Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader
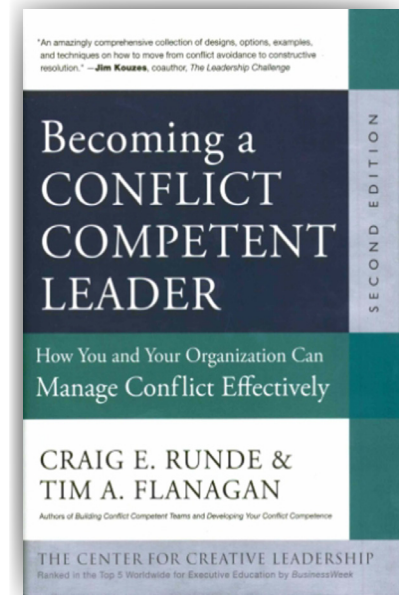
How You and Your Organization Can Manage Conflict Effectively, Second Edition

Craig E. Runde & Tim A. Flanagan

KEY CONCEPTS

- Conflict in the workplace is inevitable, but its destructive consequences can be averted by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by conflict—and exploring diverse viewpoints.

- People can avoid a troublesome future by not reacting rashly when their hot buttons are pushed. Instead, they should "Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively."

- Conflict does not vanish by avoiding it—doing this allows it to fester and perhaps erupt later with a more potent intensity.

- Individual conflict styles include: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.

- People should examine why their "hot buttons" bother them—and be sure they understand why others are behaving the way that they do. People often misconstrue colleagues' motives and goals.

- When conflict arises, it is useful to focus on "interests" rather than "positions."

- The intensity of conflict builds, from differences, misunderstandings, and disagreements to discord and polarization.

- Retaliation is always toxic and engenders a never-ending cycle of revenge.

- People should listen for understanding, with the intent to summarize the essence of a speaker's statements—*not* to appear polite or prepare a response.

- Team settings can multiple and magnify the scope of emotions—but can generate the potential for a variety of solutions from the diverse viewpoints.

- "Face time" with new business colleagues is essential; it is worth the time and expense of travel to build familiarity and trust.

INTRODUCTION

Since the first publication of **Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader** in the fall of 2006, Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan have remained positive about

conflict, believing that conflict brings opportunities as well as challenges, and that conflict must be faced and addressed in order to reap the very real benefits it can sow. Like the previous edition, this edition offers leaders constructive approaches to conflict through research, conceptual models, practitioner experience, and stories that highlight the core conflict competencies. Flanagan and Runde describe constructive behaviors and proven approaches that leaders can employ, tactics and reactions to avoid, and insights for ensuring that organizational structures support positive approaches to conflict management and resolution. This edition features two new chapters: one presents their core model to avert abrupt behavior that could cause long-term damage: "Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively"; the other chapter focuses on conflict in teams.

The What and Why of Conflict Competent Leaders

Conflict occurs in all workplaces. Business leaders who ignore conflict will not make it diminish or vanish. In fact, conflicts and disagreements actually present opportunities. The best business leaders find ways to fashion constructive responses to conflict while avoiding any destructive actions. The best business leaders work to achieve "a conflict competent organization." To do this, they take three crucial steps when in the heat of conflict:

- Cool Down
- Slow Down and Reflect
- Engage Constructively

By adopting these practices leaders can address conflict directly, without denying it and without burying it, to perhaps erupt with greater force sometime in the future.

The most effective leaders serve as role models, especially in the realm of conflict. They cultivate and model constructive behavior, such as:

- Perspective taking
- Creating solutions
- Expressing emotions
- Reaching out
- Reflective thinking

- Delaying responding
- Adapting

Since the first edition of this book, Runde and Flanagan have begun emphasizing another vital skill—listening for understanding. This is one of the first and most important steps used by conflict competent leaders.

Negative responses to conflict such as winning at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, retaliating, avoiding, yielding, hiding emotions, and self-criticizing abound in the workplace, and effective leaders shun them.

Conflict costs business an enormous amount each year. A recent study by the Center for Creative Leadership found that between 20 and 40 percent of managers' time is spent mired in conflict. Conflict causes organizations to lose employees, spend excess amounts of money on health care, and experience higher degrees of absenteeism and lower levels of productivity. At its very worst, conflict can result in workplace violence. The skills necessary to manage conflict in business leaders' teams, their organizations, and the world at large constitute "conflict competence."

Further Information

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www.conflictcompetent.com
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Understanding the Dynamics of Conflict and Your Responses to It

Business leaders do not need to become conflict experts, but they should have some understanding of the varied ways people respond to conflict to mitigate the negative effects of conflict and cultivate its positive ones. The ways people respond to conflict are rooted not just in their perspectives, but in their very values and entire world views. Their world views are not about to change, but conflict competent managers can change their own responses to conflict rather than wishing it away.

New responses to conflict should be applied early in the conflict cycle, before tempers and resentment result in incidents that exacerbate the trouble and make finding resolutions later that much tougher. People must operate in the conflict competence zone and "Cool Down, Slow Down

and Reflect, and Engage Constructively." Above all, they should avoid any temptation to retaliate, which can escalate anger and postpone a beneficial solution. The principal conflict resolution models derive from Western views of conflict, especially from North America and northern Europe. Individuals from other cultures—particularly those from societies with a greater emphasis on the collective good and maintaining "face"—may choose to handle issues of conflict differently.

When you're in conflict with someone, the only way to get the best of it is to fully engage. We say that with absolute acknowledgment that it's easier said than done. With that in mind, we have polished our message and introduced our conflict competent model: Cool Down, Slow Down and Reflect, and Engage Constructively.

About the Author

Craig E. Runde, director of the Center for Conflict Dynamics at Eckerd College, oversees training and development on the Conflict Dynamics Profile assessment instrument and Becoming Conflict Competent courses. He is a frequent speaker, writer, and commentator on workplace conflict issues.

Tim A. Flanagan is the owner of Customer Leadership Solutions with his wife, Virginia "Mac" Flanagan. He is visiting program manager for leadership, change, and conflict classes conducted for various government agencies through the Office of Personnel Management. He teaches in the Management and Executive Education program at the Crummer Business School, Rollins College, and is a senior fellow at the Center for Conflict Dynamics. They are the co-authors of *Developing Your Conflict Competence* and *Building Conflict Competent Teams.*

Introverts and extroverts may also differ in the ways they view and resolve conflict. And while some people will emphasize concern for the self and concern for others, other individuals will place greater importance on concern for the relationship and concern for the conflict outcome.

There are several distinct individual conflict styles, including:

1. *Competing:* High level of interest in satisfying one's own interests and a low concern for the interests of the other (defeat the other).

2. *Avoiding:* Low level of interest in meeting the needs of others (prefer not to deal with the issue).

3. *Accommodating:* Low level of concern about meeting one's own needs and a high level of interest in meeting the needs of others (give in to others).

4. *Compromising:* Midlevel interest in the needs of both parties (split the difference).

5. *Collaborating:* High level of interest in meeting both parties' needs (try for a win–win situation).

The differences between conflict styles can trigger misunderstandings about other people's actions and motives. Business leaders should bear in mind that everyone possesses "hot buttons"—instances of behavior from other people that can cause resentment

to flare. Proactively identifying these behaviors can help leaders deal with them more effectively when they arise.

All responses to conflict can be divided into constructive and destructive behavior, and, in turn, into active and passive manifestations of each. Active constructive behavior includes perspective taking, creating solutions, expressing emotions, and reaching out. Passive constructive behavior includes reflective thinking, delay responding, and adapting. Active destructive behavior includes winning at all costs, displaying anger, demeaning others, and retaliating. Passive destructive behavior includes avoiding, yielding, hiding emotions, and self-criticizing.

Conflict competence is a term we use to describe skills that leaders can develop to improve their personal ability to manage conflict and to help their teams and organization address it more effectively. Becoming conflict competent involves developing cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and normative skills in order to address the inevitable conflict faced in organizational life.

When people imagine they "understand" an issue, they frequently mean they know it from a personal perspective and are convinced they are right. But by taking the time to understand their conflict partners' viewpoints, people can gain a clearer insight into their conflict partners' interests, and subsequently, reframe the conflict with the goal of cooperating to solve it.

To become a conflict competent leader is not easy, so some people may need extra assistance, such as attending programs in conflict management, taking assessment instruments, or hiring an executive coach.

Cool Down: Managing Your Emotions

Conflict is mired in emotion. When people are locked in a retaliatory cycle of behavior, their emotions can rise rapidly. People naturally monitor their environment for threats and are on alert for possible dangers from the surrounding environment, characteristics humans honed during their evolutionary development that are hard-wired. But, with practice, business leaders can learn to temper and tone their responses.

When business leaders work to temper their hot buttons, they will need to expend a good deal of self-reflection determining why some behaviors from others trigger strong responses. Many people misinterpret their colleagues' motives, and may need to explore alternative explanations for these motives. This does not guarantee that their conflict partners' actions will seem more agreeable or more acceptable—but it can provide perspective and help change their responses to hot button behaviors.

"Getting it off one's chest" is overrated. When people vent about a situation to friends they may actually exacerbate problems because validation can make them even angrier. Instead, conflict competent leaders take a "time out" from a disagreement—a simple, useful way to avert a momentary action with dire long-term consequences.

Slow Down and Reflect: Taking Time to Consider What Is Happening

When conflict arises, conflict competent leaders focus on "interests" rather than "positions." They think of what the other party might want to obtain as a result of the conflict; they reflect on what they would want if they were in the conflict partner's situation. After doing this, they may be able to support some of the conflict partner's interests.

Few people work in complete isolation, so people should remember that the structure and culture of an organization can impact how conflict occurs and unfolds. Some hot buttons may be spawned by factors beyond the conflict partner's control.

Preventing Destructive Behavior Responses to Conflict

Speed is valued in today's world, perhaps more than it should be. Business leaders are expected to act quickly in seizing opportunities and solving problems. But speed when dealing with conflict can be counterproductive and downright dangerous. Haste can indeed make waste.

All conflicts are not equal. The intensity of a conflict can be graded much like the escalating levels of a hurricane. Levels one to five of conflict intensity are:

1. *Differences* occur when two people see a situation differently, understand each other's positions and interests, and feel little or no discomfort about the differences.

2. *Misunderstandings* occur when what is understood by one party is different from what is understood by the other party or parties.

3. *Disagreements* happen when two people see a situation differently, and, in spite of how well they understand the other's positions, feel some degree of discomfort.

4. *Discord* arises when the conflict damages the relationship between the people involved—even when they are not dealing with the original conflict.

5. *Polarization* settles in when the conflict is characterized by "severe negative emotions and behavior," with little or no hope for reconciliation.

Often, people who display anger at work may fail to realize the degree of harm they inflict. Leaders can inflict a magnified degree of damage in proportion to their ranks. Therefore, people should always avoid demeaning others because it is invariably toxic and produces a spiraling cycle of misery. Retaliation begets retaliation and can turn into outright polarization.

Avoidance, seemingly one of the more "benign" responses to conflict, can actually become one of the most disruptive because it is one response that literally guarantees that the conflict will remain resolved. When people continually yield and hide their true emotions, others may sense their discomfort and eventually begin doubting their honesty, eroding trust and short-circuiting the potential for successful solutions.

Fostering Constructive Responses to Conflict

Many of the greatest leaders in history—Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, for example—became esteemed because they dealt with conflict with courage and success. In business, the most effective conflict leaders are "enthusiastic and overt in their actions" when they teach and coach others. They give feedback, ask questions, empathize, develop ideas, demonstrate behaviors, intervene when necessary, and offer advice. In other words, they talk the talk and walk the walk. Conflict competent leaders inspire people to view and solve their problems in new ways and can be a catalyst for creating breakthrough ideas and fresh ways to analyze a situation.

In this edition of their book, Runde and Flanagan put special emphasis on "listening for understanding"—not listening to prepare a response or to appear polite and engaged but respecting the other person and focusing on their communication. The best leaders:

- Listen as if hearing what the speaker is saying for the very first time.

- Listen with the intent to summarize the essence of the speaker's statements.

- Ask speakers to clarify what they are saying if the meaning is unclear.

- Do not interrupt the speaker.

- Hear the speaker out or ask for more details if they disagree.

- Ask themselves if they comprehend the conflict partner's thoughts, positions, and views before speaking.

When a person attempts to keep emotions hidden, others are likely to pick up on subtle clues that signal some discomfort and uneasiness. This often leads to doubts about honestly, and trust begins to erode. When there is a lack of trust between conflict partners, the potential for successful resolutions is seriously diminished.

When people are in conflict they can benefit immensely from knowing that their conflict partners wish to understand them—the results can be literally disarming. Disagreement can turn into a search for understanding, producing solutions neither party could have arrived at on their own. Conflict competent leaders thus outperform their less savvy peers. Business people who think up a single solution are merely fulfilling their job requirements, but those who find multiple solutions have the "recipe for success," and creating more solutions increases the probability that their colleagues can reach an agreement.

At no point, however, should people deny that conflict arouses emotions—it does. Emotions need to be acknowledged and expressed during conflict, albeit using civility and care. Conflict competent leaders:

• Identify and disclose emotions to their conflict partners.

• Discuss emotions in an open, honest, and straightforward way.

• Cast no blame for the emotions and feelings that arise.

Conflict competent leaders should be willing to offer the first "olive branch," or even several. When people repair the emotional damage a conflict has generated, they can ease the way to solving their problems. When warranted, a conflict competent leader can offer an apology or another means of making amends.

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? —Henry David Thoreau

Developing and Leading Conflict Competent Teams

Team settings can multiply and magnify the possibility and scope of emotions. In teams, emotions can spread like wildfire. However, as the number of team members increases, so too does the number of possible perspectives and the potential for a variety of solutions.

Successful conflict competent leaders use the skills individuals tap when they work with teams—summarizing, checking for understanding, demonstrating empathy, acknowledging and inviting, and asking questions. This eight-step method can help establish team agreement:

1. The team reviews its mission and context, clarifying the relevant purposes and priorities.

2. Everyone discuss the desired change. Team members prepare lists describing how they will interact with their teammates.

3. Team members brainstorm suggestions and ideas to create the desired "climate" for the process.

4. People combine similar suggestions to streamline the discussion process.

5. Everyone prioritizes the suggestions and works toward achieving a list of between five and ten items that can help change the conflict-solving climate.

6. People then translate these goals into proposed ways of behavior that they can then begin discussing.

7. People record and distribute the resulting list so that team members can reflect on the list, analyze it, and not feel rushed into compliance.

8. The team reviews and finalizes the agreement or list. Team members verbally agree that they support the final agreement, or, if they wish, sign a written agreement acknowledging it.

Teams that experience conflict learn from a situation only by revisiting it, examining what was said and done, and discussing the impact of the resulting actions on team members. By understanding how their differences evolved into conflict, team members can prepare to meet similar challenges successfully in the future.

Although the cost of travel is high in terms of time and money, an early face-to-face meeting with colleagues in a distant location pays off in the long run because it creates the foundation of trust and understanding necessary for a successful group partnership.

Communicating internationally across cultures may be even more challenging, however, especially when working in teams. These tips may help:

• Everyone should withhold making judgments and instead focus on trying to understand one another.

• Many cultures focus first on relationships, then on tasks, so people should listen carefully for this important distinction and proceed accordingly.

• People should take time to cultivate relationships with teammates.

• Team members should be open to changing their personal paradigms.

• They should learn about the differences.

• Team members should avoid stereotyping.

• Everyone should establish team norms or agreements when addressing issues that may be related to cultural and background differences.

CREATING CONFLICT COMPETENT ORGANIZATIONS

The authors quote the French moralist and essayist Joseph Joubert, who advised that the aim of discussion should "not be victory but progress." Conflict competence should be viewed as part of the wider task of talent management.

Every corporation or organization must champion company-wide policies that support conflict management. Companies and organizations must align their missions with the goals of conflict management, committing the resources needed to obtain those goals and making conflict competence an integral part of performance expectations. When seeking to foster a conflict competent culture, business leaders must protect the confidentiality and privacy of all employees, shielding them against possible reprisals. A conflict competent culture can help businesses avoid the pain, alienation, and frustration that damages work environments, replacing it with a cooperative striving toward shared goals.

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FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 5–6 hours, 273 pages

Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader is an erudite, accessible guide to approaching conflict in the workplace as an opportunity to defuse anger and reap the benefits inherent in disparate viewpoints. Craig E. Runde and Tim A. Flanagan suggest that multiple solutions to a common problem actually increase the probability that it can be solved—creatively and in a way that individuals in isolation could not achieve. They do a thorough job of presenting their own advice and synthesizing that of others. This second edition places an added emphasis on "listening for understanding"—to be sure that people know their conflict partners' interests, solutions, and motives before responding. The book has comprehensive resources and references sections and an index. It also offers access to "premium" web content.

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Preface to the Second Edition

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