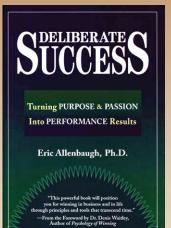
THE 12 WIN-WIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES[®]

Written by G. Eric Allenbaugh, Ph.D. ©2009

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THE 12 WIN-WIN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES[®]

Think of a time when you experienced significant conflict with another person – at work or at home. Considering how the situation evolved, to what extent do you and the other party feel satisfied with the result? Following the conflict, did the relationship stay the same, improve, or deteriorate? When you think of that past conflict, do you notice any gain or loss of body energy? What unfinished business, if any, do you have with that person as a result of that how that conflict experience was handled?

Conflict comes with the territory of life, and how you handle conflict often determines the quality of your relationships, whether personal or professional. Developing skill in handling difficult or sensitive conflict situations, therefore, is an essential life skill that has far reaching implications.

Virtually every conflict situation has two key elements requiring careful attention: 1) the issue, and 2) the relationship. For example, assume that your next-door-neighbor rescues a dog from the pound. You enjoy a friendly relationship with the neighbor, but are suddenly confronted with their new dog barking all day and night. If you elect to avoid the barking dog issue, you are likely to lose a lot of sleep and begin feeling resentful toward the neighbor. If confront the neighbor, you will likely experience some significant interpersonal difficulties. You are now challenged with the classic dichotomy in handling conflict: *How does one handle the issue of the barking dog while maintaining the relationship?* The "barking dog analogy" applies to nearly every interpersonal conflict.

This article explores **The 12 Win-Win Conflict Management Strategies**[©] that will assist in working through interpersonal conflict issues while preserving or perhaps even enhancing the relationship. Applying these pragmatic tools at work and at home will likely make a positive and significant difference in how you travel through life.

STRATEGY 1: Commit to win-win

Granted – not every disagreement will result in a win-win solution. Nevertheless, a significant majority of interpersonal conflicts can be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of both parties – particularly when individuals enter into the discussions with the intent to create a win-win outcome. Even if



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only one person initially seeks to create a win-win outcome – that approach will likely encourage the other party to join in the effort.

In exploring methods of handling conflict, I observed Dr. Covey challenge individuals to ask this thought-provoking question when confronted with a difficult situation: "Are you willing to engage in dialogue until we are successful in coming up with a win-win solution?" Great question! This approach creates a mindset that encourages both parties to creatively seek a mutually satisfactory outcome. The question also effectively addresses the "barking dog analogy" by setting a stage for dealing with the issue while preserving the relationship.

STRATEGY 2: Focus on interests – not positions

Typically, those engaged in conflict lock on to a position: "...*that is the way it is, and this is what I want!*" This myopic and fixed position essentially eliminates creative options, complicates resolving the issue, and generally results in relationship tension. There is another way.

In the book titled <u>Getting to Yes</u>, the authors described the difference between a "position" and an "interest." Imagine twin teenage girls arguing over an orange. Both say they want the orange and neither one is willing to move off her position. A parent gets involved and ultimately handled the situation by simply dividing the orange and giving half to each sister. Both sisters, however, remained unhappy. The parent, unfortunately, did not listen to why the sisters wanted the orange – the interest behind the position. As it turned out, one of the sisters wanted the orange to eat and the other sister wanted the orange peel to use in a cooking recipe. While both sisters vocalized their positions (wanting the orange), neither articulated her interest.

Interestingly enough, few people understand their interest behind their stated position. What they say they want, typically, is not what they actually want. Even if you ask them their interest, they will likely state their position. Your job as a win-win player, then, is to assist the other person in both discovering and articulating their interest behind their stated position. As you seek to understand their interests, be prepared for the probability that they will state: "*It sounds like you are arguing for my position!*" "*No*," *you respond*, "*I am seeking to understand your interests*." Once you have a good understanding of their interests and of your own interests, multiple win-win options are more likely to surface.

STRATEGY 3: Start with the facts, not your judgments

Imagine that your teenage daughter comes home late from a date the third time in a row. You might confront her at the door by saying something like: "You are so irresponsible! I am grounding you for the next 10 years!" At that point, your daughter storms off to her room, slams the door behind her, and doesn't talk with you for the next three weeks. Instead of reflecting on her broken promises related to returning on time, she fixates on her judgmental parent. Starting the discussion with your conclusions and emotionally charged judgments ("You are so irresponsible.") will likely escalate and personalize the conflict. The result? The problem behavior remains unaddressed while new stresses are introduced to the parent-child relationship. Once again, there is another way. Instead, start by sharing your observations:



"I noticed that you have come home late from the last three dates. That is not consistent with our agreement, and we need to talk about that." Starting with your neutral observations will likely create a mindset for a more rational and reasonable discussion. Likewise, sharing observations encourages both parties to focus on the issue rather than allowing personality conflicts to emerge. This approach also takes into consideration that there may well have been legitimate reasons for her tardiness.

STRATEGY 4: Assume a positive intent

During the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the United States, low trust levels resulted in both parties assuming a negative intent in several significant situations. Former President Ronald Reagan fueled that lack of trust by referring to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." In 1983, Korean Air Lines Flight 007 strayed into Soviet airspace. Convinced that the 747 was on a spy mission by the United States to test the Soviet military response capabilities, a Soviet interceptor shot it down with an air-to-air missile, killing all 269 passengers and crew aboard. The Soviets assumed a negative intent and acted accordingly.

Several years later, President Reagan took the bold action of flying to Moscow to personally meet with the then Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbechev. During those meetings, Reagan and Gorbechev became friends – good friends. That action warmed relations and improved trust levels between the two Super Powers. In 1990, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to participate in the Goodwill Games in Seattle, Washington. Athletes from the Soviet Union boarded planes to fly to the United States for this world class sporting event. Due to a communication glitch, the Soviet planes crossed the International Date Line precisely twentyfour hours early and entered US airspace. US Air Force fighter jets scrambled to intercept the oncoming planes. Because of elevated trust levels with the Soviet Union, our Air Force assumed a positive intent and did not blast them out of the sky. Instead, the armada of Soviet and US planes landed at an Air Force base in Alaska where the Americans and Soviets partied while waiting for official clearance for the Russian planes to continue their journey to Seattle.

Assuming and acting on a positive intent provides opportunities for conflicting parties to achieve results otherwise unattainable. When in a conflict situation, pause to consider that the other party may well have a positive intent – and be prepared to act on that.

STRATEGY 5: Seek first to understand, then to be understand

Eight centuries ago, St. Francis of Assisi encouraged people to "*seek first to understand, then to be understood*." This wise counsel is just as relevant today as it was then.

When in a conflict situation, each party typically wants to be understood – first. As a result, neither actively listens to the other and the conflict tends to intensify.

"Seeking first to understand," on the other hand, positions one to listen to both the *content* and the *feelings* of the other person. In my consulting practice, I often facilitate conflict between individuals. Before engaging both parties in the *content* of the disagreement, however, I seek



ARTICLE 16: "The 12 Win-Win Conflict Management Strategies"©

advance agreement from each on the *process* of how we are going to handle the issues. The 5 Active Listening Steps described below provide an effective process for safe and open communication – at work and at home:

- Step 1: *Pause*. (Not just a time pause, the intent of pausing is to initiate an internal resourcing process of linking both the "head and heart." By being fully present and open, active listening is facilitated.)
- Step 2: Say: "Help me to understand." (At this point, you are encouraging the other person to voice her interests, positions, and concerns You are not debating or offering another point of view you are genuinely seeking to understand her perspective.)
- Step 3: Listen with every bone in your body. (Rather than listening, we are often waiting to talk or preparing our rebuttal. Neither of these, of course, demonstrates listening. Listening with every bone in your body is one of the highest forms of respecting another human being. When people do not feel heard, however, the conflict tends to intensify.)
- Step 4: Seek to understand their facts, feelings, and perceptions. (If others perceive things to be a certain way, to them it is that way. Additionally, their "facts" may differ from yours, and their feelings may trigger a highly significant emotional response. By seeking to understand their facts, feelings, and perceptions, you

have a greater chance of "hearing" and understanding what is really important to them. In this step, you are seeking understanding, not necessarily agreement. Once the other person feels understood, they are more likely to now listen to your facts, feelings, and perceptions.)

Step 5: *Reward the feedback*. (Even if you do not like the feedback, it is important that you genuinely thank others for having the courage to share their feelings, facts, and perceptions directly with you. By acknowledging the feedback, you both make it safe and encourage others to talk directly with you about sensitive situations. If we do not make it safe, then others are more likely to talk about you within their sphere of influence rather than to talk with you. As hard as it may be at times, you want important people within your personal and career circles to be open with you about important and even sensitive issues.

> You can "teach" others to talk directly with you by practicing these five steps in your interpersonal relationships. By seeking first to understand, you create a more favorable climate for active listening – both ways. Having actively listened, you are now in a position to say: "*May I share another perspective?*" Because you have role modeled active listening to their facts, feelings, and perceptions, they are more likely to now reciprocate by actively listening to you.)



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STRATEGY 6: Be tough on the issues and tender on the people

Conflict often promotes less than effective behaviors – ranging from passive to aggressive. Those who passively avoid have a propensity to be tender on both the issue and the person. As a result of this "tender & tender" approach, the issue typically continues and may even worsen due to lack of attention.

Aggressive behaviors, on the other hand, often generate relationship tension as a result of being tough on both the issue and the person. I have heard individuals pompously declare: "I just call it the way I see it. If they can't handle it, that's their problem." Interestingly enough, those practicing this "tough & tough" approach assume that they clearly communicated their position to others, but the message typically falls on deaf ears. The recipient, instead of hearing the message, focuses on the messenger's apparent insensitivity and lack of respect – and misses the intended message.

Assertive behaviors balance being both tough on the issues and tender on the people. This "tough & tender" approach clearly addresses the issue while demonstrating deference for the individual. This does not mean that you necessarily agree with or even like the individual. You can, however, foster a respectful climate and facilitate open communication by being tender on the person and simultaneously tough on the issue.

In applying the "tough & tender" principle, let's return to the example of the teenage daughter who showed up late from the last three dates. Using a "tough & tough" approach, you would likely hear: "You are so irresponsible. You haven't kept your agreements, and you are now grounded." A "tough & tender" approach, by contrast sounds more like: "I noticed that you have come home late from the last three dates. That is not consistent with our agreement, and we need to talk about that." The latter approach facilitates focusing on the issue and providing greater clarity of expectations. While you may still ground the daughter, she will more likely focus on her accountability issues without damaging your relationship.

STRATEGY 7: Be Clear and Specific

Have you ever had the experience of giving what you thought was crystal clear feedback to someone only to later discover they didn't have a clue what you meant? Perhaps you have had this happen both at work and at home. I certainly have. Most conflicts result from unfilled expectations, and those generally result from lack of clear communication. For example, a man and his fiancé discussed what values they wanted to bring into their marriage. Both agreed that "mutual respect" was one of the more important values for sustaining a positive and fulfilling relationship. With that agreement, they tied the knot and started their journey together. Five years later, they found themselves on the brink of divorce. Why? Neither one of them felt respected by the other. How could that be? Prior to their wedding, they carefully explored what values would sustain their relationship and jointly agreed that respect was fundamental to a long term marriage. So what went wrong?

While they agreed in principle to "respect," they did not discuss <u>how</u> to behaviorally implement



the concept of respect. In his family, the way you demonstrated respect was to "shovel while the piles are small," to be passionate when communicating in by raising your voice and waving your arms, and to never leave the room until resolving the issue. Her family also deeply believed in the principle and practice of respect, yet did it differently. She was taught that the best way to demonstrate respect was to let a lot of little things go (don't sweat the small stuff), to never raise your voice, and if someone raised their voice with you, out of self respect – to leave the room. Get the scenario? On the first week of marriage, she did something that bothered him a bit. Consistent with his commitment to do respect, he called it to her attention, raised his voice a bit, and waived his arms. What did she do? She, of course, left the room – feeling disrespected. As his new bride walked out of the room, how did he feel? Disrespected.

> *"There are two causes for all misunderstandings:*1) not saying what you mean, and
> 2) not doing what you say." Angeles Arrien

Fortunately, they paused rather than proceeding with the divorce and applied many of the 12 Win-Win Conflict Management Strategies discussed in this article. Through that process, they invented their own behavioral expectations of how to do respect – and managed to save their marriage.

It is not enough to speak in generalities about your expectations of others. For you to express to another that you want to be treated more respectfully, or for them to have a better attitude, or to be more of a team player, or support you more, or (fill in the blank), is not sufficient. These general concepts are subject to wide interpretations based on differing life experiences. Instead, it is helpful to convert these intangible concepts into behaviorally specific language that emphasize three tangible elements:

- 1. Visual: What does it look like?
- 2. Auditory: What does it sound like?
- 3. Kinesthetic: What does it feel like?

For example, let's go back to the concept of respect and apply the Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic (V-A-K) descriptors. How do I know that I am respected? I see (Visual) people coming to me for counsel. I hear (Auditory) them asking for my advice and opinions. I feel (Kinesthetic) safe and honored. On the other hand, when in a conflict situation I know that I am respected when I see (Visual) the involved person coming to me rather than talking about me in the parking lot, I hear (Auditory) them being tough on the issue, and I feel (Kinesthetic) them being tender with me as a person.

I have found that direct V-A-K feedback, 1) given in the spirit of being in service and 2) being authentic, facilitates a meaningful dialogue in even the most sensitive of situations. Under these circumstances, people tend to stay with you, understand the message, and are more likely to join you in co-creating a behavioral action plan for improving the situation. Clarifying behavioral expectations in terms of what you would like to see, hear, and feel facilitates understanding and positions you and the other person to act with

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greater certainty. Through awareness, more effective choices can be made to enhance results.

Feedback is subject to a wide range of interpretations. You have the responsibility to both understand and be understood. This can partly be achieved by being clear about the significance of an issue. A simple tool to facilitate this process is to use the "Scale of Zero to Ten" technique. "On a scale of 0 to 10, the significance of this issue is *a* _____." (Fill in the blank with the appropriate number.) By identifying the significance of the issue with a number, the relative importance is more likely to be understood by the receiver. For example, rather than "beating up" the person to make your point, you can say: "On a scale of 0 to 10, this issue is a 9 in terms of importance to me." The receiver now has a clear understanding of the significance and importance that you are assigning to the issue. Clarifying the relative importance with a number enables you to be tough on the issue while tender on the person. The receiver is now more likely to hear the message and focus on the issue rather than shoot the messenger.

STRATEGY 8: Look for the 3 Truths

In difficult or sensitive interpersonal situations, I typically find that three truths emerge: 1) my truth, 2) their truth, and 3) The Truth. The problem is that I frequently think that "my truth" is "The Truth." The other person, coincidently, also feels that "their truth" is "The Truth." Consequently, the battle lines are drawn as each argues for their respective "truth."

By seeking first to understand the other person, as described in Strategy 5 above, we are more likely to jointly discover "The Truth." Amazing things happen when people are on "listening terms" with one another – and when they actively seek to understand one another.

STRATEGY 9: Look for the 3rd great idea

A hospital vice president retained me to coach her regarding one of her problematic department directors. I asked her to describe the situation and how she proposed to handle it. After sharing her approach, she asked me: "What do you think?" I responded: "I think that is a great idea." Obviously pleased that she was on course, she stood up and prepared to leave the conference room. I asked: "Where are you going?" to which she responded: "I thought you said this was a great idea." "Yes," I said, "that is a great approach. Now, sit down and give me a second great idea. Approach it differently."

After sitting down and talking me through a second great approach, she asked: "*Do you like this approach?*" After responding affirmatively, she went further: "*Do you like it better?*" "*Yes*," I replied. Somewhat relieved and with a confident smile on her face, she again started to leave. As you probably predicted, I asked her to stay and give me a third great idea in handling this situation. A little frustrated at this point, she walked me through a third great idea. I then challenged her to compare and contrast the three approaches and to select the one that would produce the best results. She ultimately selected the third idea.

Especially when in conflict, people have a tendency to come to premature closure and lock on to a particular position. By so doing, optimal solutions are often thwarted. Looking for the "3rd Great Idea," on the other hand, promotes



exploration of viable options. Engaging conflicting parties in exploring options facilitates communication, encourages creative thinking, and likewise discourages people from locking onto a given approach too soon. While the first or second idea might well be the best, continuing the process until at least three are explored encourages conflicting parties to work together in finding a win-win solution.

STRATEGY 10: Let go of old baggage

While facilitating change in a large client organization, an individual approached me about how he had been inappropriately treated by his manager. I encouraged him to share his experience with me and was mystified that I did not know about his significant situation – especially considering that I had been consulting with this client for a year. I asked him: *"When did this happen?"* With narrowing eyes and clenched jaw, he said: *"Fifteen years ago!"* Fifteen years ago? Good grief.

This man had harbored negative feelings for years, and the situation had likely drained significant emotional energy from him over that period. Unresolved conflict will typically arise again and again if people do not have the courage or skill to effectively address it. In this case, the individual certainly had difficulty of letting go of old baggage, found it hard to forgive, and likely had neither the skill nor the courage to address the issue.

We know that we are carrying old baggage when, whenever we think of the situation or person involved, we actually experience a drain of emotional energy. This is our body's way of telling us that we have unresolved conflict or unfinished business with another person. When this condition arises, we have three options: 1) take appropriate, positive, constructive action to bring it to closure, 2) let it go, or 3) continue carrying the baggage. To assist in making a decision about what to do with old baggage, ask yourself these three questions:

- What is the worst that could happen if I elected to deal directly with this situation? (Can I handle the worst? If not, what external resources could I pursue that would assist in effectively dealing with the situation?)
- 2. What is the best that could happen if I elected to deal with this situation?
- 3. What if I elected to maintain the status quo and did nothing about the situation?
 (In the long run, which will consume more energy dealing with the situation or not dealing with it?)

Having worked with thousands of people over the years in addressing conflict issues, a vast majority conclude that not dealing with an unresolved issue drains considerably more energy over the long term than experiencing the worst if they were to actually deal with the issue. What old baggage or unfinished business might you have that requires attention?

STRATEGY 11: Shovel while the piles are small

Some people, surely not you, procrastinate in dealing with sensitive issues – usually because of lack of courage or lack of skill. While postponing the inevitable, the unresolved situation



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typically intensifies. This "tender & tender" approach seems to be the method of choice during the "procrastination phase." If the situation heats up due to inaction, emotions are often triggered – now typically resulting in a "tough & tough" reaction. Neither approach –"tender & tender" nor "tough & tough" – produces the desired results. There is another way.

Shovel while the piles are small. Commit to dealing with a situation close to the triggering event – usually now or within twenty-four hours. And when dealing with the situation, be tough on the issue and tender on the people in an effort to maintain or perhaps even enhance the relationship. A computer technician, who I have under contract to maintain my office computers, was servicing my equipment a while back. Being familiar with the nature of my consulting work, he offered a suggestion about how he and his wife keep things current between the two of them. They established a "Two Week Rule" regarding issues in their relationship. If either of them has an issue or concern involving the other, they agreed to address the situation within a two-week period. This time period provides ample opportunity to deal with any issue needing attention. If for some reason they do not deal with the situation within the two-week period, it is off limits -forever! Both agreed that old, unfinished business that is three weeks or three months old cannot be used as a battering ram to use against the other person. By "shoveling while the piles are small," they keep their relationship current and free of old baggage.

STRATEGY 12: Be trusting and trustworthy

Trust, like respect, is yet another key to developing quality relationships, whether personal

or professional. We are often taught to trust incrementally – meaning that we start out at a low level of trust. If the other person demonstrates trustworthiness, then we can incrementally increase our trust. Translated, this means that, on a scale of zero to ten, I might start out trusting at a two. If the person demonstrates trustworthiness, then I might increase that to a three – and so on. This makes sense – on the surface. Yet, this approach does not work particularly well.

If one trusts at a "two," they are likely to receive a "two" in response. It's the Law of Reciprocity - what we give out tends to come back. Think about it – if people are trusted at a low level, they tend to fulfill those low expectations. On the other hand, if someone trusts you at a high level, you are likely to rise to those elevated expectations. One large corporation retained me to assist in transforming their culture. Up until then, they experienced low levels of trust and significant conflict between management and labor. In doing my preliminary focus group interviews and cultural assessments, I learned more about how they created their own predicament. Their new employee manual, prepared by a labor attorney and containing about 200 pages of "legalese," listed a number of reasons why one could be fired - in the first few pages! So, what message did the employees receive? It's "us against them" and "you cannot be trusted." In the Law of Reciprocity, they got back just what they sent out.

At the Nordstrom department store, they too practice the Law of Reciprocity – in a very different way. Having met with Nordstrom executives on a number of occasions, I was interested to see their new employee manual. It's barely one page in length and states "Rule Number *One: Use your*



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own judgment in all situations. There will be no additional rules." Think about the message: "We trust you and have confidence that you will do the right thing." Interestingly enough, people rise to that level of expectation.

At Southwest Airlines, the "We believe in you" and "do the right thing" philosophy is instilled in the minds of new hires through the "You, Southwest, and Success" (YSS) program. Like Nordstrom, they trust people to make sound decisions, and employees rise to this level of expectation.

So, what does all this have to do with handling conflict? By role modeling a principled approach, by being trustworthy, and by willing to trust others at a high level, the bar is raised to work through issues with greater confidence and clarity. I am not, however, suggesting blind trust. I do not, for example, leave my car – with the doors unlocked, the key in the ignition, and the seats filled with Christmas presents – parked for a week in a high crime section of town. Chances are good that the presents – and the car – will be gone after a short while. I am advocating, on the other hand, that you role model the high levels of trust you expect to come back from others. More often than not, you will find this principled approach to be contagious and others will likely follow your lead. When you treat others the way you want to be treated, the Law of Reciprocity will work to your mutual benefit.

CONCLUSION:

Conflict comes with the territory of life, and **The 12 Win-Win Conflict Management Strategies**© will facilitate how you handle difficult or sensitive issues while maintaining or even building relationships in the process. While none of these strategies work all of the time, they have a good track record of achieving positive results when practiced with awareness and conviction. Applying these pragmatic tools at work and at home will likely make a positive and significant difference in the quality of your life and career journey.

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