

The Conflict-Intelligent Leader

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The past few years have been exhausting for many Western organizations. Civil strife seems to be widespread, with clashes over racial, gender, and income inequality; rising authoritarianism; immigration; climate change; and foreign wars deepening the divides in an increasingly polarized society.

It's perhaps inevitable that in this time of growing discord, conflict at work would increase too. A recent Society for Human Resource Management survey of 1,622 U.S. workers showed that 76% had witnessed acts of incivility in the past month, with 21% experiencing it personally. Nearly half said they had encountered it weekly, and 13% said they had encountered it daily. Forty-four percent believed incivility would worsen in 2025, and 26% said they were likely to leave their jobs because of it. With employee engagement at a low, contentious interactions at work are estimated to cost businesses more than \$2 billion a day in productivity losses and absenteeism.

Polarization and increased incivility have put CEOs under intense scrutiny too. Today their every utterance risks backlash from employees, customers, politicians, or all three. But in this era leaders are often expected to wade into the fray. Research from Weber Shandwick published in

2023 revealed that 65% of employees believe that their companies have a responsibility to speak up about critical social issues, and upwards of 80% of consumers think that companies should take stands. Some leaders have a difficult time threading this needle, however, which may explain why in the first quarter of 2024, 622 CEOs announced their resignations—50% more than quit in the first quarter of 2023, which was already a record year for departures.

CEOs and other corporate leaders are by no means the first to navigate thorny conflicts, however. Over the past 30 years, I and my colleagues at the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University have drawn insights from psychology, peace and conflict studies, and complexity science—and conducted scores of surveys and laboratory, case, and field studies—in order to identify the most effective conflict-engagement strategies of leaders, mediators, and peacemakers. Those efforts led us to create a set of principles that will help leaders guide their organizations through even the most vexing situations.

Our research reveals that leaders need four core competencies to navigate conflict. The first, and most foundational, is self-awareness and self-regulation—recognizing and managing your personal reactions so that you can remain calm and engage strategically. The second competency, strong social-conflict skills, which include deep listening, balancing advocacy with collaboration, and checking biases, helps leaders reach constructive solutions. Situational adaptivity—knowing how to tailor strategies to fit different types of conflict and when to lean in, step back, or adjust for cultural nuances—is also crucial. Finally, systemic wisdom allows leaders to address chronic, deeply rooted conflicts by seeing the bigger picture, embracing complexity, and learning from past successes and failures.

Leaders who demonstrate the four core competencies have what we call a high conflict-intelligence quotient (CIQ). Our research indicates that such executives not only excel at dispute resolution but also create workplace environments where team members experience greater job satisfaction, empowerment, and well-being. These leaders also tend to build organizational cultures marked by greater creativity and constructiveness and, according to research by Nicholas Redding, the ability to navigate stress and uncertainty. Notably, our research has found significant correlations between employees' perceptions of leaders' conflict intelligence and the psychological safety they feel at work—whether their environment is characterized by mutual trust, transparent communication, professional respect, and support for calculated risk-taking.

It's easy to confuse emotional intelligence and conflict intelligence, but they're distinct concepts with unique applications. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage your own emotions as well as the emotions of others. It involves skills like empathy, self-regulation, and social awareness. Conflict intelligence encompasses a broader set of competencies aimed at managing and resolving disagreements. While emotional intelligence is a crucial component of conflict intelligence and enables people to engage constructively and adapt, conflict intelligence includes understanding social dynamics, situational factors, and systemic forces that influence disputes.

The question is, what, exactly, do high-CIQ leaders do during conflicts? What strategies do they employ to successfully manage these encounters? Our research reveals seven principles that are particularly helpful in volatile situations. They often are apparent in the work of master mediators and peacemakers of different stripes—people who work in business, community organizations, and global affairs. In this article I'll draw on examples from those arenas to highlight how effective leaders deploy them.

Lay the Groundwork

Before warring parties ever enter the same room, expert mediators spend months identifying key players, establishing communication channels, and building trust with both sides. Skilled leaders similarly build a foundation for resolving disputes by strengthening their organization's work climate and conflict-engagement skills and infrastructure—before disagreements come to a head. And when a conflict erupts, they choose their moves carefully. Like diplomats who know that the first 48 hours of a crisis can determine the nature of relationships for years, they understand that their initial responses will shape all that follows.

George Mitchell's work on the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland in the 1990s illustrates the effectiveness of laying the groundwork in a peace process. When Mitchell arrived in Northern Ireland, he faced a centuries-old conflict and communities divided by religion, politics, and blood. What distinguished his approach was extraordinary patience and methodical foundation building. He spent the first months doing nothing but listening, conducting more than a hundred in-depth interviews with people across Northern Irish society—including paramilitary leaders, clergy, politicians, and ordinary citizens affected by "The Troubles."

Mitchell's signature contribution was the Mitchell Principles—a set of commitments to democracy and nonviolence that created a moral framework for negotiations. Instead of demanding immediate solutions, he acknowledged that peace required building blocks. His team meticulously documented every agreement and concession, creating what he called "gardens of agreement" in a landscape of conflict.

A decade later, Alan Mulally took a similar approach in building a positive organizational environment at Ford. When he took the helm, in 2006, the company was facing a \$12.7 billion loss and struggling with a deeply entrenched culture of distrust and secrecy. Fearing blame or punishment, executives hid problems in their divisions until they turned into crises. Mulally spent his first months establishing new communication channels and trust-building mechanisms. His signature innovation was the business-plan review meeting, a weekly forum where division executives reported their projects' status using a red-yellow-green traffic-light system. Mulally publicly celebrated the executives brave enough to present red projects, declaring, "You can't manage a secret." This seemingly simple change catalyzed a profound cultural shift toward transparency and cooperation. Mulally's patient foundation building paid off as the company's stock price rose from \$1.01 in 2008 to more than \$18 by 2014. But more important, it transformed a culture that was notoriously confrontational into one focused on joint problem-solving, which continued long after his departure.

Grow Rapport

Seasoned negotiators create what diplomats call “positive peace” between the parties in a dispute: They don’t just end the conflict; they help foster strong collaborative relationships. They incorporate into agreements measures that will increase each side’s confidence in the other, knowing that every positive interaction will help build a buffer against future crises. Mediators often pair ceasefire talks with initiatives like cultural exchanges or joint economic projects that boost trust and resilience, for instance.

Business leaders can adopt this approach by designing meaningful joint ventures that bring people together. Such projects promote positive engagement and build a rapport that can endure, and even grow, during moments of tension. The goal is to establish a high ratio of positive to negative interpersonal interactions.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner Martti Ahtisaari’s work on the Aceh Peace Process in Indonesia after the devastating 2004 tsunami offers a good example. The disorder and distress following the disaster could have deepened the decades-long conflict between the Indonesian government and GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) separatists. But Ahtisaari understood that natural disasters can create what scholars call “hurting stalemates”—moments when continuing a conflict becomes more costly than peace for all parties. His genius lay in transforming humanitarian cooperation into a political breakthrough.

Ahtisaari designed a process in which former enemies worked together to distribute aid and rebuild communities. Like Mitchell’s “gardens of agreement” in Northern Ireland, these partnerships created what Ahtisaari called “islands of cooperation” that gradually expanded. He insisted on concrete confidence-building measures—joint monitoring teams, shared reconstruction committees, combined security patrols—that produced tangible evidence of the benefits of peace. The Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding that emerged from those efforts included detailed provisions for natural-resource sharing, political participation for former rebels, and economic development—a new model for a lasting peace agreement.

When Microsoft acquired LinkedIn for \$26.2 billion, in 2016, many commentators expected to see another failed tech megamerger. Instead, CEO Satya Nadella pursued an approach that would become a master class in building positive peace between corporate cultures. Rather than rushing to integrate the social media platform into Microsoft’s operations, he took the counterintuitive step of maintaining LinkedIn’s independence while carefully cultivating collaborative opportunities. He established the Connected Apps initiative, which created specific projects where Microsoft and LinkedIn teams could work together voluntarily, allowing relationships to develop organically. Teams began discovering natural synergies, from integrating LinkedIn profiles with Microsoft Office to creating joint AI projects.

The result? LinkedIn’s revenues grew from \$2.9 billion at acquisition to \$16 billion by 2024. More remarkably, LinkedIn retained its unique culture while gaining access to Microsoft’s vast resources.

Balance Discipline with Creativity

If you watch master negotiators work, you'll notice that they seamlessly shift between firm boundary setting and collaborative problem-solving, between public strength and private flexibility. One moment they're establishing clear red lines, the next they're exploring innovative compromises.

The Norwegian diplomat Jan Egeland exemplified neutral but principled diplomacy during the peace negotiations in Colombia, which ended one of Latin America's longest-running civil wars. Egeland understood that peace processes needed to address not just military issues but the underlying causes of conflict, and his approach demonstrated that mediators can maintain firm positions on human rights while still finding creative solutions for peace. His most innovative contribution was integrating victims of violence into the peace process. Instead of treating them as passive bystanders, Egeland helped design mechanisms for their direct participation in negotiations. To make sure all voices were heard, he created what he called "parallel tracks"—one in which formal negotiations proceeded in Havana, while regional dialogues throughout Colombia ensured local buy-in and addressed specific community concerns.

The resulting agreement included not just strict provisions for demobilizing the FARC guerrilla group but detailed plans for rural development, political participation, and addressing injustices committed during the violence. It showed that peace processes could balance accountability for past crimes with the need for reconciliation and reintegration.

For a business example, let's turn to Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple. In the mid-2010s the tech giant faced a deep tension between privacy advocacy and business growth, particularly as it expanded its service revenues. That conflict took place both inside and outside the company, with different internal groups advocating for competing priorities and external stakeholders pushing for either stronger privacy protections or enhanced services (which required more data collection).

Cook pulled off a careful balancing act. He maintained Apple's strict public stance on privacy while finding creative ways to grow service revenues through privacy-preserving technologies. This diplomatic dance included both firm positions (like refusing FBI requests to unlock iPhones) and flexible implementation (developing on-device AI processing). The approach helped Apple achieve both aims—strengthening its privacy guardrails while growing service revenues from \$24 billion in 2016 to more than \$96 billion in 2024.

Master Adaptivity

Different conflicts demand different diplomatic tools. An approach that works for resource disputes might fail utterly for identity-based clashes. Expert mediators develop diverse intervention strategies—such as shuttle diplomacy, where intermediaries carry messages between disputing parties; multitrack engagement, which involves parallel efforts across government, business, and civil society; and peace corridors, which create designated safe zones for dialogue and humanitarian efforts amid active conflict.

Lakhdar Brahimi's work in Afghanistan on behalf of the United Nations showcases how great leaders move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to context-appropriate ones. His experience in Afghanistan led to a guide that became known as the Brahimi Report and transformed UN peacekeeping. Brahimi recognized that Afghanistan's diverse social and political landscape required what he called a "light footprint"—international support that enhanced rather than replaced local capabilities.

Brahimi engaged with both traditional tribal councils (jirgas) in rural areas and government officials in urban centers. He understood that religious authorities needed to be part of the solution and worked to integrate Islamic principles with international humanitarian law. Perhaps most important, Brahimi demonstrated that peace processes needed to pay attention to what he called the "regional ecology" of conflict. In both Afghanistan and later Syria, he engaged neighboring countries and regional powers, understanding that local conflicts often had international dimensions that needed to be addressed for peace to hold.

In her 12-year tenure at PepsiCo, Indra Nooyi illustrated similar adaptivity. Nooyi faced a firestorm when she became CEO, in 2006: Soda sales were in decline, competition from rival companies had intensified, and consumers were demanding healthful food and beverage options. Tensions were rising between executives in the traditional carbonated beverages division, who were resisting change, and those overseeing healthful products, which required new approaches. Units in emerging markets wanted localized strategies, while the North American units expected uniform global ones. Investors and the board were pressuring PepsiCo to improve quarterly earnings, which conflicted with Nooyi's long-term vision emphasizing healthful offerings and sustainability. These competing viewpoints led to fights over resources, marketing priorities, R&D, and executive compensation metrics.

To manage the disputes, Nooyi developed a variety of strategies, balancing sustainability with action on immediate business pressures. For the core beverage business, she maintained traditional metrics and profit-focused approaches. However, for emerging health-focused products, she implemented collaborative development processes involving nutritionists and consumer-advocacy groups. Environmental initiatives were guided by sustainability frameworks, while market expansion strategies were customized for different global regions, each with its own cultural and economic context.

This multifaceted approach drove remarkable results: During her tenure the company grew its revenues 80% while successfully repositioning its portfolio toward healthful options and achieving significant sustainability goals.

Leverage the Broader Context

When peace talks stall, experienced diplomats look beyond immediate hostilities and try to understand the wider constellation of forces creating tensions—and learn to work with them. They know that sometimes the key to unlocking a bilateral dispute lies in multilateral engagement.

Consider Ralph Bunche's mediation of the 1949 Arab-Israeli armistice agreements. Bunche knew that the conflict couldn't be resolved through a single comprehensive agreement. Instead, he orchestrated separate but interconnected negotiations between Israel and each of its neighbors—Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. Using proximity talks—in which parties don't speak face-to-face but meet at the same conference and communicate through an impartial mediator—to reduce tensions, he focused on practical issues like water rights and refugees and created solutions that worked on the ground. His innovative approach earned him the Nobel Peace Prize and established principles for managing complex regional conflicts that remain relevant today.

When Paul Polman was the CEO of Unilever, he encountered repeated conflicts between the company's sustainability goals and profit objectives. Recognizing that the disputes reflected broader issues, he initiated what he called "systems mapping"—a comprehensive analysis of how environmental, social, and economic factors interconnected across Unilever's global operations. It revealed that many sustainability challenges were actually rooted in supply chain structures, consumer behavior patterns, and market incentives that had evolved over decades. "As more CEOs and world leaders recognize the systemic nature of the challenges we face," Polman explained, "it is also rising in importance on the corporate and global agenda."

His approach transformed what appeared to be a simple conflict into an opportunity for fundamental business model innovation: Unilever's Sustainable Living Brands. These were products designed to reduce environmental impact and improve social conditions through sustainable sourcing, ecofriendly packaging, waste reduction, water conservation, and other kinds of initiatives. By 2019 they were growing 69% faster than the rest of the business and responsible for 75% of its growth, demonstrating that understanding broader dynamics could resolve seemingly intractable conflicts.

Aim for Generational Peace

Master negotiators think in decades, not news cycles. Like peacemakers who plant trees whose shade they'll never sit under, they invest in gradual changes that create lasting organizational harmony.

Betty Bigombe's nearly 30-year involvement in Northern Uganda's peace process demonstrates how persistent, multigenerational peace building can transform conflicts. Her approach to child-soldier rehabilitation, for instance, became a model for addressing the generational impact of conflict. She understood that these children would become parents and community leaders, making their healing crucial for long-term peace. Rather than treating them simply as victims needing immediate help, she developed comprehensive programs that supported their reintegration over decades. Those programs included education, job training, psychological support, and efforts to heal relationships with their communities.

Throughout multiple failed peace attempts and changes in political leadership, Bigombe developed what she called "peace infrastructure"—networks of trained mediators, community leaders, and civil society organizations that could continue peace-building work even when

formal negotiations stalled. Because she recognized that women often bore the greatest burden of wars while being excluded from peace processes, she created networks of female peacemakers across northern Uganda, training them in conflict resolution and providing resources for them at the community level. Those networks are still operating today.

When CEO Marc Benioff confronted growing divisions at Salesforce around 2018, the challenges were complex and multifaceted. Employees were deeply divided over the firm's government contracts, particularly with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and disagreed about whether tech companies should take stands on social issues such as immigration enforcement. Rapid growth through acquisitions had also led to cultural rifts between different employee populations who didn't share the same expectations about corporate activism and social responsibility.

Instead of imposing immediate policies or taking rigid stances, Benioff implemented what he called "ethical scaffolding"—institutional frameworks for addressing controversial issues. He established Salesforce's Office of Ethical and Humane Use and created structured stakeholder-input processes that included employee resource groups, external ethical advisers, and affected communities. He strengthened the company's culture of *ohana* (a Hawaiian term that loosely translates as "extended family"), redefining it as promoting respectful disagreement rather than forced harmony. When salary audits revealed gender pay gaps, he implemented systematic pay-equity reviews and committed \$3 million to correcting disparities.

The results demonstrated the value of this long-term approach. By creating multiple channels for employee input and establishing clear frameworks for addressing controversial issues, Salesforce successfully navigated numerous potentially divisive situations while maintaining strong employee engagement. The company achieved an employee retention rate in the top 10th percentile for companies of its size during the Great Resignation of 2022, when turnover among tech companies rose dramatically, and its employee satisfaction scores remained high even during controversial decisions. And the measures Benioff established continue to help the company address new challenges as they emerge, becoming a model for managing workplace polarization.

Be Opportunistic

The most profound negotiation breakthroughs often happen because of something unexpected—a surprise emotional encounter, unanticipated common ground, or a crisis that reveals a shared problem. Skilled mediators learn to watch for emotional turning points, informal channels, surprising areas of alignment, and other subtle opportunities that can transform conflicts.

Jimmy Carter's use of personal diplomacy at Camp David during Middle East peace negotiations in 1978 demonstrated this principle in action. Isolating Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin at Camp David for 13 days, Carter created a pressure-cooker environment that forced breakthrough moments. He famously showed Begin pictures of his grandchildren at a crucial moment of deadlock, helping the Israeli leader reconnect with the

human implications of peace and war. Carter tapped his own religious background to build bridges with both leaders, finding common ground in shared Abrahamic traditions. When formal negotiations stalled, Carter would take walks with each leader individually, using these informal moments to explore new possibilities.

Jack Ma's handling of the Alibaba-Yahoo partnership in 2005, when he was the Chinese firm's executive chairman, also illustrates this approach. His personal relationship with Yahoo's cofounder Jerry Yang, built over several years, was instrumental in facilitating the U.S. company's \$1 billion investment in Alibaba. It gave Ma opportunities to meet Yang informally—for instance, on the Pebble Beach golf course, where they discussed the future of e-commerce and search engines and laid the groundwork for their partnership. Ma also established cultural exchange programs between American and Chinese teams to improve their understanding of each other's perspectives and work styles. Those informal channels proved crucial during negotiations over Alibaba's independence and strategic direction, helping Ma successfully navigate one of the most complex cross-cultural corporate partnerships in tech history. His success demonstrates that sometimes the most effective path to resolving conflicts lies in unexpected connections.

Building Organizations with High Conflict Intelligence

The most significant challenge for business leaders is transforming the organizational culture to empower employees at all levels to manage disputes effectively. By embedding conflict resolution skills throughout the ranks, leaders can ensure that their organizations thrive even in the face of internal tensions. That means moving beyond seeing conflict as something to be avoided and framing it as a potential source of energy, innovation, and growth. That shift begins with creating safe, facilitated spaces for difficult conversations about sensitive issues in order to normalize the idea that conflict, when handled well, drives improvement rather than destruction.

Leaders can help employees adopt this attitude by modeling and celebrating examples of successful conflict engagement, sharing stories of how constructive disagreement led to breakthrough solutions, and recognizing those who have used effective strategies. A recent study by our CIQ-Leadership research team at Columbia found that in organizations where employees rated their leaders high on CIQ, the overall culture was more collaborative and less contentious or conflict-avoidant. In other words, the positive behaviors the leaders used to manage conflict were being mirrored by the employees.

Today the question for leaders isn't whether to build conflict intelligence—it's how quickly they can begin. In a world where change is constant and complexity is rising, the ability to manage conflict effectively isn't a nice-to-have skill. It's becoming a core requirement for organizational success. Those who master this capability won't just survive the storms of conflict—they'll learn to sail by them.