



Considered Conflict: How to have a win-win approach to conflict

A practical and authentic guide for Leaders



“Daring leaders are never silent around hard things.”

- Brené Brown

“Don’t raise your voice, improve your argument.”

- Desmond Tutu

Conflict is part of every Leader's job

- Work and conflict are synonymous. Conflict of some kind is experienced by 85% of employees at work, including at the executive level.
- Rates of conflict have increased and 30% of employees believe that this will continue to increase.
- However, conflict is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Conflict can actually be helpful in some cases.
- Knowing how to handle unhelpful conflict and curate the helpful type of conflict can lead to improved productivity, innovation, creativity, performance, and wellbeing.
- Conflict in the workplace is like bushfire; can be destructive, or it can promote resilience. The difference between the two is planning and control. Planned and controlled burn-offs can reduce fuel loads, promote regeneration, enhance biodiversity and improve soil health. So too, the right conflict, at the right time, in the right amount can be beneficial to performance and relationships.

References:

- <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/topics/civility>
- The Myers-Briggs Company, 2008

The four biggest challenges with non-productive conflict in the workplace

The outcomes of conflict, when not handled well, can lead to significant negative consequences for individuals, teams, and organisations as a whole, including:

- **Poor psychological safety**

- If conflict is not managed constructively, it can erode trust, leaving employees hesitant to share ideas, give feedback, or speak up about problems, leading to missed opportunities for innovation, reduced collaboration, and low morale.

- **Productivity drain**

- Conflict can drain the energy, time and resources of your people, diverting focus from productive work. It can also lead to increased absenteeism and turnover. Output will decrease, as will employee engagement and organisational commitment.

- **Resistance to innovation and change**

- In non-productive conflict environments, people become more focused on maintaining the status-quo and self-protection than on contributing openly to new ideas or initiatives. Team members will often fear that any missteps or suggestions could exacerbate existing tensions or lead to criticism, which suppresses creative problem-solving and discourages risk-taking. Additionally, unresolved conflict can deepen divisions among employees, creating a culture where people are less inclined to collaborate or share ideas.

- **High employee turnover**

- Unresolved or mismanaged conflict often creates a tense and unproductive environment, leading employees to feel undervalued or frustrated. When team members feel unsupported or unable to voice concerns, their morale declines, and they are more likely to increase workplace absences or seek opportunities elsewhere. Over time, this high turnover not only disrupts team dynamics but also leads to increased costs and lost knowledge within the organisation.

The six biggest challenges for Leaders when it comes to conflict

Holding a leadership role in an organisation can feel like juggling five hot potatoes—especially when conflict is in the mix, adding an extra layer of complexity to every decision. We often need to:

- **Balance fairness and authority**

- Leaders often struggle to balance their authority with a fair, unbiased approach to conflict resolution. Being perceived as partial or overly authoritarian can erode trust among team members.

- **Encourage open dialogue**

- Creating a team culture where employees feel safe to discuss conflicts openly can be difficult, especially in teams with a history of suppressed or avoided conflicts.

- **Dealing with high emotions**

- Managing conflicts often involves handling intense emotions, which can be uncomfortable and require a high level of empathy, patience, and communication skill.

- **Fostering a growth mindset about conflict**

- Shifting the team's mindset to see conflict as a potential growth opportunity rather than a threat requires a cultural transformation, which can take time and consistent reinforcement.

- **Manage perceptions of competence**

- Leaders, especially female leaders, may feel pressure to prove their competence, making them more hesitant to engage in conflict for fear that it will reflect poorly on their leadership abilities.

- **Manage the impact on team morale**

- Leaders need to address conflicts in a way that preserves team morale and cohesion, without overstepping or micromanaging, and with minimal disruption to team momentum and productivity.

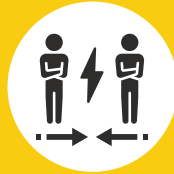
The six fears of Leaders when navigating conflict

The root of the discomfort we often feel about engaging in conflict as Leaders can include the fear of:



Negative outcomes

We often automatically and unconsciously label conflict as difficult, stressful, and bad.



Fear of damaging relationships

Leaders may fear that intervening in conflict will hurt their rapport with team members or lead employees to view them as biased or unfair.



Fear of appearing incompetent, aggressive, or emotional

Some leaders worry that if they can't resolve conflicts effectively, it may reflect poorly on their leadership abilities.



Fear of uncovering deeper issues

Conflict can sometimes reveal underlying organisational problems, such as structural inefficiencies or cultural misalignments, which can be intimidating for leaders to address.



Fear of creating lasting division

Leaders may be concerned that conflict will lead to long-term divisions within the team, harming collaboration and weakening team cohesion over time.



Conflict escalation

Leaders may be concerned that engaging in conflict could escalate tensions, requiring emotional energy to manage both the conflict itself and the expectations to remain composed, further risking burnout to themselves and others.

The Considered Conflict journey

Many of us can be reluctant or hesitant to engage with conflict, however, we all need to. Understanding current perspectives towards conflict are important, as this knowledge can inform the actionable steps that can help on the journey to build confidence to curate considered conflict.

PERSPECTIVE/ ATTITUDE	FOCUS	CONFIDENCE
Considered	Curator	95%
Curious	Intentional	50%
Hesitant	Flexible	10%
Reluctant	Open	0
Avoidant	Aware	-10%

Unpacking the Considered Conflict journey

- **Avoidant**

- Actively steers clear of any situation that could lead to disagreement, frequently diverting conversations or deflecting responsibility to escape tension. Problems and issues are often ignored and tactics like distancing or passive compliance are used to evade direct engagement.

- **Reluctant**

- Tends to withdraw or remain silent during disagreements, often feeling uneasy or anxious about any confrontation. Behaviours like procrastination on addressing issues, sidestepping difficult conversations, and prioritisation of relationships over effective conflict resolution.

- **Hesitant**

- Exhibits a cautious and reserved demeanor, preferring to avoid confrontation to maintain harmony and avoid potential negative fallout. They may downplay disagreements, refrain from voicing dissenting opinions, and choose to accommodate others' viewpoints, prioritising peace over addressing underlying issues.

- **Curious**

- Approaches disagreements with an open mind and a willingness to explore different perspectives, viewing conflict more broadly as an opportunity for learning and growth. They ask questions, actively listen, and seek to understand the underlying causes of conflict, aiming to foster robust, constructive dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.

- **Considered**

- Takes a thoughtful and deliberate stance, carefully weighing the potential outcomes before engaging. They prioritise understanding all sides of the issue, approach and manage conflict with calmness and reflection, and aim to address problems in a balanced and fair manner, ensuring that their responses are measured and strategic. Understands that conflict can be helpful and inserts it where there is too much agreement or not enough robust discussion.

The truth about conflict

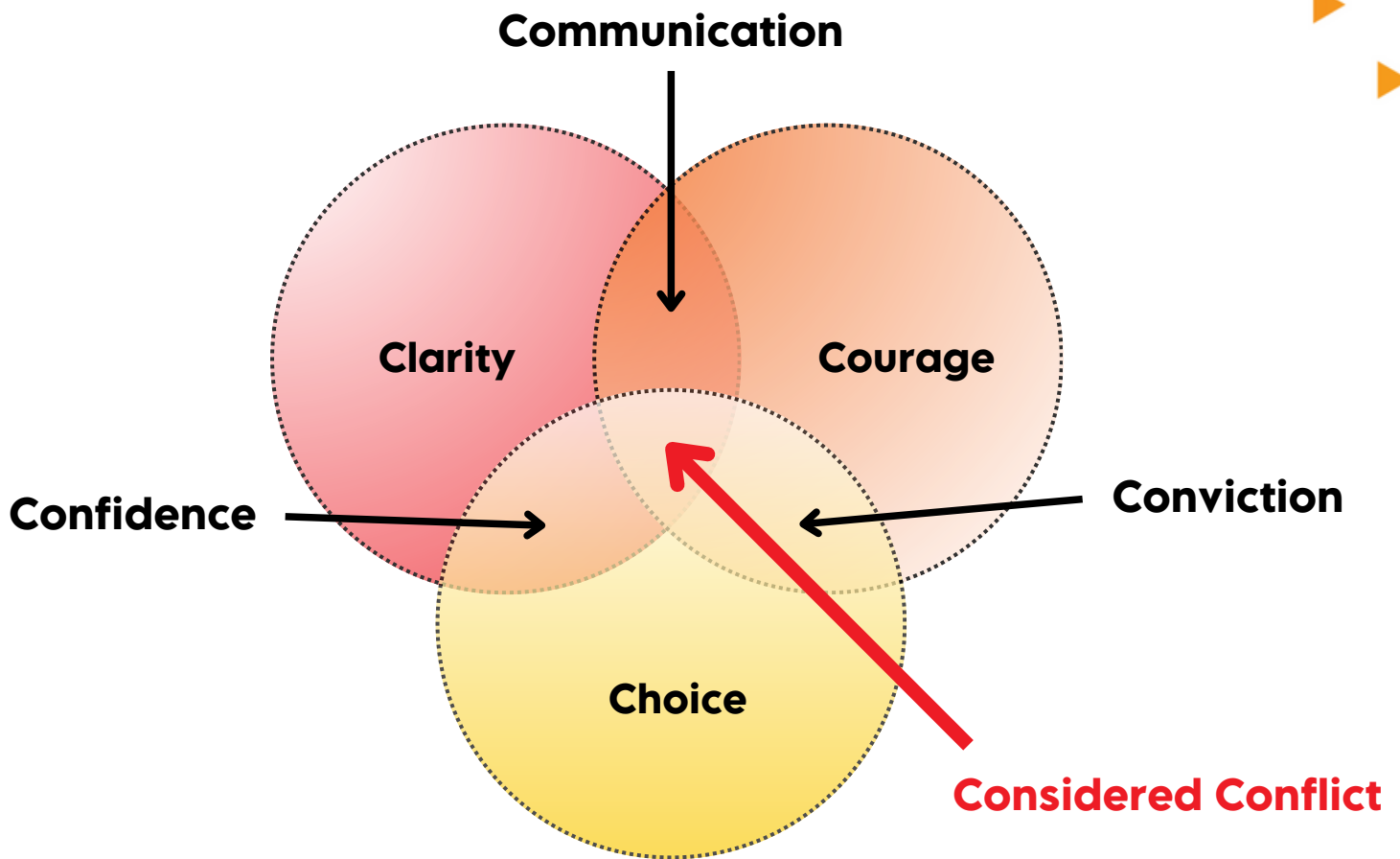
- Conflict has value, when curated and managed well. However, doing so is often hard.
- Conflict comes from:
 - Poor communication
 - Lack of honesty and openness
 - Lack of clarity and accountability
 - 'Taboo' topics
 - Poor performance management
 - Lack of diversity
 - Low engagement
- Non-considered conflict can negatively impact performance.

Conflict: Performance Matrix

Conflict - when done right, at the right time, and in the right amount - can be beneficial to performance and relationships.



The solution is Considered Conflict



Benefits of Considered Conflict

Benefits for you and for your teams:

- Increased performance, innovation, and creativity
- Building capacity within teams to deal with predictable and unpredictable
- Reduces overthinking and stress
- Increases confidence, employee engagement and satisfaction
- Authentic and embedded psychological safety

Considered conflict, or conflict done right, has three components:

- **Clarity**

- You and everyone in your team clearly understands themselves as well each other. You have open discussions about conflict management styles in anticipation of conflict arising. Everyone understands that conflict can have purpose and knows what good conflict is and what negative conflict is.

- **Courage**

- Engaging in conflict can be uncomfortable and sometimes it's easier to hold back things that are important to you. Holding back or withdrawing is not good for anyone, so having the courage to speak up is critical. Courage means stepping out of our comfort zone, acting in alignment with our values (even when it is hard), and not accepting the status quo if it doesn't serve the greater good.

- **Choice**

- When conflict arises, you can react or you have a choice to respond. You also have the choice to inject conflict where you think it might be productive or important. Planning and controlling conflict is also a choice, just like controlled burn-offs.

- Clarity, openness and honesty in conflict when combined with courage will see your **communications** improve. You'll feel less like holding back your views, ideas, or feedback.
- When you realise and acknowledge the choices you have to raise issues that might spark conflict and there is a clear understanding of the what/why/how of conflict in the team, you'll be more **confident** to engage.
- Finally, the recognition of your available choices together with your courage will boost your **conviction**. The results of this conviction? Performance, influence, respect, and impact.
- Underpinning all of this is the goal of authenticity



“Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.”

– Ronald Reagan

“Conflict can destroy a team which hasn’t spent time learning to deal with it.”

– Thomas Isgar

Reflection questions

- How does conflict currently unfold in your role, and what impact does it have on your daily interactions?
- How confident are you in guiding and shaping conflict towards win-win outcomes?
- What results could a considered approach to conflict bring for you, your team, and your organisation?

ABOUT



Samantha Rush helps teams make decision better by unravelling complexity and facilitating decision making that challenges thinking and safeguards psychological safety.

With over 20 years as a financial services professional, including seven years in executive leadership, Samantha is a curiosity-driven person who loves exploring the magic that happens when different ideas combine, creating something new. Samantha is passionate about all kinds of growth and progress and has faced plenty of ambiguity and tough decisions during her time in Intelligence and Corporate Executive roles, as a Company Director, Business Advisor and Strategic Consultant across sectors and industries.

Aside from comprehensive and diverse experience, Samantha's qualifications include an MBA, Psychology, HR and Industrial Relations, and she is currently undertaking a PhD researching decision making. She is recognised as a Fellow of ANZIIF, a Certified HR Professional with AHRI and a Graduate of AICD. She is a Nationally Accredited Mediator, and member of various professional bodies:



**Australian Institute of
Professional Intelligence Officers**
The peak representative body for all intelligence professionals



**PROFESSIONAL
MEMBER**
2023

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
of COMPANY DIRECTORS**



For fun, she likes to make cheese, drink champagne, make short films and hang out with her cats.



Samantha Rush



samantha@samantharush.com



0499 284 459



www.samantharush.com