



Perspective / Opinion

Using Conflict to Improve Understanding

By Maximilian Casey and Kelli Cole

Conflict. Conflict is a word that often evokes strong emotions and experiences. To many, conflict is an anxiety-provoking, nightmarish scenario that must be avoided at all costs. To others, conflict is something they seek as a mechanism to release bottled-up emotions or get a “win.” No matter where you land on this gambit of emotions, we all experience conflict, and a crucial part of leadership is calmly navigating the conflicts and crises that arise. The first step in discussing and improving our ability to handle conflict is to understand which style of conflict management we tend to employ, and how that affects the decisions we make and the relationships we have.

Any productive discussion on conflict and conflict management necessitates that we make space for the fact that conflict has many different contexts. We want to clarify that when we use the word “conflict” today, we use it solely in regards to disagreements in which one’s emotions may be high but there is still underlying civility and respect. At no time are we referring to conflict in terms of any form of verbal, emotional, or physical harassment or abuse whether that be workplace or domestic. If you or anyone you know has been touched by the effects of abuse you are not alone. Froedtert and The Medical College of Wisconsin have resources dedicated to helping, you can find them at [Concern Navigation \(mcw.edu\)](https://www.mcw.edu/concern/navigation).

Explosive, flashy, old fashioned screaming matches might be what we think of first when conflict is brought up. However, in most cases that type of conflict is the result of chronically mismanaged micro-conflicts spaced out over a longer period of time. In fact, if we truly want to understand how we manage conflict, we need to realize that internal conflict, just as the name implies, is conflict as well. The schemas that we build up to deal with our internal conflict are often reflected in the ways we handle external interpersonal conflict.

In every decision we make, we are confronted with the conflict of having to do one thing or another. This can be small, such as choosing between working out or spending another hour on the couch, or it can be larger, such as the decision to maintain a particular set of values or reform those values based on your lived experiences. We have learned just how uncomfortable

it can be to confront our own schema of conflict management and reflect on the ways we've avoided conflict instead of holding more steadfast.

Practicing those uncomfortable reflections and encouraging others to do so as well is exactly why we are so excited about this Leadership Course. Having a guided, safe space where students are able to discover their conflict management style, and then develop proactive skills for identifying other's conflict management styles provides ways to recognize the signs of conflict before it boils over into something much more difficult to clean up. As we transition to an ever-more collaborative learning environment, these are the skills that students will be able to build upon and put into practice in all their courses and clinical experiences.

For learners, the question of why spend your time with this course extends beyond the many professional and academic development benefits mentioned. As we have alluded to, it also provides a safe space for self-growth and reflection. We are incredibly grateful for our own experience within our work on this content, which has helped us challenge our comfort zones and identify opportunities that match our passions.

One of these areas that we have become more invested in that we would like incorporated into training in conflict management—because it has impacted our own views on conflict—is dialogue. Over the past few months, we have participated in conversations about topics that challenged our perceptions, encouraging critical thinking and even disagreement. Through this, we have gained such a great appreciation for good healthy dialogue. To be more specific, our time learning about conflict has informed our beliefs that it is important to be able to have disagreements with people.

There is so much to be learned if we allow ourselves to enter conversations willing to listen, and hear what the other person says, not just the preconceived notion of what we think they are saying. The ease with which we have access to constant echo chambers can blind us to the reality that every person has their own unique lived experience that informs their perspective. Too often we fight to keep our world small—surrounding ourselves with those who agree with us—instead of holding space for the beauty that could grow by expanding our world view and exploring others' perspectives.

This is not to suggest that this is easy, or that you are required to agree with each person you may argue with. In fact, it can be maddeningly difficult, and it is something we are constantly working on. However, this process can be incredibly helpful when thinking about conflict. If you take the time to listen to other people's words and try to truly understand the potential hidden context behind those words, you may find that the root of some conflicts you experience is a misinterpretation of the other person.

This leadership course aims to promote teaching strategies focused on pausing, taking a minute to reflect, and then determining if the cause of conflict is from outside emotion, and if so how to deal with that emotion in a way that allows us to separate our decisions and identities from momentary emotional reactions. This view of conflict is based in honest, open dialogue that

stems from a place of mutual respect and truly attempts at reconciliation of each other's values as a resolution.

No matter how capable you believe you are in handling conflict, there is always room for growth. We would like to extend an invitation to all of our peers, classmates, and future colleagues to join us in this uncomfortable endeavor of leadership development. We look forward to branching out and hearing from the Medical College of Wisconsin community as we continue a dialogue on conflict, leadership, and all the many passions we each have.

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