

# SERVANT LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER

**TOPIC THIS ISSUE: HEALTHY CONFLICT DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

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*“If you avoid having difficult conversations you’ll likely have difficult relationships.”*



## LEADERS MUST EMBRACE CONFLICT

By: Bob Mason



Is there any place that is truly free of conflict? If there is, I haven’t seen it. The fact is that humans will always disagree, have differing goals, or just have bad days. It’s a leader’s job to manage, not prevent, conflict to make it a positive rather than

distracting force in the workplace. That seems like a difficult assignment. How does a leader manage conflict?

**The first step is to understand that conflict will always be present.** No matter how poised, composed, or peaceful a person may seem to be, there is always something that will bring them into conflict with someone else. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t have some issue or belief that will foster a disagreement with someone else. In fact, I don’t want to know anyone like that because I believe passion is important.

**Next, learn to use conflict to attain a better result.** There’s an old saying that if two people always agree, one of them isn’t necessary. One thing I’ve learned is that when I’m with a group of subordinates, I’m never the smartest guy in the room. Everyone there is an expert in their own area and it pays to listen to them. I welcome and encourage disagreement. It challenges my thinking and ensures important issues and concerns are not missed. When everyone agrees on

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a complex issue, I get concerned.

**Third, know the difference between helpful and harmful conflict.** Conflict that leads to personal attack or even violence is obviously bad. Unfortunately, there is a tendency of late to consider anyone disagreeing with the accepted wisdom as fostering a bad type of conflict. This isn't true! As a rule of thumb, consider any disagreement with ideas, processes, or methods as potentially constructive. These conflicts can be expressed without resorting to personal attack. Though he didn't actually say it, Voltaire is quoted as saying "I disagree with what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is a perfect philosophy for a leader to adopt. Effective conflict management includes ensuring that everyone has a chance to express their thoughts, in expectation of a fair consideration.

The previous three steps allude to the fourth. **The leader must encourage conflict.** That sounds almost ludicrous in today's world, but it's vitally important. First, exactly because today's world tends to discourage conflict, a leader must ensure everyone on the team is heard and that they can honestly express themselves without fear of censure. Second, by encouraging, and properly managing conflict, the leader provides a sort of relief valve. When conflict is stifled, the issues and problems causing the conflict will not go away, they're just suppressed. At some point, that pot will boil over with very bad results.

Lately there has been considerable discussion in the news about civility with everyone begging for civility towards each other. That's a great idea! But remember, civility refers to how you address yourself to others, not the subject of the conversation. Embrace the idea that it's okay, even healthy to disagree. Just be nice about it.



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## HOW GREAT LEADERS HANDLE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

By: Tal Shnall



Even though communication is the lifeblood of any organization, it's difficult to find a company that doesn't have its breakdowns in

this area. Part of a leader's job is to keep these to a minimum and handle effectively.

In reality, most people avoid conflicts and the confrontations required to deal with them not because they lack the will, but because they lack courage to overcome that fear of "what if" and the potential of something unproductive.

***No one is immune to workplace tensions- It is inevitable that you will have some challenging conversations with colleagues or customers.***

When we need to have a difficult conversation with someone—we always have that gut feeling of resistance. Fear and contemplation drowns that inner voice and we put the conversation off.

Meanwhile the other person continues to provide substandard performance, miss deadlines, engage in interpersonal conflicts and contributes to a toxic culture.

***The consequence of not having that uncomfortable conversation is costly.***

A recent study by Accenture revealing that, even in this challenging economic climate, **35 percent of employees leave their jobs voluntarily because of internal politics and conflict.**

***Judith E Glaser in her recent book about Conversational Intelligence*** says that, "...confronting another person with difficult conversations brings up potentially volatile emotions, so we move with



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*caution and keep our real feelings close to our chest. In the most extreme cases, when we are faced with situations that stir up highly charged emotional content, most of the tension and drama is actually taking place in our own minds."*

**Here are four ways to reach a constructive outcome, no matter how tough things can get:**

**Focus on Building Trust:** Every difficult conversation is an opportunity to improve the circle of trust. Assumptions and doubts block the development of trust. The key to trust is understanding the imperfections of every person. To trust is to create a safe space for the other person to be who they are. As a leader you need to help open the individual's mind to see solutions to problems, to get "out of the self-imposed limitation" and perceive solutions.

**Demonstrate Empathy:** *A leader seeks first to understand than to be understood. Sincere and selfless way:* Showing empathy and understanding, will lead to the development of mutual trust allowing individuals to open up their mind and heart and derive all the possible benefits to help move them towards a better relationship.

**Listen well:** Not only to what the person is saying but what he/she is feeling. To create clarity and to let people know you're genuinely listening, validate what they're feeling— and ask them to do the same.

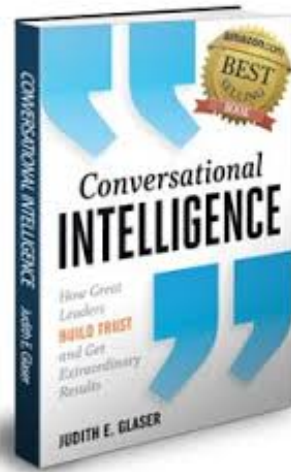
In fact, take a few moments to listen to their side of the story first before sharing yours, and always demonstrate you are genuinely interested in hearing their story. Difficult conversations are emotional and you need to get a good appreciation of the underlying issues that drive the emotions.

**Co-Create Solutions:** Work together on a common solution to the conflict you both are facing. This is a really great opportunity to collaborate and open up to new possibilities. With Co-Creating, each person is accountable to pull their weight into a constructive solution that can bring a win-win to both parties.



# EFFECTIVELY MANAGE CONFLICT WHEN YOU KNOW YOU'RE RIGHT

By: Judith E. Glaser



I'm sure this has happened to you: You're in a tense team meeting trying to defend your position on a big project and start to feel yourself losing ground. Your voice gets louder. You talk over one of your colleagues and correct his point of view. He pushes back, so you go into overdrive to convince everyone you're right. It feels like an out-of-body experience -- and in many ways it is. In terms of its neurochemistry, your brain feels as though it has been hijacked.

The body makes a chemical choice about how best to protect itself -- in this case from the shame and loss of power associated with being wrong -- and as a result is unable to regulate its emotions or handle the gaps between expectations and reality.

**So we default to one of four responses:**

- 1) Fight (keep arguing the point),**
- 2) Flight (revert to, and hide behind, group consensus),**
- 3) Freeze (disengage from the argument by shutting up) or,**
- 4) Appease (make nice with your adversary by simply agreeing with him).**

What do you do? Can you guess which behavior is the most common?

I can tell you that the fight response is by far the most damaging to work relationships. It is also, unfortunately, the most common.



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Luckily, there's another hormone that can feel just as good as adrenaline: oxytocin. It's activated by human connection and it opens up the networks in our executive brain, or prefrontal cortex, further increasing our ability to trust and open ourselves to sharing.

Your goal as a leader should be to spur the production of oxytocin in yourself and others, while avoiding (at least in the context of communication) those spikes of cortisol and adrenaline.

**Here are a few exercises for you to do at work to help your (and others') addiction to being right:**

1. **Set rules of engagement.** If you're heading into a meeting that could get testy, start by outlining rules of engagement. Have everyone suggest ways to make it a productive, inclusive conversation and write the ideas down for everyone to see. For example, you might agree to give people extra time to explain their ideas and to listen without judgment. These practices will counteract the tendency to fall into harmful conversational patterns. Afterwards, consider see how you and the group did and seek to do even better next time.

2. **Listen with empathy.** In one-on-one conversations, make a conscious effort to speak less and listen more. The more you learn about other people's perspectives, the more likely you are to feel empathy for them. And when you do that for others, they'll want to do it for you, creating a virtuous circle.

3. **Plan who speaks.** In situations when you know one person is likely to dominate a group, create an opportunity for everyone to speak. Ask all parties to identify who in the room has important information, perspectives, or ideas to share. List them and the areas they should speak about on a flip chart and use that as your agenda, opening the floor to different speakers, asking open-ended questions and taking notes.



## 5 STRATEGIES FOR TACKLING TOUGH UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS

By: Scott McDowell



*One of the hardest parts of being a leader is having difficult conversations: firing someone, getting into it with a client, apologizing for a mistake, or delivering bad news. Many of us*

*choose avoidance as often as possible. That uncomfortable feeling (in your gut, your hands, in the back of the throat) is a warning sign: tough conversation ahead.*

In the book *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, the authors write, **“Our anxiety results not just from having to face the other person, but from having to face ourselves.”**

Whether the source of the conflict stems from circumstance, a challenge to your identity as a leader, or protecting one’s turf, stemming the tide of personal emotions and dealing in a direct, measured way can let the air out and diffuse conflict effectively.

Here are some methods to use with your team, your boss, or anyone else in the face of everyday conflict.

### **1. Draw out possibility.**

Instead of using a blunt doorstep of a statement like, “This is the problem!” turn it into a question. “What would you say if...?” or “Could it be that...?” are both great disarming phrases.



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## **2. Share the impact.**

One tactic to disengage harsh feelings is to share the anxiety or tension that you feel about the conversation. Andrew Lighthouse, who runs workshops about how to communicate in high-stakes situations and writes the blog, *A Peaceful Resolution*, says communicating your anxiety about the conversation can help you “step out of automatic roles and become a bit more human.” Just stating your discomfort can soften the prickliness.

## **3. Use silence.**

Silence works especially well when facilitating teams of people through rough terrain like a strategy session or a pressure-filled meeting. Throw something out there and wait. See what bubbles up. Most people need to fill up the conversational space with words, so learn to embrace uncomfortable silences. Sometimes it just takes a moment for the important stuff to hatch. Just wait.

Communicating your anxiety about the conversation can help you step out of automatic roles and become a bit more human.

## **4. Coax insight.**

Not to be confused with giving advice. The phrase, “and what else?” lets your cohort formulate Option 2, usually a more measured and calmer, though less intuitive, response. “And what else?” is one of the most powerful questions according to Michael Bungay Stanier in his book, *Do More Great Work*. He offers variations on this theme: “Do you have any further thoughts on this?” and “Can you think of anything else?”

## **5. Extinguish blame.**

The need to blame is a reactionary feeling; it’s quite normal. But blame usually signifies more complicated emotions. In *Difficult Conversations*, the authors encourage talking in terms of “joint contribution” rather than blame, even though that tactic can feel incomplete. Blame, they say, “is a stimulus to search further for hidden feelings. Once those feeling are expressed, the urge to blame recedes.”

**Dealing head-on with your emotions can minimize anxiety and make tough conversations easier to handle. After all, a tough conversation is usually less difficult in hindsight.**