

## EI and Conflict Handling By Maureen Bowes

When destructive, conflict can have a toxic, and costly, impact on organisations. In this article I give my perspective on what conflict is, why people don't address it and on how practising emotional intelligence results in effective conflict handling. I also offer some practical tips on conflict resolution. Healthy conflict management requires a two-pronged approach with top-down and bottom-up pro-activity, in other words, senior management commitment to a skilful approach to conflict and staff who are empowered to put assertiveness principles into practice. I focus on the latter for this article.

### Good conflict / bad conflict?

Whatever your perception, conflict is inevitable because people are different. We can choose to address it or ignore it, to deal with it in a way that promotes both parties' interests or in a way that undermines the relationship. Many people perceive conflict as bad, but handled well, conflict is constructive and contributes to the organisation's success. I refer here to the skilful or planned conflict arising from the careful management of different views and challenges so as to inspire creativity, sharpen ideas, test solutions and encourage innovation. Also, to the skilful resolution of unplanned conflict arising when managers *deal with and resolve* issues in ways which support and enable team members to progress beyond their differences. The skilful use of planned conflict and the skilful resolution of unplanned conflict generally reflect a healthy organisation which is able to make use of both approaches to make sustainable advances.

Destructive conflict results from an unskilled approach and usually manifests as a toxic breakdown of communication which impairs a team's or an organisation's effectiveness and requires costly measures to put right. When individuals set out to improve performance by bullying, or setting team members against each other, or failing to give credit, or scapegoating, they generate destructive tensions. Similarly if managers fail to address issues when they arise or take sides or crush the expression of conflict, they set forces in motion which undermine team and organisational effectiveness. The unskilful approach to conflict can be a sign of a wider organisational malaise.

Choosing the skilful approach means:

- capturing the conflict in its early stages
- ensuring the differences are respected and
- presenting the situation as an opportunity for a creative exploration of options

But differences are often not nurtured for their potential, instead they are overlooked until they have become toxic and chronic and then must be addressed because performance has been affected. Since this delay is costly, it is worth considering why it happens, and continues to happen.

### Some reasons why we don't address conflict

#### Pressures

The pace at which most people work nowadays, along with the volume of work to be processed means, for many, that people issues are a lower and time-consuming priority. In resolution sessions it is common to hear 'with hindsight' comments like *'I should have seen it coming.'* or *'All the signs were there, I just didn't take notice.'* It's often the case that people go around with a kind of task-tunnel-vision that doesn't allow much space for awkward, people problems, but has to make space for the task of dealing with major interpersonal or interdepartmental conflicts. A change of perspective is useful here to get out of the tunnel and to perceive people issues as important, not peripheral, tasks. Addressing the differences early on, investing in a skilful, step by step approach to potential conflicts, nipping them in the bud, saves people and organisations huge amounts of time and money. Listen to the 'with hindsight' comments of the people who've been there.

## Fears

Many people, at all levels in an organisation, get anxious about the consequences of initiating conflict. We fear the discomfort and the consequences of doing what we need to do to prevent things worsening – telling it like it is, managing underperformance, raising difficult subjects. In a culture where we are not expected to 'rock the boat', these fears can tower above the positive consequences of addressing the conflict as equals – **I'm OK. You're OK.** The irony of this situation is that the outcomes of not addressing the issues are much more 'to be feared' than the outcomes of addressing them. Avoiding what needs to be done can result in people cracking under pressure, displays of very unprofessional behaviour, mistakes, huge amounts of time being wasted through poor decision making and a war of egos.

## Why the fear?

As humans, we have hard-wired into us 'fight or flight' responses. These have served us well and contributed to our survival on the planet for thousands of years, they still do.

These reflexes are strong within most of us even today and fundamentally contribute to our clobbering (fight) or pussyfooting (flight) approach. But, for most of the civilised situations we find ourselves in, these approaches are no longer appropriate because we are not being chased by a sabre toothed tiger and because we have evolved the intelligence to exercise self management:

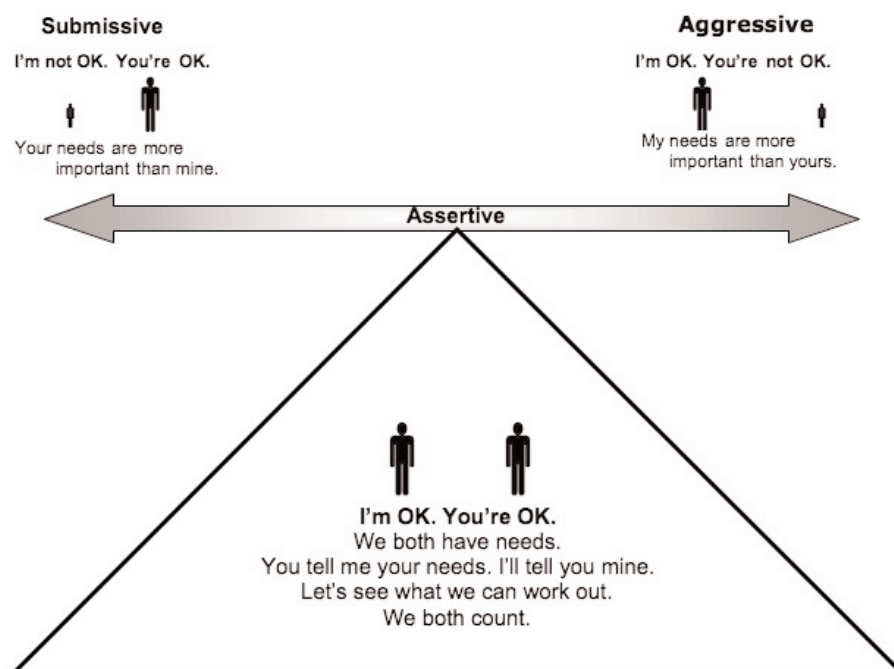


- 1) we can communicate *very effectively* with words and non-verbally
- 2) we can *control* how we behave and
- 3) we can *choose* to behave differently from how our emotions propel us to act.

This intelligent use of emotions forms the basis of assertive behaviour - the middle ground between fight or flight behaviour, where flight is submissive, and fight is aggressive. The middle ground is the place where we can be aware of the slow build up of emotions, recognise the tensions that need to be dealt with and realise that conflict doesn't mean war.

## The skilful approach to conflict

In most situations assertive behaviour minimises destructive conflict because of its problem solving **I'm OK. You're OK.** or Adult to Adult approach, the application of which is a major contributory factor to effecting culture change.



The creative options arising from these assertive principles and behaviours accommodate our rights and responsibilities as individuals and allow us both to address our conflicts, live out individual and company values and live with our decisions. Although this may seem like common sense, knowledge can be far removed from practice. How widespread is this approach of mutual respect? The answer lies within the culture of the organisation.

## Courage

It takes a certain kind of courage to face up to potentially destructive conflict, (particularly when a conflict straddles an organisational hierarchy), a courage that requires openness and honesty, and that demonstrates the intra and inter personal skills of telling it like it is while, at the same time, facilitating the other party's understanding and acceptance of what needs to be said. This demonstration of I'm OK. You're OK. can be fraught with perceived dangers - arguments, aggression, upsetting others, being disliked or ostracised, being misunderstood, being discounted for promotion or becoming the target of retaliation. So more often than not we tolerate the situation because we believe we can't do anything about it, or that nothing will change. (This gives the security of not having to face our anxiety or take responsibility for our behaviour.) We favour the chronic over the acute and so, without realising it, we contribute to, and become part of, the problem.

Alternatively, when we fear the conflict we may choose the manipulative option, an indirect, dishonest or deceptive means to achieve a particular outcome. We say something we don't mean, we play a game, we are not congruent with our values. For many who believe conflict is a dirty word and who do not know how to address conflict skilfully, passive aggression is their preferred choice.

And then, to complicate matters further, even apparently assertive behaviour can be manipulative. It sounds right, it's communicated with what seems like fairness and warmth, but in fact it's set up so that there's no choice and the manipulator maintains her/his power.

The following matrix gives some illustrations of conflict's many guises:

	<b>Skilful</b>	<b>Unskilful</b>
<b>Planned conflict</b>	Encouragement of difference within a secure setting Clarity about acceptable expression of conflict Planned entry into and exit from conflict Pushing someone to get the best out of them Challenging someone Cut and thrust Confrontation Competition Giving difficult / constructive feedback	Insulting someone, provocation Aggression Bullying someone Ignoring someone, not speaking Hostile behaviour Excluding others Sabotage / theft / damage Withholding information Manipulation Dishonesty
<b>Unplanned conflict</b>	Listening Taking time to respond Recognising important priorities Negotiation Seeking resolution	Insensitivity A self-centred approach Not considering your impact on others Ignorance Passivity Ineffective communication Deception <i>"I can't say that to her/him!"</i> <i>"I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings."</i> <i>"Things are the way they are."</i> <i>"It won't make any difference."</i>

## Applied emotional intelligence – the skilful approach to conflict

Whether we are resolving personal conflicts or facilitating a resolution between others, success depends on **commitment** from both parties (The success of the resolution is often in direct proportion to the level of shared commitment.) and **knowledge** of:

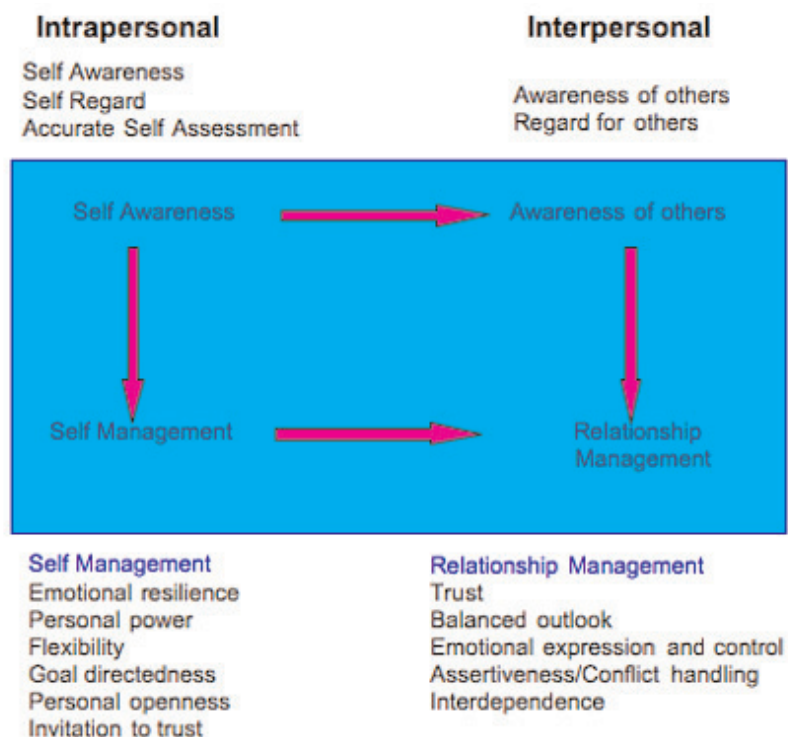
**What we feel**

**What we want**

**Taking appropriate action**

**Appropriate behaviour**

Conflict tests all aspects of emotional intelligence. Using the Individual Effectiveness model (CAEI 2000), we can map out the components of an interpersonal relationship and use this as a guide to fulfil the above requirements for success.



© Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence

Scale 14 of the IEq measures how skilfully an individual approaches conflict.

## What we feel

Our feelings are our signals to action. To be sure of what to do in conflict, we need to know, really know, what our true feelings are. It's common, for example, in conflict to think or believe we are angry and to turn this into revenge, when with a little more reflection, we would be able to locate the anger in our body and recognise a whole cocktail of feelings contained behind the label 'anger', for example disappointment, jealousy, hurt, sadness, embarrassment. In conflict people usually react to the pain of their most immediate or most recognisable emotion, without reflecting on what's stashed away behind it. This takes a good level of **self awareness** to know, at a personal level, what we are up against and therefore to determine what we want. If we make mistakes in identifying what we feel and what we want, the conflict is likely to recur.

**What we want**

Achieving what we want from conflict requires effective **self management**. For example, if our emotional resilience and sense of personal power are low, we may opt for a submissive course of action. Broaching the subject with the other party is a high hurdle to jump, and, without a strong sense of self worth, high emotional resilience and personal power, it's easier to shy away from the first hurdle. Choosing to increase our resilience would bring very different outcomes. The Individual Effectiveness framework can guide us towards our vulnerabilities and strengths in the conflict and so raise our awareness of what we want and therefore what action to take.

**Taking appropriate action**

Conflict heightens our interdependence with the other party, which means the situation requires give and take. Conflict will not be resolved if either party is unwilling to see both perspectives. **Awareness of others** is essential, bringing a degree of empathy for what the situation is like from the other person's perspective. While it is difficult to know what the other person is going through, we can read behind the words, pick up on their signals, ask questions and listen hard to build some rapport and to ensure our responses keep us on the right side of progress.

**Appropriate behaviour**

Conflicts are resolved successfully when both parties are able to maintain mutual respect. When our words and behaviour demonstrate the I'm OK. You're OK. problem solving approach. We can still respect the worth of the other person even if neither party is comfortable with the behaviours or actions that have taken place. The foundation of successful **relationship management**, and therefore conflict management, is the demonstration of a high level of **self regard** and **regard for others**. With this dynamic established, conflict resolution shifts from *me against you* to *us against the problem*. This creates a positive attitude towards conflict as both parties feel 'OK' and believe the opportunity is there to achieve fair and constructive outcomes, to clear the tensions and to stimulate new goals and interests.

**Managing conflict**

Conflict tests our attitude and our behaviour. If we are in a facilitator or mediator role, when emotions are fraught, the blame score is high and forgiveness is zero, it is crucial to demonstrate the skilful approach to conflict – to have the respect of both parties, to demonstrate diplomacy and tact, and have the courage to tell the truth with care and without compromise. To have earned this respect a facilitator or mediator will be known for putting her/his values into practice – the courage of open and honest communication, trust and trustworthiness. S/he will walk the talk consistently, not pay lip service to company values. This skilful approach is the emotionally intelligent approach. If leaders, managers and supervisors don't demonstrate the appropriate attitude and behaviours in these delicate areas, they lose some credibility and respect because without the right attitudes and habits the conflict is likely to escalate further, resentment flare and people feel patronised with quick-fix suggestions.

## Tips for resolving conflict

- Talking and listening must occur  
Address the need to talk about it face to face. *I'm concerned about our differences on the marketing project. Can we take some time to talk them through?*
- Arrange a suitable time and place
- Agree to meet for as long as it takes to work things out  
i.e. both need to keep enough time clear
- Address the need for contractual **guidelines** to create the right climate  
If people don't feel safe, if they feel too vulnerable, they will be reluctant to meet face to face. They know they might shout, cry, withdraw or lose their temper and so they need to know they will be in an environment that will protect them. Groundrules need to be in place and referred to – *no shouting, no put-downs and no walking out part way through* are some useful pointers to start with.
- Accurately identify the issue(s)  
Take time to reach agreement on what the problem really is. (It is often not what it seems.) You will each have your own perspective. You both have to be sure what the problem is to reach a successful solution. If you don't identify this accurately now, the problem will re-emerge. *You need to ask yourselves What's really going on here?*
- Identify areas of agreement
- Specify areas of disagreement or contention
- Identify shared interests – What's in it for me? What's in it for you?
- Specify the action needed by each party.  
Acknowledge joint responsibilities and required changes in behaviour.
- Arrange to follow through - revisit, review and reinforce

## Aim to achieve the following results

- To move from 'me against you' to 'us against the problem.'
- To learn the demands on the other person that prevent her/him from meeting your needs.
- To discover assumptions and inaccurate perceptions.
- To increase mutual willingness to compromise in order to maintain the relationship.

**“You get what you tolerate.”**

Destructive conflict doesn't have to be an accepted norm within an organisation, it's true differences will always occur but, handled skilfully, will contribute to the organisation's strength and success. Preventing and minimising destructive conflict, as well as generating constructive or creative conflict within an organisation is a delicate balance, the starting point for which is facilitating the **I'm OK. You're OK.** approach between individuals and teams and ensuring this ripples out across the organisation from its core. Organisational cultures are less and less tolerant of inequality of opportunity and behaviours that do not accommodate diversity. Emotionally intelligent behaviour is evolving throughout organisations in a similar way and is increasingly expected as the norm in successful teams and organisations. Emotionally unintelligent behaviour - shouting, losing tempers, bullying, intimidating people, colluding with destructive conflict, is being eliminated as people are empowered to assert their right to dignity at work.

As people aspire to and apply the principles of an **Adult to Adult** culture, to emotionally intelligent behaviour, they will thrive on the absence of toxic relationships and the very real presence of creative difference.

© Maureen Bowes 2005

Centre for Applied Emotional Intelligence

Sources

***The Individual Effectiveness Questionnaire - psychometric assessment*** – [CAEI/JCA 2000]

***The Facilitator's Handbook*** – by John Heron [Published by - Kogan Page 1989]

***Managing Differences*** – by Daniel Dana [Published by - MYI Publications 2001]

***Difficult Conversations*** – by Anne Dickson [Published by - Piatkus 2004]

*Applied EI Issue 4, May 2005*