

CHAPTER 33

Conflict Conversations: Tools for Better Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Disputes are a commonplace feature of human relationships and a recurring occurrence within organisations of every kind. Conflict arises because people differ in background, expectation, values and objectives. Many regard it as inherently damaging, yet where it is handled well through effective communication it becomes a means of learning, of strengthening relationships and of improving performance. This article argues that conducting conflict conversations is among the most critical interpersonal and managerial skills, and that dialogue offers the means by which disagreement may be converted into mutual recognition and collaboration. In contrast to approaches that rely on positional authority, avoidance or competition, a dialogue-based approach creates the opportunity to listen, to reflect and to engage respectfully. Drawing on dialogue theory, frameworks of emotional intelligence and research on conflict resolution, the article demonstrates that knowledge, competence and practised skill together enable conversations that produce shared understanding and jointly owned solutions. It further examines the emotional and non-verbal dimensions of such conversations, showing how attention to emotion, body language and tone bears materially on their outcome. It identifies the barriers that most commonly obstruct productive dialogue — fear of confrontation, delayed communication, unequal power relations and insufficient managerial empathy — and considers how these impede collaboration. The article concludes that managers should treat dialogue as a sustained everyday practice rather than as a reactive instrument deployed in crisis.

Keywords: Conflict conversations; Dialogue; Active listening; Emotional intelligence; Psychological safety.

1.0 Introduction

As organisations have come to change more rapidly, the experience of conflict within them has intensified.

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Workforces increasingly comprise people of widely differing cultural background, education, personality, working habits and prior experience, and they operate under significant pressure to meet deadlines, produce results, compete for resources and adapt quickly. Misunderstanding and disagreement follow predictably from this combination. Conflict continues nonetheless to be regarded as principally negative, and therefore as something to be avoided or resolved quickly without attention to the underlying relationships. Contemporary management thinking increasingly holds otherwise. Where conflict is managed productively, it generates new understanding and supports innovation through the collaboration of people holding differing views (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). Establishing clear communication about the existence and nature of a disagreement improves the quality of decisions and of the solutions that follow from them.

Conflict arises between people who have not communicated adequately about unmet expectations, unacceptable conduct or differing perspectives. A manager's capacity to conduct such conversations with respect, empathy and clarity substantially determines their effectiveness, since the alternative damages working relationships and generates dissatisfaction. This article examines conflict conversations from the standpoint of dialogue and explains why dialogue is an essential communication tool. It considers why such conversations matter, what makes them successful and which skills managers and employees require in order to conduct them. It argues further that organisations and leaders have the opportunity to reframe conflict as an occasion for learning, resilience and development rather than as a threat.

2.0 Concept Explanation: Understanding Conflict Conversations

A conflict conversation is an exchange that explores the causes and underlying issues behind a disagreement. Such conversations occur between people in every kind of working and personal relationship, sometimes formally in scheduled meetings and frequently informally through other channels. Their object is that the participants should work together to clarify differences, resolve outstanding issues and establish a course of action to which all are committed.

What distinguishes a conflict conversation is not merely the identification of a means of resolution but the development of shared meaning. Each participant brings their own perception of the problem, their own assumptions about how the other views it, their own emotional response to the other's conduct, and their own interest in how matters are settled. These four elements — perception, assumption, emotion and interest — are present in every such exchange (Stone et al., 2010). The depth of collaboration required to work through them is what separates dialogue from other forms of communication: discussion exchanges information, debate deploys argument to persuade, while dialogue seeks

understanding. Through dialogue, participants learn from one another by sharing their perceptions and identifying solutions jointly.

2.1 The role of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is among the principal requirements of a successful conflict conversation. It comprises five elements: recognising one's own emotions (self-awareness), managing them (self-regulation), sustaining the drive to act (motivation), understanding the emotions of others (empathy) and interacting constructively with people (social skill) (Goleman, 1995). Frustration, anger, apprehension and disappointment commonly arise during conflict conversations, and where a participant fails to regulate these, the exchange either escalates or breaks off. Those with well-developed emotional intelligence identify their own emotional triggers and manage their responses constructively. They pause before replying, choose language that does not attribute fault and address the substance of the disagreement. They remain alert to the emotional state of others and respond with empathy and care.

2.2 Psychological safety and trust

Constructive conflict discussion requires a workplace culture characterised by psychological safety: an environment in which people may express opinions and voice disagreement without fear of retaliation or humiliation (Edmondson, 1999). Those who feel secure enough to participate in candid discussion tend to take responsibility for their own conduct and to remain open to feedback. Managers have a decisive part in establishing and maintaining such a culture. Their tone and bearing signal to employees whether contribution is welcomed or discouraged. Managers build trust by approaching conflict conversations with curiosity and respect, by establishing ground rules governing how participants will treat one another, and by offering feedback constructively and consistently.

2.3 Conflict conversations as a leadership responsibility

Conflict conversations cannot be avoided or deferred indefinitely; they are fundamental to a leader's role. How a leader addresses conflict establishes the norms a team adopts for communicating and dealing with one another. A leader who declines to address conflict at all may allow it to expand considerably over time; one who addresses it aggressively generates apprehension and resentment. A leader who engages thoughtfully through dialogue models respect, accountability and maturity.

3.0 The Importance of Dialogue in Conflict Management

Dialogue is among the most effective means of building understanding between people. It allows participants to move from attending only to what they want towards

understanding why they want it, and from apportioning blame towards learning (Isaacs, 1999).

3.1 Dialogue distinguished from discussion and debate

Discussion examines an issue; debate seeks to persuade an opponent. Dialogue differs from both in seeking to understand all the parties and all the issues without hastening towards a conclusion. Participants are encouraged to suspend judgement, to listen closely and to remain open to being influenced by one another.

This proves especially valuable in conflict situations, which are ordinarily accompanied by heightened emotion and firmly held positions. By creating conditions conducive to dialogue, a manager helps clarify the real source of a disagreement — expectations that were never clearly defined, objectives that were misaligned, or needs that went unmet. Once the parties understand what is actually at issue, the range of workable resolutions becomes considerably wider than it first appeared.

3.2 Long-term benefits of dialogue-based conflict conversations

Making dialogue a regular organisational practice yields improved communication, stronger relationships, greater engagement and a more inclusive culture. Employees come to recognise that conflict need not be feared and that their views carry weight regardless of whether they prevail on a particular question. Sustained over time, the practice builds organisational resilience: the capacity to adapt, to learn and to function well under adverse conditions. Using dialogue to resolve disagreement also supports continuous improvement, since it creates regular occasions on which employees receive feedback, reflect on their own conduct and share in decisions informed by what colleagues have said.

4.0 Tools for Better Conflict Conversations

Managing conflict productively requires specific practices capable of sustaining constructive dialogue. The following are available to managers and employees alike.

4.1 Active listening

Active listening is fundamental. It consists in giving full attention to the speaker without interruption and working to understand both the content of what is said and the emotion accompanying it. Paraphrasing, summarising and asking for clarification all demonstrate engagement and signal that the other's perspective is valued (Rogers, 1980). Where a person feels genuinely heard, defensiveness diminishes and joint exploration of possible solutions becomes easier. Active listening also reduces the misunderstandings that generate conflict in the first place.

4.2 Empathy and Validation

Empathy consists in comprehending and acknowledging another's emotion irrespective of whether one shares it. Validation expresses that acknowledgement explicitly — observing, for instance, that a situation sounds frustrating, or that the other person appears to feel overlooked. Statements of this kind establish connection and reduce escalation, lending a human dimension to the exchange and establishing mutual respect.

4.3 Managing emotions

Strong emotion is common in conflict conversations. Effective communicators regulate their own responses, maintaining composure through steady breathing and concentrating on identifying a solution that meets the needs of everyone involved. Where feeling becomes too intense, stepping away from the immediate situation is sometimes the better course. Self-management of this kind allows a person to respond deliberately rather than impulsively, which prevents escalation and protects the relationship.

4.4 Positive language and framing

How a conflict conversation is framed substantially influences both its tone and its outcome. Neutral, non-accusatory language reduces defensiveness, and statements formulated in the first person allow a concern to be raised without attributing blame.

Observing that one is concerned about missed deadlines and their effect on the team is considerably more effective than asserting that a colleague is always late. Positive framing directs attention towards behaviour and outcomes rather than towards the other person's character.

4.5 Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions elicit reflective and explanatory responses. Asking what a person believes to be the cause of a difficulty, or what a successful resolution would look like from their point of view, invites everyone present to contribute to joint problem-solving. Such questions also bring to light the underlying interests and needs of each participant, which may not otherwise be apparent.

4.6 Allowing room for silence

Silence is often uncomfortable during a disagreement, yet it serves as a powerful communicative resource. Allowing time to consider what has just been said enables participants to process their reactions and to formulate their views. An experienced manager resists the impulse to fill every pause, leaving space for reflection before the discussion moves on.

4.7 Establishing ground rules

Clear guidelines for participation help everyone concentrate on the substance of a discussion and generate a sense of security. Such rules commonly include refraining from interrupting, avoiding personal criticism, treating what is said as confidential and keeping to the matter under discussion. Where managers observe these rules themselves and apply them consistently, a structure is established within which meaningful conversation becomes possible.

4.8 Collaborative problem-solving

The purpose of a conflict conversation is not to determine a winner but to establish a basis on which the parties may work together. Collaborative problem-solving involves generating possible solutions, assessing which are workable, and agreeing the specific steps each party will take together with the responsibilities attaching to them. Because participants have shaped the outcome themselves, they assume genuine responsibility for completing what they have undertaken to do.

5.0 Barriers to Productive Conflict Communication

Numerous obstacles impede effective communication about conflict, among them fear of confrontation, poor communication skills, differences in authority, divergent personal experience and cultural difference. The most significant is delay. Because people avoid discussing disagreements, resentment and frustration accumulate over time, and by the point at which a conversation finally occurs, satisfactory resolution has become substantially harder to reach. Establishing a means by which conflict may be raised promptly and respectfully is therefore a necessary condition of healthy working relationships.

6.0 Conclusion

Conflict conversations occur regularly, whatever the setting. Approached with apprehension, avoidance or without direction, they damage relationships and constrain performance. Conducted through dialogue, emotional intelligence and mutual respect, they become occasions for learning, development and connection.

Where leaders know how to conduct such conversations effectively, they create conditions in which employees feel able to express opinions and to question the views of others. Using active listening, empathy, positive framing and collaborative problem-solving, they convert conflict from a source of division into an opportunity to build trust and generate new thinking.

Organisations that adopt dialogue as an established practice navigate complexity with greater confidence. Through better dialogue they resolve disagreement more successfully, build stronger teams, develop healthier cultures and sustain long-term success.

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