

*Leaders sometimes say that conflict and disagreement are healthy. What's important are differences, not disagreement. Aware leaders cultivate collaboration around differences, not conflict about disagreements. Collaboration generates creativity and innovation, produces less stress, and strengthens relationships.*

# Turning Conflict into Collaboration

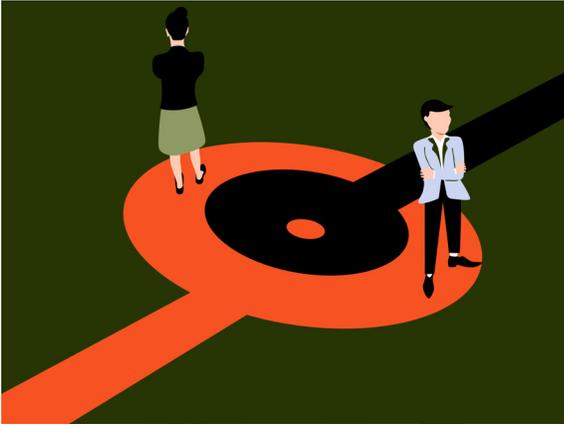
by Tom Goodell, Founder and President, Linden Leadership, Inc.

**C**onflict. It's a word that crops up in conversations all the time. It's hard to define and seems impossible to avoid. I don't think I've ever worked with an organization where conflict—and its mishandling—haven't been topics of concern. Yet I often hear leaders say that conflict, or disagreements, are healthy, and that we should cultivate them. I think they're on to something, but the ways that conflict and disagreement play out in their organizations often result in wasted energy and suboptimal relationships. I would say it differently: I would say that *differences* are healthy. Conflict kills curiosity, and curiosity is the wellspring of creativity and innovation. It's differences, not conflict, that we should cultivate.

Think about the miracle of three-dimensional vision. Neither of your eyes by itself can see the world in three dimensions. Your eyes collaborate in complex ways, enabling your brain to integrate the differences to create a much richer and more accurate view of the world than either eye could create alone. It is the difference between what your right and left eye see that enables you to perceive the world in three dimensions. No ophthalmologist would suggest that having your eyes in a state of conflict or disagreement would be healthy.

Having different perspectives and beliefs is part of the human condition. That's a good thing because, as with your eyes, integrating different points of view creates a deeper and richer understanding of whatever you are facing. But how we handle differences is critical.

When I coach people who are dealing with conflict, they often talk about it as something *outside* of themselves—as though it has a life of its own and is beyond their control. When they talk about a specific conflict with another person, it's as though the conflict either lives on its own in the space between them, or resides in the other person. One CEO I coached, we'll call him Joe, insisted that the conflict he had with Julie, a member of his leadership team, existed entirely in her. When I asked him to describe the conflict, he told me about Julie's behavior, tone of voice and general demeanor in these conversations. Then he told me his interpretation that her behavior was intentionally disrespectful. He was certain that his interpretation was right.



Joe had struggled for several years with this and felt quite stuck. Julie was a valuable member of the team and brought substantial revenue to the company, but Joe was fed up and close to saying he could no longer tolerate her disrespectful behavior. He was thinking of letting her go.

What hadn't occurred to Joe was that he was as much a participant in the conflict as Julie. I asked him whether the conflict would still exist if for some reason he left the company. He thought for a moment, then said no, that since the relationship would no longer be there, neither would the conflict. I then

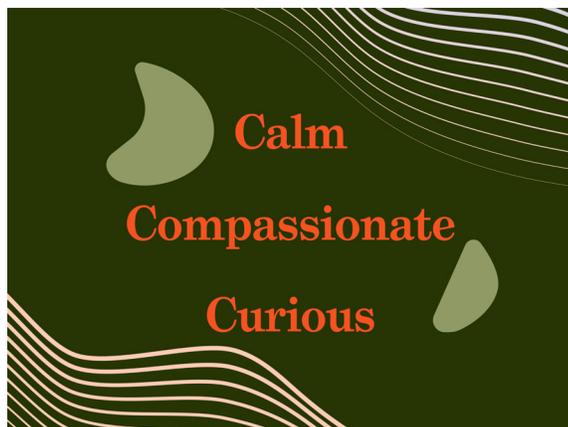
pointed out that he, therefore, must also be part of the problem. He paused and looked at me with a mixture of hostility and curiosity. After a minute he asked me to explain.

An encounter with another person is a conflict *because you define it as such*. If another person's behavior upsets you, you are likely to become:

- ▶ Emotionally triggered
- ▶ Defensive
- ▶ Close-minded



When that happens you are in conflict, trying to prove yourself right, and to win at the expense of the other person. These three states are self-reinforcing; they form a feedback loop, building on each other, each one becoming more intense and amplifying the others. But you don't have to respond that way. If you have sufficient self-awareness, and sufficient ability to regulate your reactions, you can use what I call the *Three Cs of conflict management*:



- ▶ Calm
- ▶ Compassionate
- ▶ Curious

When you use the Three Cs effectively, conflict can become collaboration without losing the richness of differing points of view. The Three Cs also form a feedback loop. When you are calm, your emotions settle down, making it easier to be compassionate. Compassion makes it easier to be curious. Curiosity leads to a deeper understanding of the person with whom you are interacting, which enhances calm and compassion.

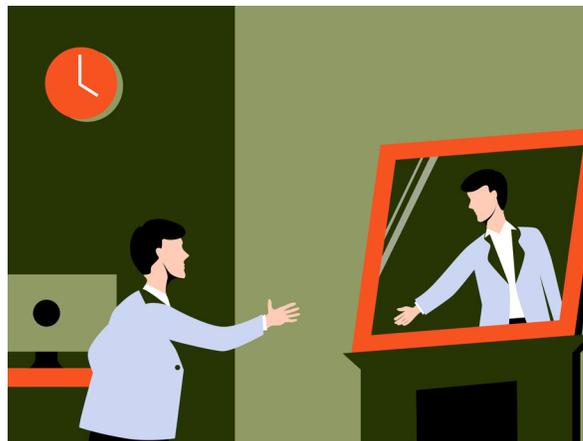
I asked Joe to reflect carefully on what happened to him when he met with Julie. I had worked with Joe for over a year and had taught him a meditation technique that he practiced regularly, so he had some skill at reflection and self-awareness.

Self-awareness is a simple concept. It means knowing what's going on inside of you: what emotions you're experiencing, what physical sensations your body is generating, and what thoughts are going through your mind. Although it's conceptually simple, developing and using self-awareness is not always easy. It takes practice.

After thinking for a minute, Joe said that in conversations with Julie he got physically tense and emotionally agitated. When Julie said things that he interpreted as disrespectful, he would get angry and defensive, and his thoughts focused only on winning. In other words, he was emotionally triggered, defensive, and close-minded.

I sked Joe how he thought Julie felt in these conversations. Again he stopped and stared at me for a minute, then said he'd never thought about that. As he reflected, he said she was probably in the same state as he—emotionally agitated, defensive, and wanting to prove her point.

If you are not self-aware, you can't be very aware of other people either because your inner state will continually generate distractions that prevent you from really seeing what's going on for them. Your interpretation of an event becomes distorted by inner noise. Self-awareness enables you to calm the inner noise, so you can see what's actually happening more accurately. From that place of calm you can develop compassion and curiosity.



It was only after Joe became aware of his own inner experience that he could reflect on what Julie's experience might be. He realized that it must also be stressful for her to be in conversations with him, knowing that he would be tense and defensive. And he realized that the three Cs don't imply agreement, but mutual exploration. You can be calm, compassionate, and curious without agreeing with someone. But when you are calm, compassionate, and curious, you create a dynamic of respect and safety, making it easier for others to practice the three Cs as well. From that place of mutual exploration, you can collaborate in finding what is valuable in each person's perspective. Differences dissolve as you craft a vision that is richer than either of you could have created on your own.

With these insights, Joe decided to shift his behavior the next time he met with Julie, to center and calm himself, to feel empathy towards her and to be curious about what was behind the things she was saying.

People react to everything they experience. That's what it means to be alive—to sense and respond to the world around you. The art of managing conflict isn't about not reacting; it's about reacting effectively. In conflict situations, reacting effectively means checking your hard-wired fight or flight response, recognizing the inherent richness and opportunity in the differences, and moving to engage rather than defeat the person with whom you are talking.

If you experience an encounter with another person as a win/lose situation, you will perceive it as conflict. Reframing the encounter in your mind as a conversation for collaboration and discovery eliminates the conflict, at least for you. But our minds are not simple things; they are more than our intellectual thoughts. It is easy to say "OK, I should stay calm." It is quite another thing to stay calm. So reframing a conversation in your mind



entails not just a thought, but also shifting your emotional and physical states. Meditation is one of the most powerful methods for doing that.

For Joe, reframing the conversation with Julie involved first finding a way to calm himself, so he wasn't wired for defense the minute he saw her coming. He did that using the meditation technique I had taught him, focusing his attention on his breath and, when the defensive thoughts and feelings came up, keeping his attention on his breath, letting the defensiveness subside on its own. As his defenses relaxed, he was able to accept that Julie might have a very different

interpretation of what she was doing and saying, and that his behavior had actually been pushing her to behave in exactly the ways he disliked. So he developed empathy for her, recognizing that she, too, was struggling with how to have an effective conversation with him. From that place of calm and empathy he was able to become curious—to genuinely want to know what was important to her in the conversation, and why she saw things the way she did.

Reframing a conversation for yourself can influence the other person to reframe it as well. Joe told me that as he took this new approach and respectfully asked Julie questions with genuine interest, he could see her physically relax, her voice became less strident, and she became open to a genuine exchange of ideas rather than trying to win the battle. Joe's internal reframing of their conversations led Julie to reframe them as well. As they practiced the three Cs, their conversations became more collaborative and creative.

Conflict and disagreement are emotional states that make the integration of differences, and the synthesis of something new from them, difficult at best and impossible at worst. It is collaboration around differences, not conflict about disagreements, that we want to cultivate. When people collaborate they can create something richer and deeper than either could alone—experiencing less stress and strengthening their relationship in the process.

Ultimately, it is how you define a situation—not just intellectually, but in your emotional and physical responses as well—that determines whether or not you create conflict. Someone else's conflict doesn't have to be yours, even if you're in the same conversation. What I'm suggesting is not easy; powerful skills are never easy to master. But with the right awareness, intention and self-management, differences can present opportunities to discover new possibilities and build stronger relationships. Conflict can become collaboration when you change your mind. It's up to you.