

Three Frames for Understanding Conflict Resolution

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In order to help understand the complexities inherent in conflict resolution, I have developed a broader model for understanding the various kinds of conflict resolution activities, based on three frames for looking at conflict resolution.

The three frames are:

1. Agreement
2. Process
3. Transformation

The Agreement Frame: Principled Negotiation

This frame looks at conflict resolution through the lens of negotiation. Conflicts are generated when individuals or groups take positions (desired outcomes) that are contradictory. In order to break the impasse, the parties must negotiate and devise a solution on which all parties agree. The goal of conflict resolution in this frame, then, is to reach agreement.

This frame is documented quite clearly in the book *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and Bill Ury. They have developed a process, called “principled negotiation,” which they suggest can be used to resolve a broad range of conflicts, from where you and your spouse will go out to dinner, to how work assignments are made in an office, to the complex political negotiations happening right now in the Middle East.

The basic notion behind their work is that in a conflict, parties tend to negotiate by arguing over “positions.” Positions are simply the desired outcomes that

people have in a conflict. When we are in conflict, we tend to argue about which solution to the problem we should adopt—yours or mine. Their research on negotiation has shown that arguing over positions is a terribly ineffective way to engage in conflict. First, it often produces unwise agreements. When you argue for a position, you tend to become locked into it, even if you later realize it doesn't serve you well (you don't want to "back down"). Sometimes you become so attached to a particular position, a challenge to that idea becomes a personal challenge, and you will defend it, even if you know the criticism to be founded.

Second, arguing over positions is inefficient. When parties have opposing positions—and they know the rules of the game are to fight for their position—they tend to start the negotiations at the extremes, hoping that in the process, as they make concessions, the final agreement will be close to their original goal. This means parties rarely share information about what is really acceptable to them, and the process takes an unnecessarily long time to come to the eventual middle ground.

Finally, arguing over positions often endangers an ongoing relationship. When you take a positional stand (my way or the highway), you tend to generate bitterness in those who end up doing it your way. You start by disagreeing with someone, but you end just appearing "disagreeable" to that person.

Fisher and Ury realized, however, that the traditional alternative to hard negotiating (soft negotiating) also had limitations. Soft negotiation, marked by viewing the other as a friend, trying to reach agreement, making concessions, trusting the other side, and giving in, can be abused by someone taking a hard approach.

Their alternative, principled negotiation, is a method of negotiation that is explicitly designed to produce wise outcomes efficiently and amicably. It is centered around four points:

1. Separate the people from the problem
2. Focus on interests, not positions
3. Invent options for mutual gain
4. Insist that the results be based on some objective standard.

People

The motto for principled negotiation is to be “hard on the problem but soft on the people.” Instead of viewing the other person as the adversary or enemy, look at both of you together trying to solve a problem. Too often, acceptable resolutions to conflicts are never surfaced because the parties simply cannot get along. We end up getting hung up often on issues of perception, emotion, and communication. That is, we often fail to even understand the other’s point of view (because to understand it is seen as agreeing with it), adding to the intransigence of the other side. Around emotions, we often pretend that they are not there, or at least not relevant to negotiation, when in fact they are legitimate. And finally, our inability to communicate complicates negotiation because we are unable to listen or make our point effectively.

Interests

We argue about positions, but when faced with positions that we find unacceptable, we rarely ask the question, “Why?” I want the window open, and you want it closed, and we fight over how open or closed it will be. Behind our positions around that window, however, are interests—the reasons WHY we want it open or closed. You will find that behind opposing positions, there are often very compatible interests. For example, maybe you want the window closed to avoid the draft and I want it open to get fresh air. We actually might agree that drafts are bad and that fresh air is good, and now that we are focusing on our interests (instead of positions) we are much more likely to generate a wise agreement.

Options

Once we identify the interests, we are in a better position to generate a solution that will satisfy us both. In the window conflict above, we might determine that we could open a window in an adjacent office, which would provide us with fresh air without generating a draft. This is the legendary “win/win” solution (as opposed to a win/lose approach—our window is either open, I win, or closed, you win). We fail to generate win/win options during negotiations because we

often jump to premature judgments, search for a single “right” answer, or insist that solving “their problem,” is, frankly, their problem. If we allow more time to generate options, and if we hold open the possibility that there may be several solutions that can meet all of our interests, and if we understand that when the other side is happy, we are more likely to be happy ourselves, then we will have more success in resolving our conflicts.

Objective Criteria

Of course, not all interests are compatible. We can identify interests behind our positions and find that the interests are legitimately in conflict with one another. In that case, Fisher and Ury stress the importance of identifying objective criteria by which to judge potential solutions. At first we thought we were negotiating about our positions, but then we identified the interests behind them and negotiated around those. When we discovered that the interests are in conflict, the negotiation then becomes focused on criteria. In other words, arguing about our interests can be as futile as arguing about positions if we have not agreed on what criteria we will use for judging options.

The agreement frame is critical to understanding conflict resolution, particularly in America where the culture is strongly individualistic and litigious. We are a nation of individuals who are accustomed to fighting for rights, and our popular culture celebrates and rewards people and institutions that regularly “win,” even when there are others that must lose. While triumphing over injustice is certainly worth celebrating, our win/lose culture often prevents us from getting what we want by supporting us in practicing inefficient and ineffective negotiation techniques. By learning and practicing the disciplines of identifying interests, brainstorming options, and clarifying criteria, we all can have more success in resolving conflicts.

The Process Frame: Having Difficult Conversations

Negotiating an agreement is primarily a rational process. Although Fisher and Ury point out the importance of emotion when separating the person from the problem, the primary emphasis of their model is on rationally devising a solution to a problem. Their approach seeks to remove the impediments that block our ability to use reason to resolve our conflicts and successfully negotiate wise solutions.

Taking the “process” frame on conflict resolution does not negate any of Fisher and Ury’s points. Process advocates agree that principled negotiation can support individuals and groups in negotiating agreements. The process frame puts at the center of its analysis, however, the relationship between the two parties, not merely the problem that they are facing. This frame assumes that yes, if people can employ principled negotiation, they will have progress in negotiations—generally speaking. It also assumes, based on experience, that attempting a rational analysis of the problem one faces with another person is often easier said than done.

This frame is best represented by the book *Difficult Conversations* by Doug Stone, Sheila Heen, and Bruce Patton. This book looks more carefully at the basic PROCESS one uses in resolving conflicts—that is, communication, or having a conversation. They argue that long before one really can successfully negotiate using Fisher and Ury’s methods, parties in conflicts give up because they are so frustrated with how the conversation has gone to that point. When people engage in difficult conversations, they follow patterns of communication that inhibit learning—a key component to effective conflict resolution.

Their book outlines the three major components of a difficult conversation, shedding light on how people can successfully navigate them in conflict situations. The three components of the conversation are:

1. The “What happened” conversation
2. The “feelings” conversation
3. The “identity” conversation

What Happened

This is the most basic level at which people get stuck when they are having difficult conversations around conflicts. Most conflicts develop, or escalate, because of events and interactions that have happened or are in the process of happening. The conflict, and each individual's approach to it, is based on the "reality" of what happened. Unfortunately, the authors point out, clinging to this "reality" is in fact what makes conflicts so difficult to resolve. In fact, most conflicts stay unresolved because when we talk about what happened, we end up talking about who is right, who meant what, and who is to blame.

The "who is right" piece is centered on truth. We make an assumption that there is a single, objective truth, and, more importantly, that the truth demonstrates clearly that we are "right." In fact, difficult conversations and conversations around resolving a conflict, are almost never around getting the facts right. They are about conflicting perceptions, interpretations, and values. They are not about what is true; they are about what is important. What really needs to happen in the "what happened" conversation is to understand each other's perceptions around what happened.

The "who meant what" piece is centered on intention. In general, we assume we know what the intentions of other people are, even though all we can usually see is their behavior. Furthermore, if we are unsure about their intentions, we tend to assume that they are bad. This obviously fuels conflict situations. As we tell ourselves (or others) the story of what happened, we add into the story statements of "fact" concerning the intentions of others as they did the bad things that they did. You'll find that these assumptions we make around intentions tend to "fill in" the gaps in our picture in a way that justifies our actions and confirms our perception of the truth. Success in a difficult conversation involves separating the intention from the impact when telling the story of what happened. You can talk about how the other person's statement or behavior impacted you, but you can only ask questions about what the intentions might have been.

The "who is to blame" piece is ultimately about fear. Essentially, when we have the who is to blame conversation, our goal is to make sure the answer is not "me." Afraid of seeing what part we may have played, we look to blame others

under the guise of “responsibility” and “accountability.” That is not to say that responsibility and accountability are bogus concepts—they are very real and very important. In conflict situations, however, clinging to those concepts can prevent resolution, just like clinging to positions does in the agreement frame. The trick in difficult conversations is to shift from a blame stance to a “contribution” stance. We all contribute to the conflict situations we find ourselves in, and it is easier to identify the most important parts of a conflict when both parties are each looking at how they themselves, as well as the other, contributed to the situation.

Feelings

The process frame agrees with the agreement frame that emotions are an obviously important component of conflict resolution. They put a stronger emphasis on feelings and emotions, however. Difficult conversations do not merely *involve* emotions, they are often *about* emotions.

Yet we generally lack the skills to deal with the emotional content of our conflicts. This is because over the years, we have been taught to keep the emotions out of our difficult conversations. As “rational” as this sounds, it often keeps us away from dealing rationally with our problems. Unexpressed emotion has a knack for finding its way back into our conflict resolution processes, either by leaking or bursting in to the conversation, or merely by preventing our ability to really listen well. Unexpressed emotion can even take a toll on our self-esteem or long-term relationships with people.

The process frame suggests that our ability to successfully navigate conflict situations is dependent on our ability to identify, understand, and talk about feelings we are having. Notice that “talking about” feelings is only one piece of the puzzle. The two other parts: identifying our own feelings and emotional reactions and understanding how they impact conflict situations, are arguably more important. In work situations, it is not always possible to talk openly or extensively about feelings, yet understanding how they impact conflict situations is critical to successful conflict resolution. Just like in the “what happened” conversation, we may discover that our feelings were based on faulty

assumptions, so before we express any emotion at all, it is important to really understand what we are feeling.

Identity

If our feelings can sneak up on us and prevent us from really having a clear conversation about what happened in a conflict, then there is a deeper level in conflict situations that can even throw off our ability to process emotions. In the process frame, it is called the “identity” conversation, and it deals with who we are and how we see ourselves.

In conflict situations, you may be able to successfully navigate the what happened story by really exploring the other side’s story and understanding how each person contributed to the situation. You may also be able to identify and express the emotions that were triggered along the way, and you may have been satisfied with the way your emotions were acknowledged by the other person. But if you still feel like the conversation isn’t finished. If you still haven’t been able to resolve the conflict, then the conflict is most likely addressing in one way or another, the very essence of who you are.

To have a conversation with your spouse about how many hours per week you should work in your next job can seemingly be done easily. Together you can balance the interests of caring for the children, bringing adequate income into the household, etc. But if you keep getting stuck on the conversation, it is probably due to the fact that how much you work and how much time you spend with the family touch directly on some important pieces of who you are—who you are as a mother or father; as a provider for the family; as a member of your community. Any conversation that feels difficult is at least partly about You with a capital “Y”. The more aware you are of how these deep-rooted values you hold are affecting a conflict situation, the better able you will be to resolve it.

Learning Conversations

The process frame argues that in addition to being able to practice principled negotiation, you must also navigate the many pitfalls found in difficult conversations. The method for doing this is to shift your conversations into

“learning” mode. These conversations start with an understanding of how we move from observation to conclusions. The world “happens” in a very objective way. Yet we experience the world from our own unique perspective. We select certain events to notice and take in. Then we add meaning and interpretations to those events. From those interpretations, we generate conclusions. Difficult conversations (that stay difficult) stay at the level of conclusions. Learning conversations go deeper, seeking to understand how conclusions (on both sides) were generated.

In learning conversations you stop arguing about who is right, and explore each other’s stories. You don’t assume they meant it, but you disentangle intent from impact. You abandon blame and instead you map the contribution system. Emotions are a key component of the learning conversation. You will either have you emotions, or they will have you. You will also guard your identity and ask yourself throughout the conversation, what is “at stake.” Developing learning conversations as a pattern, as the “norm” in a relationship develops a foundation for conflict resolution.

The Transformation Frame: Building and Rebuilding Relationships

A key difference between the agreement frame and the process frame is the increase in complexity from the former to the latter. The process frame acknowledges and embraces all of the skills and approaches implied in the agreement frame, and then adds the complexity of understanding multiple realities and integrating emotion and identity into the process.

The transformation frame similarly “ups the ante” in terms of complexity. There are conflicts between individuals and between groups where the history is long, the wounds that have been inflicted are deep, and the requirements for resolution go far beyond merely coming to an agreement around interests or even having a productive conversation. Resolution requires a more fundamental change in the situation. That is why the word “transformation” represents this

frame: a change so deep and fundamental, that where you end up is profoundly different from where you started.

A primary example would be long-standing ethnic conflicts, such as that between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Negotiating an agreement around political interests (that happened with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority) is not enough to actually resolve that conflict. Even establishing dialogue projects where citizens from all walks of life can begin to have the difficult conversations is enough. The system needs to undergo major change. New structures need to be built. New ways for the two communities to interact at many different levels need to be established. The historical wounds need to be healed in both private and public ways.

The literature in the conflict resolution field is now starting to address these issues. Using terms like conflict transformation, some authors and professional conflict resolution practitioners are starting to systematically examine what it takes to really change a system that is in conflict to a system that works peacefully. Internationally, this includes work being done on healing and reconciliation. There has been a very public reconciliation process in South Africa, for instance, that many have credited as a key reason why that system was able to transform itself so radically with relatively little violence.

At a more interpersonal level, the transformation frame is also relevant. A more transformative approach to conflict resolution is required in interpersonal conflicts where the very nature of a relationship is in question or where the individuals in question or the issue in conflict is somehow symbolic of a much larger, structural or systemic conflict. In both cases, what distinguishes this level of conflict resolution from the other two is the fact that resolution will not only require skilled negotiation and communication, but also a change in other behaviors or behavior patterns between the parties in question. Resolution is not an endpoint—an agreement or an understanding. Rather, it is the beginning of a new way for the parties in conflict to be in relationship and behave towards one another.

A husband and wife that have conflicts that have run so deep that they consider getting a divorce are experiencing a conflict that is relevant to the transformation

frame. Whether or not they choose to be divorced or stay married, resolving their conflicts requires a fundamental shift in their relationship. Even if they stay married, they will be married in a new way, with a variety of new behaviors marking this transformed relationship.

A woman manager and a male employee that have a conflict over the revision of a job description could also be experiencing conflict at a deeper level. It may go beyond the specific interests of the two parties. Gender roles and a history of male dominance in workplace settings in this country could be impacting how each party in the conflict is experiencing the situation. The way this man and this woman interact could be replaying a pattern of way men have treated and are treating women, and that history plays into how either or both of them are dealing with the conflict. If that is the case, then resolution will require that these individuals begin to explore how these histories and societal issues impact how they interact, including around the issue of the job description, but most likely in other areas as well. Again, changing long-term behavior is a characteristic of the transformation frame that sets it apart from the other two.

Conclusion

The three frames are not mutually exclusive. There is overlap among them, and it is expected that conflict situations will not necessarily be easily understood in only one of the frames. The three frames demonstrate, however, that “conflict resolution” is not a simple term, and the knowledge, awareness, and skills that need to be employed in order to resolve conflicts are numerous and varied. The chart above lays out in a concise way some of the key differences among the three frames.

Frame:	Agreement	Process	Transformation
Text:	<i>Getting to Yes</i>	<i>Difficult Conversations</i>	?
Focus:	Settling disputes	Facilitating communication	Building relationships
Method:	Negotiation	Inquiry, Exploring Stories	Changing patterns, behavior
Location:	Head	Head and Heart	Head, Heart, Hand
Addresses:	Interests and positions	Needs, Emotions, Meaning	Values, history, wounds, patterns, complexity
Result:	Agreement	Foundation	Transformation

References

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