

Section 1: ANATOMY OF CONFLICT

1.1 - Playing the name, blame, and claim game

Conflict sprout up 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Why is that? Well, we're human, and in relationship to one another, we have conflicting wants, needs, goals, values. We have imbalances in our access to resources and we have different opinions about the rules that should govern everyone's conduct. So, we argue. Let's take a look at the anatomy of conflict and how we get locked in what I call the name, blame, claim cycle.

Conflict erupts when three circumstances come together at the same time:

- The belief that you're being deprived of something you need or want.
- The belief that someone else is causing the deprivation.
- The belief that that deprivation violates a value, a social norm or rule.

So, let's say Mark forgets to include his manager Lily in an email loop about a new project he wants. Lily get upset about being bypassed and accuses Mark of violating the social rule of running things past the boss. Lily names Mark as the source of her irritation and then she blames him for the wrongdoing and claims he's violated a workplace norm. So, now let's make this personal so you can have a working example.

I want you to backpedal to your most recent conflict with a friend or a coworker, or a conflict that so far is only taking place in your head. Now see if you can deconstruct it.

- What are you being deprived of? This is the name part of the cycle.
- Who's doing the depriving? This is the blame part of the cycle.
- What value, social norm or rule are they breaking? This is the claim part of the cycle.

You might want to use the notebook tool provided here to answer those questions. You'll have a window into how you got into trouble in the first place and you'll have a working example to use throughout the course.

1.2 – Understanding Conflict Styles

The way we respond to conflict has its roots in our upbringing and our culture. Some of us can argue ourselves into exhaustion, and some of us would rather take cover and wait out the storm. So, if we're going to build conflict resolution capacity, it makes sense to find out our default conflict response style so we can practice making better choices in the future. Let's take a look at the Thomas-Killman Conflict Model, which illustrates how people typically behave when faced with an uncomfortable situation.

As we go through each style, be on the lookout for your default. So, let's say you think you should get a promotion. You've been taking on more projects and responsibilities and contributing value way beyond your job description and original expectations. But just thinking about the conversation is producing a sort of internal conflict, a fear of rejection or being passed over.

In the **Avoid** quadrant of the model, simply put, you don't ask. You let the opportunity pass because the fear of rejection is so high you can't bring yourself to ask. So, you lose. And in truth, your boss or your team loses out, too, because your value is going unrecognized.

In the **Accommodate** quadrant of the model, you find the will to ask, but when you're met with questions or pushback, you fold. You say, "That's okay, I just thought I'd ask!" In this scenario, you lose, and they win.

In the **Compete quadrant** of the model, you definitely ask. And when your boss starts to waffle or says no, you double down. You defend your request, and you might just add a little threat to get your boss to see things your way.

In the **Collaborate quadrant**, you make your request, present your case, and you focus on brainstorming to find a path forward that works for both of you. This is the classic win-win.

Now, it looks like the goal of the model is to **Compromise**. You ask for what you want, and over the course of the conversation, you give up a point or two and your boss gives up a point or two. So, you win and lose, and your boss wins and losses.

Now, in my opinion, the model should be altered so that **COLLABORATE** is in the center of any conversation where the goal is to find agreement.



You enter the conversation with the mindset that you're going to ask to be valued, and you're going to explore possibilities and options until you're both happy with the outcome. You may, in fact, wiggle on timing or title, or make concessions.

But the overall outcome and feeling of the conversation is that you've done your best and been well-met. You've preserved your relationship and probably deepened it. So be honest with yourself and pinpoint your default conflict style.

With your new awareness, you now have the opportunity to choose Collaboration as a more effective way to solve everyday problems.

1.3 - Recognizing Contentious Tactics

When we feel we haven't been treated fairly, or we think our needs are being ignored, we react. We say, ouch. And if we're in a reactive frame of mind, we often resort to contentious tactics, trying to resolve conflict through manipulation, or holding our ground to prove we're right, and our conflict partner is wrong.

First on that list is **ingratiation**. Getting what we want through sweet talk, or flattery, or because we're just so charming. It might sound like I know I said I'd put the data into the spreadsheet by today, but you're so much more skilled at it than I am. That flattery might work once or twice, but over time it will diminish your working relationships.

Next is **promises**, this is getting what you want now by agreeing to do something later. You might promise to take someone to lunch in return for covering for your shift. This is actually a really useful tactic if it's employed for mutual gain. But like ingratiation, overusing it can cobble away at goodwill, and lead to future conflict.

Persuasive argumentation is the use of logic and reason to attempt to change someone's behavior or position. It might sound like the research I've compiled shows that our customers rarely use feature X, so I'm recommending we disable it permanently. This is the most common contentious tactic and it's pretty useful. But it's not always successful, because it sidesteps decision-making participation and brainstorming. And when we try to convince someone to do something they haven't fully considered; it can backfire because true buy-in was never reached.

Next is **shaming**. This tactic is expressing shock or disapproval about someone's choices or behavior, usually on moral grounds. For example, if your boss says, I'm so disappointed in the quality of your work, I'm questioning why I ever hired

you? Shaming is a much more popular tactic than most of us would like to admit. If you think back to a recent disagreement, you might just notice how you or someone else used shaming to achieve an outcome.

The next tactic is **threats**. This is getting what we want by saying we'll cause the other person harm if they don't comply. If you don't get the proposal draft to me by Friday, your days on this team are numbered. Sound familiar?

And finally, **physical force**. This is anything from hitting, pushing, shoving, to war and terrorism. Although we have rules and laws that govern our behavior in this area, we break them all the time. Resist the temptation.

When people use contentious tactics in an attempt to get what they want, it's really a signal that an upset is brewing, an unmet need or issue is hiding in plain sight, or just below the surface. Now in the heat of the moment, if you can teach yourself to pause, and ask questions that help you identify that need or issue, you give your conflict partner a chance to recalibrate and move from blame to cooperation.

So, start listening for contentious tactics, pause, and dig deeper, and you may avoid a full-blown conflict altogether.

1.4 - Unwinding cognitive bias

- Let's focus on some of the universal thoughts that cloud our judgment and dominate our disagreements. These universal thoughts are called **cognitive biases**, and they operate just below the surface of our awareness. When we're in the middle of a conflict, our biases and buried thought patterns cause us to cling to our positions like barnacles.

So, let's uncover how these cognitive biases work in our everyday conversations.

First is **hindsight bias**. This is also called the "I knew it all along" bias. It's the tendency to view past events as being predictable. So, let's say you've noticed that when team members propose ideas to your boss, they're all met with rejection. And now you're proposing a new idea and your boss shoots it down, and you say, "I knew you would have that reaction "and wouldn't support me." Hindsight bias helps you point your finger, but it does not help you solve the problem.

Next is **fundamental attribution error**. This is the tendency for people to explain the behavior of others as personality defects while minimizing the role of situational influences. Let's say your report has been late to work repeatedly for the past couple of weeks. As you sit down for a team meeting, he shows up 10 minutes in. You're thinking he's disorganized and disengaged, only to learn later he's been taking public transit because his car is in the shop. Oops. Surely there's a conversation to be had about how to deal with your report's circumstances. But the point here is to recognize how we leap to conclusions ahead of getting the facts.

Next is **confirmation bias**. Now, this is the tendency to look for or interpret information in a way that confirms our preconceptions. For example, if you believe that Joe is not the right person to lead a new project, you might seek out information and opinions from people who agree with your perspective to make your case. Confirmation bias can hold you back from seeing things in a holistic way.

Finally, **belief bias**. This is when we form an opinion about the logic of an idea or a proposal not on its merits but on the belief in the truth or falsity of the conclusion. Let me break that down. A workplace example might be if management is pushing production to hit more volume believing more is better, then any proposal favoring quality over quantity will be rejected.

These are only a few of the cognitive biases that operate in everyday conflicts. In truth, we have infinite biases about gender, race, nationality, economic status. Same for weight, appearance, how tall or short somebody is, you name

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it. The fact is, you can't stop your brain from judging. It's what our brains do. But you can train yourself to pause long enough to ask yourself, how am I viewing this conflict? What filters and biases might be clouding my vision? If you can recognize your own biases, you can take a step back from them and allow room for other perspectives. This awareness not only helps you diffuse a conflict, it can help you avoid it altogether.