

**CONFLICT ISN'T THE
PROBLEM.
IT'S THE SOLUTION.**

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Ask one hundred people what comes to mind when they hear the word “conflict” and you’ll get a variety of responses.

A few people may have positive, healthy associations with conflict, but most do not. The majority of people we work with have experienced the casualties of conflict in the form of passive-aggressive behavior, escalation resulting in violence, broken relationships, and uncomfortable tension.

It’s not surprising that when I Google the word “Conflict”, the terms “resolution,” “mediation,” “management,” and “reduction” pop up. All of these words convey an important message about our association with conflict; that it needs to be managed, reduced, resolved and mediated.

The problem with conflict mediation, conflict management, and conflict reduction is that each one positions conflict as the culprit.

Whether intended or not, these labels and much of the methods used in the conflict and communication fields reinforce the misconception that if we can remove the conflict, things will be better.

When we mediate, manage, or reduce the conflict, we necessarily reduce the energy available for productive problem solving. When we respect the tension and use that energy to create instead of destroy, the results can be transformative.

To make this transformation, we first have to address four big elephants in the room. The elephants are myths about conflict that are reinforced daily and serve only to move us further away from its transformative potential.

Myth #1: Peace Is the Absence of Conflict

I grew up the son of Mennonite missionary parents. Mennonites are a protestant denomination known for their work in peace and nonviolent conflict resolution. The early messages I received growing up were, “Turn the other cheek,” or “Find another way to solve your problem without resorting to violence.” My parents dedicated their lives to building more peaceful and compassionate relationships.

My formal education includes a PhD in clinical psychology, certification as a conflict mediator, and advanced training in communication models to reduce conflict. I’m no stranger to conflict, having grown up in Botswana, a country neighboring South Africa during apartheid, as well as having worked in addictions treatment and marital counseling, and for the past 12 years working with executive leaders who often have a very distorted view of what conflict is and how to handle it.

Here's what I've learned. One shouldn't confuse peace with tranquility. Don't confuse lack of shouting with the absence of conflict. I've experienced many families, churches, and organizations who claim to be peaceful just because they don't raise their voices and they "agree to disagree." Yet the amount of violence in these communities rivals a war zone. Passive-aggressive gossip, manipulation, avoidance, withholding information, bullying and power plays are the rules of the game.

Peace is an active, dynamic, and generative process that requires healthy conflict. If peace means we are getting along, cooperating, and not hurting each other, then we can't get there without addressing our differences and disagreements. Diversity was built into the universe from the beginning. Embracing and working with it is the only way towards peace, and this requires conflict.

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Myth #2: Conflict is Destructive

Conflict can be very destructive. On average, employees around the world spend about 2.1 hours per week, or over one day per month, dealing with workplace conflict in some way. In the US, that number is higher (2.8 hrs/week) equating to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours. Non-profit sectors experience the most workplace conflict, with nearly 48% of employees reporting conflict at work.¹

But it doesn't have to be this way. Mythologist, poet, and psychologist Michael Meade believes that the purpose of conflict is to create, not destroy. Yet so often, conflict becomes a competition where there's a winner and loser.

In a recent conversation I had with Michael, he shared some history of the word competition. Consider the standard playing field we use for soccer, football, hockey, or basketball. It is rectangular in shape, has a half-court line, and a circle in the middle. In ancient times, two teams would engage on a similar playing field while the community watched and cheered in anticipation. Competition, in those days, meant "co-petition." The two teams were performing to petition the gods for blessings. The circle in the middle of the field was where the gods were believed to connect with the people. In this sense, competition is a process of struggling with others towards a common goal.

We recently surveyed 900 people in the general population and 67 senior learning and development professionals on their conflict awareness. One of the survey questions asked people to identify all the purposes of conflict. Four answers were provided, all legitimate and correct conflict potentials. They were:

- It is an opportunity to create something new
- It reminds us to respect and honor diversity
- It reveals an unmet emotional need
- It gives us energy to struggle with others

Ninety percent of both groups selected the first answer. About three quarters selected the next two. The last option was selected by 65% of the general population and only 55% of senior L&D professionals. These results reveal a fairly optimistic, but limited perspective on the positive potential in conflict.

We like Ken Blanchard's definition of conflict; it is simply the gap between what we want and what we are experiencing at any point in time. If we accept this definition, then the real question becomes, "How are we going to close the gap?"

The way we go about using the energy created by conflict can be destructive or constructive. Ford Motor Company used the energy of conflict during the 2009 recession to reinvent itself and grow profits without taking bailouts. It motivated Michael Phelps and Katie Ledecky to exert herculean effort to win gold at the Olympics. Yet, it also motivates members of ISIS to go to great lengths planning and waiting for the right moment to strike.

Myth #3: Conflict Should Be Reduced, Managed, Avoided, Or Controlled

Just the other day I took a call from the office manager of a company looking for help with workplace drama and conflict. She shared her observation that there was too much gossip, wasted time, avoidance, and tension in the office. I asked her what the company had tried so far to address the problem. She said they had “told everyone to stop.” Unfortunately, she reported, after a brief lull, it all started back up, only this time more secretly and subversively.

After delivering a keynote at a recent conference, a woman came up to the table where I was signing books and eagerly grabbed a handful of our “no drama” stickers. She proudly announced to all who could hear, “I’m going to put this sticker on my office door because I simply don’t allow drama.”

We recently surveyed 350 people on their responses to conflict. A whopping 72% of respondents said that they choose compromise to avoid conflict. In the research mentioned previously, we discovered that 10% of the general population, and nearly 20% of senior L&D professionals believed that a zero tolerance policy for drama was the best approach.

Zero tolerance for drama doesn't work. In fact, it might be one of the most obvious signs of a drama-based culture because it reflects a misunderstanding of the purpose of conflict.

The misuse of conflict is the greatest energy crisis facing our world.

Conflict generates energy. And that energy is uncomfortable. And that's okay. Have you ever wanted something that you didn't have? Did you feel the energy contained in your discomfort? What did you do? Did you use that energy to work towards your goal? Have you ever solved a big problem or achieved a significant goal, and then had that anticlimactic let down? It's because the energy of conflict was gone. The solution; set a new goal, create another gap, generate more conflict.

Conflict isn't the problem. Conflict is the source of energy. The problem is the casualties caused when we misuse that energy. Any efforts to remove the conflict will necessarily reduce the creative potential. This is why I believe the misuse of conflict is the greatest energy crisis facing our world.

Myth #4: Compassion Leads To Less Conflict

Compassion means you care enough to engage in creative conflict with someone.

Many people misunderstand compassion to be entirely about empathy, sympathy, caring, support, and doing good for others. Quite the contrary. The Latin root of the word means “to struggle (or suffer) with.” Sounds a lot like Michael Meade’s story of co-petition. Compassion definitely includes a heart-felt care for another; however, this caring is translated into co-suffering.

Compassion is hard work. It means to get in the trenches with another person, suffer together, and share in the difficult responsibility of creating something amazing through conflict.

Compassion does not mean doing it for them, rescuing them, or avoiding accountability.

Compassion means you care enough to engage in creative conflict with someone.

“The misuse of conflict is the greatest energy crisis facing our world.”

Our definition of drama is:

Drama is what happens when people misuse the energy of conflict to struggle against themselves or each other, with or without awareness, to justify their harmful behavior.

Our definition of compassion is:

Compassion is the process of using the energy of conflict to struggle with others in a spirit of dignity to create something new.

What do these definitions have in common? Struggling! People often ask me, “So when I read your book, attend your seminars and apply the concepts, my life will get easier, right?”

Wrong. The struggle will not go away. Conflict will not disappear. But I can guarantee that you will have more authentic, productive relationships and feel more purposeful and fulfilled at the end of the day.

Recently, at a networking event, I was approached by the CEO of an oil company. I could tell by his demeanor that he didn’t want deep conversation, so I had to be ready with something short and sweet. He asked me what my company did, and I responded, “We start shit for the greater good.” He smiled.

Do you believe in any of these conflict resolution myths? How does it affect your ability to negotiate conflict? By challenging these myths you can begin reframing your approach to conflict and generate positive results.

The Compassion Cycle: A Model for Conflict Without Casualties

It's unrealistic to eliminate drama completely, but low-drama, compassion-based communities and organizations are possible. Compassion-based cultures engage in positive conflict for the purpose of creating something amazing. They engage in conflict without casualties.

The secret is in **changing the rules of engagement**. Drama-based cultures operate with these rules of engagement. 1) We are not transparent about how we really feel, 2) We communicate indirectly, especially when emotions are involved. 3) We avoid accountability. 4) We try to solve everybody's problems except our own, 5) We use fear, guilt, or intimidation to get what we want, 6) We worry more about being justified than being effective, 7) We believe and perpetuate the myths of conflict, 8) We don't talk about the rules of engagement.

Culture is the environment created by how your behavioral norms are lived out.

Drama-based cultures suffer from lack of safety, lack of curiosity, and lack of consistency. Compassion-based cultures operate according to different rules of engagement.

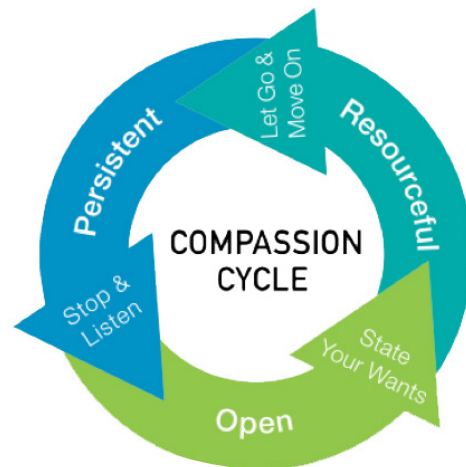
Ten Rules of Engagement for Compassion-Based Cultures

We've developed a model for Compassionate Accountability, the process of using conflict to create by balancing mutual accountability with kindness, dignity and respect. In our work, compassion leads to more conflict; good conflict.

The engine of our model is the Compassion Cycle.

It describes three core competencies (Open, Resourceful, Persistent) and three critical choices (State your wants, Let go and move on, Stop and listen) to remove drama. These generate six rules of engagement.

There are four additional rules to ensure that the three compassion skills and three choices are successfully applied. Here are the ten rules of engagement for compassion-based cultures.



“Compassion means you care enough to engage in creative conflict with someone.”

1. **We are open:** Openness is about courageous transparency and a spirit of non-judgmental acceptance of people and their experiences. We practice openness by showing empathy, validating each other, and disclosing our honest emotions without blaming anyone or expecting anyone to fix them.
2. **We state our wants:** We verbalize our needs, desires, and emotional end-goals not because we expect anyone to give it to us, but because we are worthwhile.
3. **We are resourceful:** Resourcefulness is about curious and creative problem-solving. We approach problems with open minds. We check assumptions and ask questions when we aren't sure. We don't hold on to information or resources that might be helpful. We encourage people to try new things, make mistakes without fear, and fail forward.
4. **We let go and move on:** We acknowledge that choices come with consequences and that moving forward requires grieving the loss of what could have been. We don't get stuck trying to control each other or the future.
5. **We are persistent:** Persistence is about finishing what we start, making good on our promises, and aligning word and deed. We talk to each other about boundaries, goals, and standards. We strive for excellence and ask the same of each other.

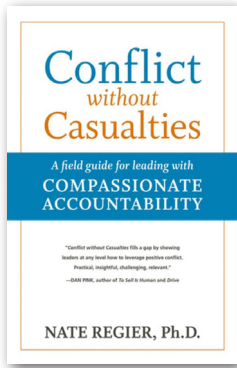
6. **We stop and listen:** We know that striving takes a toll on the mind, body, and soul. So we make time to rest, reflect, rejuvenate, and check in with each other.
7. **We accept that conflict is a necessary and healthy part of authentic relationships.** Conflict is simply the energy generated by the gap between what we want and what we are experiencing. How we use that energy distinguishes drama from compassion.
8. **We believe that compassion and accountability can co-exist.** Compassion without accountability gets us nowhere. Accountability without compassion gets us alienated. Blending the two is the key.
9. **We train and practice every day.** We know that to exchange drama for compassion requires new attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs. This takes training, coaching, and practice.
10. **We build it into everything we do.** Everywhere you look, you will see compassion rules of engagement embedded. They are in our policy manual, our performance conversations, our meetings, our daily interactions, even in how we apologize (<http://next-element.com/four-simple-steps-to-make-a-better-apology/>) to each other.

The Compassion Cycle is a dynamic model for how people build resilience to drama and lead themselves and others towards compassionate accountability. It's a roadmap for conflict without casualties. Follow the arrows to avoid drama in day to day interactions. Use the entire model to map out the most effective approach for a change initiative. Order matters, and you'll get the best results if you apply the first six rules in the order listed. Our training and certification programs go deep into the nuances, rules, skill-sets for using this model to its fullest potential in broad range of situations.

You don't have to shy away from conflict. Use the energy to create something amazing today! 📌

1. Source: https://www.cpp.com/pdfs/ CPP_Global_Human_Capital_Report_Workplace_Conflict.pdf

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Nate Regier is co-founding owner and CEO of Next Element. His latest book, *Conflict Without Casualties: A Field Guide for Leading With Compassionate Accountability*, is available from Amazon and other booksellers. Next Element is a global training and advisory firm dedicated to helping people spend less energy in drama, and more energy producing amazing results. They train, certify and coach healthy conflict communication skills so that companies can build cultures of Compassionate Accountability. To learn more, visit next-element.com.

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