separate ways.

Dinah and Suzanne argued for days about who would keep the stationery, then for weeks about who would retain what furniture. Outside observers, such as their spouses and secretary, looked on with horrified bemusement. They had been such good friends, and now they were fighting over trivial matters as if their lives were at stake. It was because they had been dear, trusting friends as well as partners that they were having so much trouble letting go. At the same time they were disassembling their business, a not insurmountable challenge, they were also trying to work through their ambivalent feelings, a process that would take years to complete.

When children separate from their parents, when spouses divorce, when

friends or partners go their separate ways, it is useful to feel a certain amount of animosity—it helps us deal with the sense of loss we experience. In the case of Dinah and Suzanne, they were attempting to deal with practical concerns at the same time they were trying to work through their unresolved feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, and resentment. They lost sight of what they were negotiating for in the first place, so embroiled were they in their heated arguments.

Since it was not reasonable to expect that they could deal with their unfinished emotional business at the same time they were dissolving their business arrangement, they made a pact (at the urging of their secretary) to complete the latter before they got into the former.

Express Feeling and Content

Most internal reactions are composed of two parts, each of which demands equal attention. The *content* of communication refers to the actual issues you are talking about—who will do what, what the problem is, what it is that you want that you are not getting. Without addressing underlying feelings, however, communication is likely to end with unfinished business that will permeate the next exchange.

This was exactly the state of affairs between Heidi and Samantha, two associates who work together in the same office. For months, Heidi had been

simmering on low boil, her feelings about the way she had been treated by Samantha affecting not only her concentration at work but also her sleep. "It isn't really such a big deal," Heidi told herself. "I am a professional. I don't let this stuff bother me."

Spouting the credo of a man's world, in which feelings are presumed to be irrelevant to conducting the business at hand, Heidi tried very hard to be the consummate professional, dealing with the content of issues while stuffing the accompanying feelings.

Although I had the opportunity to speak only with Heidi about this situation, I am fairly certain that Samantha must have felt much the same way—locked into conflict with a perceived adversary in which both parties refused to give themselves, or each other, permission to express their feelings of hurt and resentment along with a discussion of the content.

It is ironic that even as adults we often have to go to other people, sometimes therapists, in order to get permission to do things we want to do, things we know we must do. In Heidi's case, my role was easy.

"Just because the atmosphere in your office is dominated by traditional unhealthy norms of pretending you are a cold-blooded reptile without emotion does not mean you will lose all credibility and respect if you acknowledge that you do have feelings. And if that were the case, would you want to stay in a

place where you cannot be yourself, where you must disown the most important parts of who you are?

"What is particularly interesting about your ongoing dispute with Samantha is that you sense she is feeling the same pressure you are—to excel in a man's world by imitating men. If you are asking me to give you permission to be more like the way you are outside the office—that is, with the full range of your expressiveness as a thinking and feeling person—I cannot do that. But you can."

Ultimately, Heidi did find a place for herself that allowed her to be more genuinely expressive. Unfortunately, when she finally began telling Samantha how she felt as well as what she thought, the feelings she had been holding inside for so long tumbled out in a seemingly endless stream. She expressed not only her hurt and pain but also the realization that she felt stifled—the job was killing her. Samantha felt so threatened by this honest disclosure that she retreated even further into her professional shell. When we processed the encounter afterwards, Heidi readily confessed that the reason she had been so reluctant to get into her feelings was that she knew they would lead to action she was not yet ready to initiate—seeking employment elsewhere.

Heidi's dilemma illustrates the importance of defining just how motivated you are to follow your heart as well as your head when you do confront

obstacles that are blocking what you want. Expressing yourself fully does not come without certain risks. This task is also not one that you were born knowing how to do. Expressing yourself clearly, fully, and powerfully depends on developing some very specific skills. As we will discuss in Chapter Ten, even under those conditions, there are still a number of conflicts you will be able to do little about.

About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

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