

# RECIPE FOR HEALTHY CONFLICT FOR PROFESSIONALS

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## 1. SELF-SOOTHE/CALM DOWN

A conflict cannot be settled if one or both parties are in a heightened state of arousal. This is how it works. When an individual sees danger, a cascade of experiences flood his/her body. First, the vagus nerve, which keeps our heart rate in check, gets inhibited and with the brakes now gone from our heart, it immediately speeds-up. As the heart rate “revs up”, our body releases adrenaline, which makes the heart contract and beat even harder and faster. Our central nervous system dreads an attack that may make us hemorrhage, so blood flow shuts down from our extremities and gets channeled to our central core. This increase in peripheral vascular resistance results in blood pressure elevation and our kidneys function to conserve fluid in order to protect us in case we are wounded. Other parts of our body start working overtime too. Our adrenal glands secrete more adrenaline and a stress hormone called cortisol. Our liver converts glycogen to glucose and releases it into our bloodstream so sugar can fuel our blood. All the while our heart is pumping blood to keep us prepared for the danger it senses. This physiological response of fight or flight, called *diffuse physiological arousal* or DPA, is appropriate when there is real physical danger. However, in our modern world, the fight/flight or DPA response frequently occurs without notice and floods us emotionally and physiologically in a way that makes us unavailable to know or control our selves and/or solve conflicts/problems with our partners and/or work colleagues. Another difficulty individuals have with respect to DPA is that they are often not aware when it is happening until it has escalated to a point from which it is difficult to return. It is important to develop a process for or the ability to recognize when we are moving into a state of heightened arousal and try to self-soothe before we escalate. DPA alters our perceptions and behaviors. It gives us tunnel vision and we see danger everywhere, even when it is not there. When our feelings are hurt (e.g. we believe we are being criticized, discounted or not respected) or we are afraid that we will not achieve an outcome that we associate with success, many people instinctively go into a DPA response. The DPA response diminishes our “window of tolerance” and invites us to protect ourselves through fleeing or disconnecting (I make my colleague a stranger) or attacking (I make my colleague the enemy).

In a conflict, if either individual is aroused, they must take a break and calm down before continuing to discuss an issue. Research suggests that this break should last at least 30 minutes, but ideally no more than 1 day. It takes at least 30 minutes to calm down (and some suggestions for self-soothing and for calming down are provided below). Taking a break that lasts longer than a day, can be considered “stonewalling” (one of Gottman’s 4 factors that can destroy relationships) and may be experienced by the other person as punishment, manipulation, or disinterest. If the individuals in conflict must take more than a day, they should acknowledge a commitment to re-engage and schedule a time to continue the discussion of the issue.

## PROCESS FOR SELF-SOOTHING

- A. Connect to what you are feeling and experiencing in your body
- B. Breathe deeply and slowly
- C. Focus on your breath and try to disconnect from your thoughts
- C. Tense and relax each muscle group
- D. Connect to your safe place and/or a positive memory/experience
- E. Breathe in compassion, kindness, understanding, and gratitude towards your self
- F. Continue this process until you experience internal peace

Daniel Siegel has created an acronym to describe our internal state when we are feeling in a place of centeredness and peace.<sup>[4, 5]</sup> Before attempting to solve a problem or find resolution to a conflict it is useful to self-soothe in order to achieve FACES or a state Siegel describes as Flexible, Adaptive, Coherent, Energized, and Stable. We arrive at this state (FACES) through an attitude or approach to life that meets the present moment with COAL or Curiosity, Openness, Acceptance (for the present moment), and Love (without judgment for ourselves in this moment).

## 2. SOFTEN HOW YOU START THE DISCUSSION

“Start-up” refers to how you bring-up an issue with a colleague. The way a conversation starts is generally how it will end.

- A. Say what you feel (notice your own emotional state with presence—How do you show up).
- B. Describe the problem objectively—avoid statements of evaluation<sup>[3]</sup> Notice how you “engage.” Can you engage with compassion, empathy and curiosity to genuinely understand the perspectives of the other.
- C. Say what you need (not what you don’t need)
  - Humans have needs (below is a list of human needs reproduced from the work of Oren Jay Sofer)<sup>[6]</sup> The ability to state a need requires courage to state your vulnerability, and when you can talk at the level of vulnerability, you are likely to break down barriers.
- D. AVOID: Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, Stonewalling<sup>[2]</sup>, and don’t continue if you or your partner feels Flooded (see self-soothing, below)

*Criticism:* Putting the problem INSIDE the other person; essentially making them the problem. Like putting a soccer ball inside them and kicking them around.

- Antidote is *complaint*. Putting the problem out there as a problem that everyone can kick around. When the soccer ball is not inside the other person, it is more likely that it can be kicked in different directions by people who have different perspectives. This invites true curiosity about the perspective of another. For example, can you see any way that the following equation, written in Roman Numerals, can be true?

$$X = I + XI$$

If someone is claiming that it is their truth, perhaps if you are self-regulated (self-soothed), you might be more inclined to try and understand their viewpoint (which you can do by walking over to their side and viewing from their perspective—try turning the page upside down).

*Defensiveness:* Defensiveness is a form of blame—it manifests as pointing a finger at others without acknowledging personal accountability. Defensiveness is often connected to a deep sense of shame that I am not worthy or adequate and if part of the problem rests with me, then I am flawed.

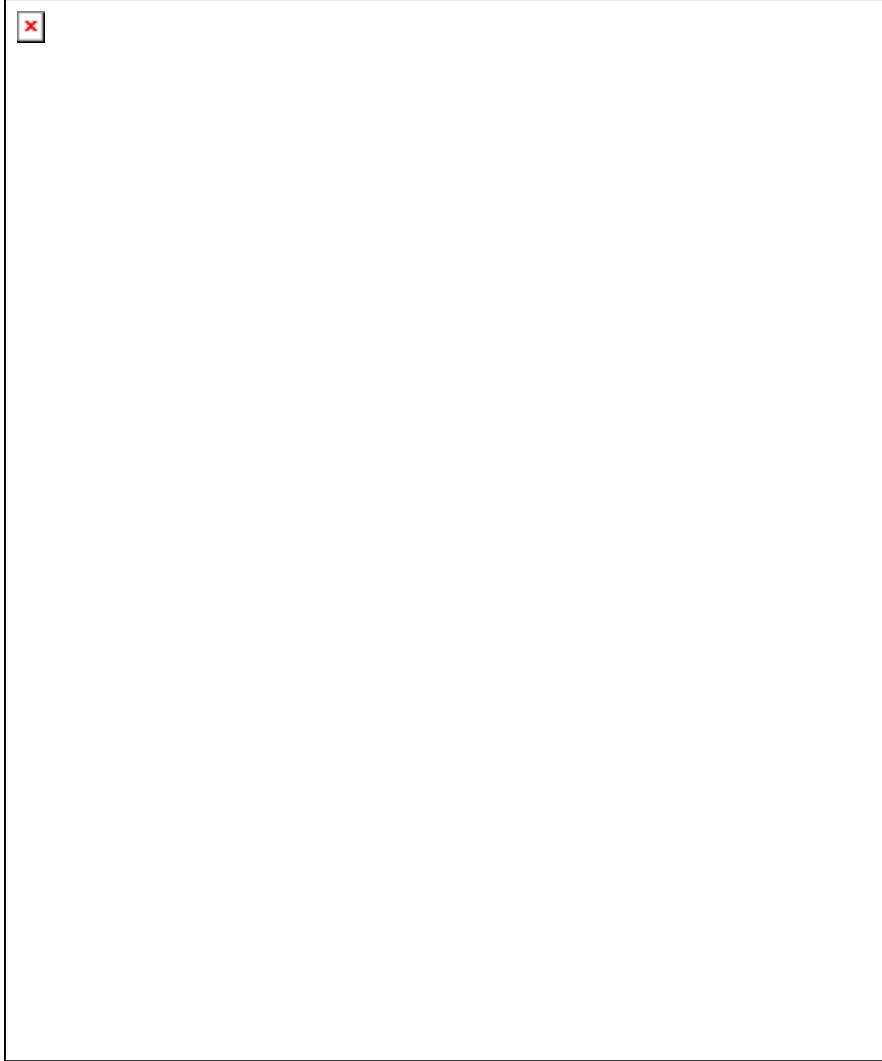
- Antidote is *self-accountability*. The ability to own a piece of the problem distinguishes the fine line between shame and guilt. With guilt, the person can acknowledge “I did this bad thing” and take accountability for that action or behavior. Shame is a deeper and darker quality which states “I am this bad thing” and seeks to protect the vulnerable and fragile core that—if discovered to be true by another—can signal that I am not worthy of being loved or valued. Some people have enormous difficulty with self-accountability and need to be approached with great compassion for the pain they are struggling with.

*Contempt:* Of the four factors that can destroy relationships, contempt may be the strongest. At its core, contempt is a dismissal of the competence, knowledge and value of the other person. It doesn’t need words and can often be transmitted with a look—one that conveys that the other person is “worthless” or “meaningless” and that their opinions and perspectives have no relevance or value. Contempt may be at the heart of bias in all of its forms. It is sometimes an enculturated belief that others (in whatever form the other appears—different race, gender, subspecialty or place of training...) are inferior.

- Antidote is *appreciation* of differences. The diminishment of contempt rests in the genuine desire to explore to understand and value the perspectives, talents and beliefs of others.

*Stonewalling:* Stonewalling manifests as “I don’t want to talk about it.” Usually, it is the result of “flooding” where the person feels overwhelmed (physiologically, emotionally and psychologically dysregulated) and is simply not capable of having a dialog. As mentioned above, it is not likely that you can solve a problem from a state of emotional or psychological dysregulation. When you sense someone is in this state, it is best to commit to dialoging later, after they have some time to regulate themselves.

- Antidote is *self-soothing*. As discussed above, when someone is flooded and stonewalling, it is helpful for them to find a way to regain their state of efficacy, composure and resourcefulness. Invite them to take the time they need and then commit to re engaging.



### **3. ACCEPT INFLUENCE BY REALIZING THERE ARE OFTEN NUMEROUS VALID VIEWPOINTS**

Accept and understand that there is no such thing as one absolute and true reality. Although it is human nature to think, “I am okay and you are defective”, this will not lead to a successful or satisfying relationship and it leads to “I am right and you are wrong”. It is paramount that you learn to Postpone Persuasion. Persuasion is a form of *coercion and telling*. Instead, it is valuable to adopt an attitude of curiosity and caring.

- A. Ask questions to understand your colleague’s point of view. Use open-ended questions. For example: What do you think about this? What feelings do you have about this that I need to know? What makes this so important to you? What is the worst/best part about this for you? Is there something that worries you and if so, what is it? What is it that you value here? What meaning does this have for you?

- B. Restate your colleague's point of view to their satisfaction (not to your satisfaction). Your colleague gets to decide when he/she feels understood. The key phrase you want to hear from them, after you describe what you are hearing them tell you, is: "Yes, that's right."
- C. Validate your colleague's perspective/point of view

Conflict Topic: \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the Blank)

- a. What I'm experiencing (feelings & thoughts) and what I want and need
- b. My colleague's point of view (what s/he wants and needs)
- c. My colleague's point of view makes sense to me because

#### 4. COMPROMISE/ACCEPTING INFLUENCE

Most of us fear compromising because we are afraid that we will have to relinquish something that is at the core of who we are or what we believe. We are afraid that we will have to give up on our most deeply held beliefs and yearnings. The goal is to define and divide your and your colleague's position into 2 areas:

- A. First, take turns defining the smallest, most minimal core area that you cannot yield on. What is your core need. (look at the list of needs above—a need is different than a strategy. A strategy is an action or a behavior that you insist than someone perform. A need is personal. For example, the strategy is "I need you to respect me" which means do what I tell you to do. The need is that I am worried that if something goes wrong, I might be viewed as inadequate, which could threaten my job security and tarnish my reputation. I need to feel like a partner in working with you to solve this problem). Expressing your needs at a human level shares vulnerability, which takes great courage, and can help you to be understood. Expressing a true need can change the win/lose situation to a win/win situation. Define what you need and what you have to have. *My core areas that are inflexible are: My colleague's core areas that are inflexible are:*
- B. Second, take turns defining those areas of greater flexibility. This could be when and how you get your needs met. *My flexibility areas are: My colleague's flexibility areas are:*
- C. Third, come up with a compromise. There are different levels of compromise. Talk about what you can and cannot do on this issue in terms of respecting your partner's position.

If you are stuck, here are some questions for understanding:

- A. How can we each provide understanding and support on this issue?
- B. Do you understand why your colleague's core issues are important to him or her? If not, kindly say, "Please help me understand what you need and why?" or "I know this is important to you and I'm trying to understand. Can you tell me more about what it means to you?"
- C. What do we agree about? What goals do we each have? Can we develop a common goal here?

- D. How do I better honor your need(s) here?
- E. What are our common or most important values here?
- F. What common goals do we have here?
- G. How can we understand this situation, issue?
- H. How do we think these goals should be accomplished?
- I. What are my areas of flexibility? Can I yield on how fast things happen? Or the extent to which it happens, or the cost, and so on?

## 5. REPAIRS

Relationships are messy and they all experience bumps. Since it is impossible to avoid misunderstanding with others, it is imperative that individuals learn to make and accept repair attempts. For a repair attempt to work it has to be both *made* and *accepted* with genuine sincerity. Some examples of potential repair statements are

- a. I might be wrong here.
- b. I really blew that one.
- c. Please, let's stop for a while. I'm willing to discuss it when I'm not so tired/overwhelmed.
- d. I need to take a break and get back to this when I calm down.
- e. Let me try again.
- f. That must have really hurt your feelings.
- g. I apologize. I was flooded and should have taken a break.
- h. Help me out here. I want to have a positive relationship with you and I seem to be unable to create that right now.
- i. Let's start over again.
- j. I can see my part in this.
- k. I really got worried about \_\_\_\_\_. How did you experience it?
- l. That hurt my feelings.
- m. How can I say it, so it doesn't sound so abrasive?
- n. It would be helpful to me, if you can listen to me without interjecting your point of view.
- o. I need your support right now.
- p. Can we talk again? I realize what my part of the problem is\_\_\_\_\_.
- q. Let's try to find some common ground.
- r. I need to finish what I was saying.
- s. I'm sorry. Please forgive me.
- t. I feel defensive. Can you rephrase that?
- u. You were starting to convince me, but I interrupted.
- v. I agree with part of what you are saying.
- w. Thank you for....
- x. My reactions were extreme, I'm sorry
- y. We seem to have such different perspectives on this. Help me find our common ground.

## 6. PROCESS AND UNDERSTAND FIGHTS

After a heated disagreement, when the individuals have some distance from the experience, it is important to process and understand what happened. Each person needs to:

- A. Describe your feelings during the disagreement (positive and negative)
- B. Describe your perceptions and thoughts during the disagreement
- C. Accept responsibility for your role in the disagreement (There is no such thing as a disagreement where only one person is accountable, i.e., figuring out who was wrong or right is not the goal and it doesn't exist)
- D. Talk about what you can do to make it better next time you have a heated disagreement ...what you can do better and listen to what your colleague thinks he/she could do better

Some examples of ways each person make take responsibility through sharing with their colleague are:

- a. I have been stressed and irritable lately.
- b. I haven't expressed enough appreciation for all that you do lately.
- c. I have been taking your efforts for granted.
- d. I have been overly sensitive lately.
- e. I have been overly tired lately
- f. I have not made time for recognizing the good that we are accomplishing.
- g. I have not been very supportive lately.
- h. I have been getting upset lately.
- i. I have not asked for what I need and expected others to read my mind.
- j. I have not been sharing my perspectives with you.
- k. I have been unavailable for collaboration and support.
- l. I have been distracted by other projects and unable to focus on this one.
- m. I have felt overwhelmed by the amount of work I have to do.
- n. I have not made time for things that are important.

### **7-A. DEEPEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR SELF AND YOUR COLLEAGUE. UNDERSTAND THAT EACH HEATED CONFLICT USUALLY CONTAINS HIDDEN VULNERABILITIES RELATED TO PREVIOUS LIFE CONTEXTS, i.e., CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES OR OTHER PIVOTAL LIFE EVENTS.**

Many experts believe that every heated disagreement has a hidden conversation that we are either unaware of experiencing or are fearful of expressing. Understanding our vulnerabilities and emotional allergies to certain situations helps us to have compassion for our self. Acknowledging these previous wounds to ourselves and working them through with a trusted friend or professional counselor/coach outside of the conflict situation can be useful in helping us to dissipate and/or manage our self. The more we understand our triggers and why we go ballistic over certain issues, the more likely we'll be to discuss them in an appropriate way. Concurrently, understanding that your colleague's reaction may have more to do with a previous vulnerability will help you to

have compassion and understanding for him/her. It is not your job to suggest or identify this to your colleague because it is up to them to work their own issues through. It is not even necessary for you to know the specifics of your colleague's vulnerabilities. Knowing, that an over reaction (to a situation or conflict) means it is usually about a deeper vulnerability than the issue at hand, can provide us with an opportunity to experience compassion for our self and others. There are many ways to expand and reclaim your own internal resources for managing the demands of professional and personal life.<sup>[8]</sup>

**7-B. IN ADDITION TO UNDERSTANDING THAT PRESENT EXPERIENCES CAN TRIGGER PAST VULNERABILITIES, IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT OUR HARD WIRING OR PREFERENCES FOR CERTAIN WAYS OF BEING OR DOING CAN BE DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE OF OUR COLLEAGUES AND STILL BE WITHIN A NORMATIVE RANGE OF ATTITUDE OR BEHAVIOR.**

There are a variety of personality and temperamental preferences with which people enter this world. Each preference or trait has its strengths and weaknesses.<sup>[9]</sup> Sometimes conflict arises when one individual thinks others "should be like him or her". It is best to accept our differences without judgment or expectation that others will change to become more like us. It is important to dialogue about differences and look for creative ways to engage each person at the level of their preference and strength. It is in our sameness that we connect, and in our differences that we grow.

**8. UNSOLVABLE PROBLEMS: MOVE FROM GRIDLOCK TO DIALOGUE**

Gottman's research has shown that about 69% of all problems are **not** solvable. This means that we will likely rehash many of our perpetual issues with colleagues on more than one occasion. The goal is to re-visit these problem areas in ways that preserve our dignity and the dignity of our colleague. It is important to acknowledge that my perpetual issues flare-up when I am stressed, tired and low on energy. Moving from gridlock to dialogue means that I accept myself as I am and my colleague as he or she is. We can come to understand, accept and even embrace (rather than resent) our differences when we no longer feel that we have to change to be loved, and when our colleague knows that they are accepted and valued for who they are, and not who you want them to be. It means that we each seek to understand the dreams, hopes, goals and qualities behind each of the positions we hold and the ways that they are contributing to our conflicts. It may be helpful to step outside the current problem and observe it using COAL in order to achieve a state of FACES. In order to do this I can ask these questions of myself and my colleague. You may want to take a deep, loving and compassionate breath as you consider each of these questions.

- A. What are my dreams, yearnings, and goals behind this conflict?
- B. What are my colleague's dreams, yearnings and goals?
- C. What do I hold sacred?
- D. What are my deepest values?



- E. What does my colleague hold sacred?
- F. What are my colleague's deepest values?
- G. Who am I at my core and can I send a message of loving acceptance to that core?
- H. Who is my colleague at their core and can I send a message of loving acceptance to that core?

## **9. CREATING A COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR COLLEAGUE(S)**

While work environments are not generally designed to meet the personal needs of individuals who work within them, there seems to be evidence that work morale is highest among colleagues who experience each other as friends. Attitudes, which invite friendship and collaboration, are: Appreciation, gratitude, respect, support, kindness, understanding, acceptance and valuing of differences, shared meanings, and positive inquiry. Colleagues who create friendships in which they turn towards one another, not away or against experience more vitality and collegiality. Some of the ways colleagues can turn towards each other are:

- A. Create and enlarge your friendship maps...know the simple and complex preferences, hopes, and goals of your colleague
- B. Spend time learning more about your colleague's life outside of work
- C. Create a regular schedule for checking-in with one another
- D. Honor your own needs and goals and also find ways (when appropriate) to shift from my goals to our goals without losing yourself
- E. Create rituals to celebrate accomplishments and acknowledge milestones
- F. Support and respect each other's roles...equally value both your and your colleague's contributions
- G. Define your goals and spend time discussing how to accomplish them
- H. Support your colleague's dreams and goals
- I. Create shared values and beliefs
- J. Find ways to say "yes" to your colleague
- K. Take your colleague's side against criticisms from others
- L. Value and appreciate similarities and differences
- M. Reward and celebrate efforts
- N. Recognize and honor that your colleague's professional life is only part of their life. They may have many other competing demands, which are important to them.
- O. Compliment your colleague and look for the positive

## **10. WHEN THE RECIPE FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION DOESN'T WORK**

Sometimes as hard as a person tries, this recipe for conflict resolution doesn't work. If this is the case, it may be necessary to get outside professional help. There are reasons too numerous to mention here as to why individuals are unable to develop the tools for healthy conflict with a coworker or professional colleague. Some of the more common reasons that this recipe doesn't work are: the individuals involved in the conflict have

personality preferences<sup>[9]</sup> that are so vastly different that working together/understanding each other is just going to take more time and energy than they want to give to working with one another at this time; sometimes, one person's deepest held values are just too different from another's to find common ground; and sometimes we or another's attitudes or behaviors trigger deeply held vulnerabilities that haven't been worked through so that working with one another is just too painful.

Finally, healthy conflict can only happen when both people want to resolve the conflict in a way that respects the relationship even when there are strong differences of perspective over which they are disagreeing. There are some individuals with personality disorders such as histrionic, narcissistic, psychopathic or sociopathic who have as their goal the manipulation of others. The ability to diagnose a personality disorder can only be done by a trained professional and it is not the author's intent to provide you with tools to do this. *It is critically important not to default to the diagnosis of a personality disorder for each individual who creates conflict—while severe personality disorders occur, they are not common and require expert evaluation to determine the diagnosis.* It is mentioned here because of the destructiveness of these individuals in professional settings because of their strong propensity for manipulation and the inability of some of them, in the extreme (such as sociopaths) to experience shame and remorse.<sup>[1, 7]</sup> They are not interested in finding common ground on which to build a relationship, but rather on using others as objects to meet their needs. Depending on the severity of the disorder with sociopaths and psychopaths being the most extreme, it is best to disengage and protect yourself from these individuals. It will not work to try and reason with them. Psychopaths and Sociopaths in particular are practiced at tuning into the vulnerabilities and yearnings of others and using them to manipulate these unsuspecting others for their own ends. One of the hallmark characteristics of psychopaths and sociopaths is their ability to lie and hurt others without any personal experience of guilt or remorse. Another frequently identified characteristic is the ability to win others over through pretending to be a victim of powerful or malevolent others. They often try to make others feel sorry for them (they may even use tears), but this is only a game in order to achieve their goals of manipulating others for their own self-serving ends. In addition, they are notoriously incapable of working on, much less creating, healthy teams. They will not take accountability for their actions, are grandiose, and deceitful. If you suspect you may be dealing with someone whose primary goal is to use you or your position for their own ends, it is best to get outside professional help and/or to get away from them as much and as quickly as possible. Trying to engage a narcissist, psychopath or sociopath in a conflict resolution process as described in this paper will only make you more vulnerable to their manipulation.

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