

# In Conflict? Make It Their Problem

by [Mike Hawkins](#)



Most people are innately wired to be in relationships. We are made to be with other people. Yet relationships are often frustrating if not unbearable. At some point, every relationship, personal or professional, has conflict. Some relationships have a lot of conflict. Some end because of it. Many business partnerships fail due to conflict. So do marriages, friendships, and family relationships end as a result of conflict.

With conflict so prevalent, there must surely be proven approaches to overcoming it, right? Well, for sure, there are many ideas and approaches. There is also help available from many people such as friends, family, counselors, pastors, mediators, arbitrators, managers, and parents. There are also countless authors, books, and articles with a multitude of perspectives on overcoming conflict. Yet with so many resources and approaches, conflict abounds.

Wouldn't it be great if overcoming conflict was simple? Maybe you've even thought, "why can't we just get along?" The answer is "we can't" because there are so many sources of conflict. Virtually any difficult circumstance or miniscule difference in opinion, personality, style, or behavior is fuel for conflict. Consider how many conflicts in your life come from these common sources:

- Differences in personalities, beliefs, values, and attitudes, e.g. who people are
- Behaviors and words, e.g. what people do or say which includes:
  - Differences of opinion
  - Underperformance
  - Intentional disrespect
  - Unintentional disrespect
- Issues within people such as relational immaturity, emotional dysregulation, selfishness, and dishonesty
- Circumstances, events, and problems outside of people's direct control

What makes conflict especially difficult is when it becomes a cycle. One person says or does something, an *action*, that triggers another person to say or do something in response, a *reaction*. The reaction then triggers the initial person to say or do something else which then starts a cycle that repeats and deepens the conflict.

Whether a one-time conflict or a recurring conflict, what is the best way to stop it and repair the relationship? Most experts on conflict agree that the start to a relationship turnaround depends on one, or ideally both people, deciding the relationship is worth improving. That decision is then followed by each person becoming self-aware enough to take responsibility for their contributions to the conflict, whether actions or reactions.

When one person takes and maintains responsibility for addressing their contributions to a conflict, and as long as they sustain visible progress, they in effect turn the problem over to the other person. While they can't nor should try to control the other person, they make the problem the other person's responsibility. If the other person then addresses their responsibilities in the conflict, the conflict resolution journey begins. If the other person chooses not to address their responsibilities in the conflict, they in effect become the problem and in time it becomes clear they are the problem.

Listed below is a step-by-step approach to overcoming conflict based on proven best practices. Use this as a checklist in your own situations or use it to help and coach others in theirs:

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- 1. Reflect on the conflict:** Recognize that you've been triggered. Consider what happened in you and to you. Realize that in you or outside of you is an undesirable condition, thought, behavior, or pattern. Give yourself some time to reflect. By all objective and healthy standards, the primary issues might be the responsibility of the other person, but don't assume they are. Give serious thought to your role and responsibilities. If appropriate, journal your thoughts. Select the relevant questions below to ask yourself:
  - Do I want to invest in overcoming this conflict and repairing the relationship?
  - What hope for a better future might motivate me to pursue relationship repair?
  - What are the actions and reactions that cause the conflict?
  - How might I have misunderstood these actions and reactions?
  - Have I sought my own validation from others perhaps instead of a more accurate explanation?
  - How might I get a more accurate understanding of both of our contributions to the conflict?
  - Can I disregard my perceptions of the other person's disregard? Can I override my tendency to react?
  - Do I realize that by reacting to the other person I'm allowing them to control me?
  - Can I be more grateful and see the other person more positively?
  - Can I change my triggering beliefs or override my innate negative perceptions?
  - How might I replace my negative reactions with empathy and compassion for their perspective?
  - How can I improve the quality of my communication including my tone, word choice, and listening?
  - In what areas might I develop to improve this relationship?
  - Do I have the maturity to not defend what I believe is right in preference for the relationship?
  - Might the other person's values or motives be honorable, just not well communicated or implemented?
  - Might there be other circumstances that are contributing to the conflict?
  - How might I more accurately understand the context behind which the other person is coming?
  - What are the person's needs that cause their actions and reactions? Can I respect these needs?
  - Can I be more openminded and willing to find a compromise?
  - Can I rely on my spiritual beliefs and let go of my concern?
  - Can I apologize? Forgive?
  - Can I take responsibility for my contribution to this conflict?
  - Can I be the best version of myself regardless of what they do or say and not depend on or expect anything from them?
- 2. Decide what to do:** Calm down before reacting any further and deciding how to respond. Decide if the conflict should be ignored or engaged. Was it a single event with unique circumstances or something that isn't going to get better without discussion? Is your trigger healthy? Is it something you need to work out within you or with others? Is the conflict merely a difference in opinion that simply needs one or more parties to be more openminded and understanding?
- 3. Have the right mindset:** Engage the conflict with an "us" instead of "them" mindset. Consider that you are on the same team, not opponents. Show up with a kindhearted demeanor. Start with empathy. Put yourself in their circumstances before sharing your thoughts and expecting them to listen to you. Have a mature, humble, cooperative, and openminded spirit. Appreciate the opportunity to learn something new and become better through this adversity.
- 4. Agree on the goals:** Start the discussion with the other person. In this discussion, start by fostering a spirit of cooperation by agreeing on common ground, overarching goals, a shared vision, and the desired outcome for the relationship. Discuss what is working and for what you are grateful.
- 5. Agree on the process:** Agree on the process to be followed in discussing and overcoming the conflict. Agree to be gentle and calm. Agree to only state opinions as opinions and feelings as feelings, not as facts. Agree to be respectful and not exaggerate. Agree to not jump to conclusions, especially negative ones, at least not until there is transparent two-way discussion and accurate understanding. If needed, agree on how

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to gain better self-awareness such as pausing and getting non-biased feedback from others before proceeding any further.

6. **Understand the triggers and what happened:** Discuss what actions and reactions happened including what was said or done, how it was interpreted, and how it was triggering. Discuss what made it triggering such as feelings of disrespect, fear, rejection, betrayal, control, blame, shame, or defense.
7. **Share deeper thoughts and needs:** After discussing specific actions and reactions, discuss the deeper issues causing the feelings, actions, and reactions. Each person shares their underlying concerns, beliefs, fears, biases, needs, and motives without defending or blaming. Listen to learn rather than to react. Seek to understand and empathize with the other. Avoid asking leading questions, using inflammatory language, or making passive-aggressive comments that merely create more reactions. Be as brief as possible so not to come across as defensive or blame shifting.
8. **Take appropriate responsibility:** Each person admits and accepts responsibility for their part in the conflict. Take turns providing genuine apologies for the words and behaviors that triggered the other. Take responsibility for the coping mechanisms, defensiveness, self-protection, self-promotion, explaining, fears, biases, and beliefs that were involved. Admit how these behaviors probably caused negative reactions by the other.
9. **Agree on needs and issues:** Before discussing solutions to resolve the conflict, sufficiently discuss and agree on the healthy need(s) to be fulfilled. Agree on the conflict-causing issue(s) to be resolved. Move from what was said or done in the past to the agreed-upon issues and needs that need to be addressed now and in the future.
10. **Explore solutions:** Explore and agree on how to fulfill the needs and resolve the issues. This may include seeking help from others. It may include reframing perspectives and changing fundamental beliefs. It may involve making changes to priorities and the ecosystem in which either person works or lives. It will almost always involve making changes within each person. Look for “both/and” alternatives to the extent possible. Focus on what each person needs to do to satisfy and show respect for the other.
11. **Forgive:** Forgive that which the other person apologized, took responsibility, and agreed to address. Acknowledge their change in heart and mind. Acknowledge their willingness to change, develop, and start a new trajectory. Without waiting for full relationship repair or complete assurance of a change in behavior, give them the opportunity to feel good about their new perspective and to make progress.
12. **Move from talking to doing:** Implement the agreed-upon solutions that fulfill each other’s needs. Implement the actions that address the agreed-upon issues. Agree on how to be accountable as changes are made and actions are taken. Enroll the help of accountability partners if appropriate.

These steps when taken by both parties provide a very good chance for conflict resolution. However, if either person ignores one or more steps, the effectiveness of this approach is significantly reduced.

Best of luck in resolving the conflicts you encounter!

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