

CHANGE PAIN TO GAIN

The Secrets of Turning
Conflict into Opportunity

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INTERNATIONAL

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SECRET 1

CONFLICT DOES NOT NEED TO BE FEARED



In great teams, conflict becomes productive. The free flow of conflicting ideas is critical for creative thinking, for discovering new solutions no one individual would have come to on his own.

~ PETER SENGE

Conflict. Fighting. Disagreements. Different labels create different feelings for people. Disagreement may seem less negative than conflict or fighting. But no matter what you call it, when people turn against each other, it's challenging.

You can meet that challenge by expanding your perception about conflict. When you open your mind to examine any conflict, rather than fear it, you learn more skills to help you address it. Sometimes you can even find humor in it. Enjoy some poignant and humorous quotes about conflict in Appendix A.

Secret 1

CONFLICT DOES NOT NEED TO BE FEARED

Conflict is a puzzle that typically creates anxiety. Does conflict need to be avoided, or is it a battle to be won at all costs? The answer depends on the situation. What is always true is that conflict is a natural part of life that occurs at the intersection of danger and opportunity. The best approach is to be neutral.

Many people think negatively about conflict and want to avoid it. Others want to exert their power and win arguments. There is another way to approach it, however. Think of conflict as an opportunity for creating better understanding between different people. Of course people have different ideas and opinions. It is normal human nature since people have varying lenses through

which they view the world and any situation. The magnificence of life is found in the splendor of people's differences. Imagine an arboretum with only one flower, a symphony with only one note, or an advertising team with only one idea. No impact and not very interesting. It is the differences that bring beauty, music, and creativity. How people perceive and value differences in other people when they are in conflict will determine whether they have harmony in their lives.

Growing up in a family of nine presented plenty of opportunity for conflict as far back as I can remember. I am third oldest in a family of five girls and two boys, and we could claim the prize for sibling rivalry at its best. The middle child and my next younger sibling was Mary, my playmate and sometimes my nemesis. She was a cute little girl with blond ringlets and an angelic face. She had a speech delay, and I was often the only one that could understand her, so I was her interpreter. Our mother says Mary was the best baby of all. One early Saturday morning when we were playing house, Mary wanted the china doll my grandma gave me. When I wouldn't hand it over, she tried to grab it from me. I ran away, holding tight to my prized possession. As she was chasing me around and around the dining room table she would shriek, "Mommy, Patty won't let me bite her!" Her solution to conflict was to sink her teeth into it. It, of course, being me!

There may have been another way to handle this property rights issue. Had I considered the altercation an opportunity to practice conflict resolution, rather than conflict escalation, the scene might have played out differently. I could have just asked,

“Mary, what do you want to do with my doll?” I would have learned, by listening to her response, that she wanted to wrap it in a soft blanket and tuck it into a cozy cradle. While the doll took a quiet nap, she and I could go outside and have fun with our neighbor friends. That’s what I discovered when our mediator mama intervened.

Better and more creative outcomes can be realized by simply considering conflict as the intersection of differences. I first heard of conflict being defined as the intersection of differences from my colleague and training partner, Adele Ciriacy, nicknamed Spark-

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ie. She sees these differences intersecting in an adversarial or a non-adversarial way. Viewing conflict in this way has been invaluable to me from both a personal and a professional perspective.

The Chinese symbol for conflict aptly demonstrates the intersection concept as it combines danger and opportunity in its definition. The Internet offers many Chinese symbols for conflict, but the one thing they share is the idea that conflict is the intersection of different concepts.

CONFLICT IS NEUTRAL

Are you willing to consider conflict as neither good nor bad? Seeing conflict as a natural part of life will allow you to change your

mindset of danger, fear, and avoidance of conflict into a mindset of opportunity. Your new perspective will help you welcome differences as opportunities for creativity and problem solving. You'll be able to communicate more clearly, have better understanding, and enjoy improved relationships. Life improves when you manage conflict with civility and respect for the other person merely because that person is another human being. You can be a caring, empathetic person and resolve your differences at the same time. Imagine the possibilities.

People have different styles of conflict. Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann designed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) in 1974 that shows there are five conflict styles. Some individuals want to keep the peace and accommodate the other person or figure out a way to compromise or collaborate. Others want to compete and win the argument, and still others want to avoid conflict.

What is your preferred conflict style? You, like most people, probably resort to what is most comfortable for you, but may not realize you actually need to use all five styles, depending on the situation. While situations change, no matter who you are, there is always the potential for serious discord.

Years ago I had a major conflict with Sparkie, my colleague I mentioned. The story we wrote about this altercation became our signature story (the story we were known for) as we trained groups in facilitating meetings and the resolution of conflict. It's an example of conflict that was not easy to resolve but worth the effort.

A TURNING POINT: GIVING CONFLICT A SECOND CHANCE

Sparkie: Patricia and I like conflict; I assume you all feel that way, too, right? We actually know a lot about conflict. We are training partners and conflict is one of our topics. We suggest conflict can be a very good thing if it's seen as an alert to differences. If we are sensitive to the first small indications of conflict—the body language, voice, sense of discomfort—we're able to recognize it as the screaming message it is: there are differences here; take advantage of them! If we then stop, step back, become curious and look at those differences, analyzing what they mean and designing a way to use them productively, we can end up with some unanticipated and brilliant outcomes. The story of how we became training partners is a story about conflict that we would like to share with you.

Patricia: Sparkie and I discovered many differences as we designed a statewide training for educators in special education. For instance, I'm a big picture person.

Sparkie: I'm a bigger picture person.

Patricia: I also enjoy writing out the details of the plan.

Sparkie: Not me.

Patricia: I make to-do lists so I don't forget anything.

Sparkie: I lose them. I create visual cues, starting with pictures and graphics.

Patricia: I like words and outlines and notes.

Sparkie: I really like the process and discussing options.

Patricia: I want decisions and need a product. We can't talk forever; we need to start doing the training.

Sparkie: Okay, let's start.

Patricia: I don't know what my hurry was to start training. I was so nervous, with my knees shaking as I stood behind the lectern holding onto our script—every word of it. When it was Sparkie's turn, she roamed the room, responding to the trainees, not using the notes we'd developed. Interestingly enough, nothing terrible happened. I was intrigued. The next time we trained, I was a little more comfortable so I tried a more flexible approach, got creative, and didn't follow the script either. Very proud! After several trainings, Sparkie said she didn't like my creativity and went completely berserk.

Sparkie: Berserk is putting it mildly. Patricia was changing things during the training that had an impact on me. She'd say, publicly, "What about doing this activity a new way?" Again and again, I asked her not to say it. And she'd agree, then do it again anyway. I was so angry.

Patricia: I didn't get what her problem was. I thought I had stopped doing what she didn't like.

Sparkie: There came a time that almost broke us. During training, she asked me to do something new, and I said, "No." Immediately, I realized I looked like an idiot. I'd embarrassed myself, I'd reacted to conflict by ignoring its alert, and I'd done it publicly. I'll never do that again.

Patricia: I was angry with Sparkie, too. She had modeled flexibility and creativity, but when I tried to be these things, it wasn't OK with her. This was so unfair. It didn't look good for us, did it?

Sparkie: Once I stepped back from my anger, I got curious and began analyzing it. Was this partnership worth saving? Patricia was good at, and enjoyed doing, a lot of things I hated. Notes. Details. Lists. She could do those things, and I could do the things I liked. I realized the training—the product—was better with her than without her. However, we needed a new design—a new way—to allow our differences to interact in a way that would lead to a better product.

Patricia: I was analyzing what happened, too. This wasn't easy—to step back, analyze the conflict, and think about an intervention that would allow us to put our differences on the table in a way that felt safe for both of us.

Sparkie: We decided to meet once a week for breakfast, to listen “below the words,” to summarize our decisions, and to give each other space to do what we each needed to do in our own way.

Patricia: The weekly intervention worked. I came to understand that Sparkie's reaction to me changing how we did an activity during our training, took her way out of her comfort zone. It was hard enough for her to remember the details of how to do the activities in the first place. Once we kept things on the table and listened more carefully, we were able to understand and to identify differences in each other that were valuable to the training.

Sparkie: As a result, we are using those very differences to create further quality trainings. We found our turning point.

Patricia: This is so exciting! If we recognize conflict as an alert, we don't have to be afraid of it, be defensive or get into a fighting mode; we can just stop, become curious, analyze what's

really happening, and design an intervention that will make the outcome better than anything we anticipated. Would being able to do this make your world better, too? Why not try? Give conflict a second chance.

APPLYING THE STORY'S LESSON

If we couldn't work out a solution for ourselves, what good would we be in training others on how to resolve conflict? The depth of our commitment and the respect we had for each other's talents helped us reach a resolution and improve our working relationship. Whether man, woman, or child, conflict can be a challenge, but it doesn't have to turn people against each other. Think about the desired outcome and how you can reach it.

As a divorce mediator, I see couples no longer willing or able to resolve their differences. I'm saddened to see some people that had committed themselves to sharing their lives turn angry, hostile, and uncaring. I see my role as a mediator to bring civility and creativity to their process, however painful.

Conflict gives you the opportunity to determine what's appropriate in any given situation and whether your relationship with another person or achieving your goals is more important to you. Sometimes you give up one to have the other. In some situations, the best of all worlds is to have both through collaboration.

If you're like Winston Churchill, you will remember to see the humor in a situation or add some of your own. The story goes that he was having a heated argument with a woman who shouted at him, "If I were your wife, I would put poison in your coffee!"

Whereupon Winston answered, “And if I were your husband, I would drink it!”

Conflict is a natural part of life that occurs at the intersection of danger and opportunity—two differing concepts. Read on and discover how the next time you’re faced with the challenge of conflict or disagreement, you can handle it with care.