

GOING DEEPER—TEXT-BASED LEARNING

CONFLICT THAT TRANSFORMS



We have just started to scratch the surface on conflict consciousness. Below you will find text that will take your thinking a little deeper. This next section might be useful to read with your team and then structure a dialogue after some quiet reflection.

What if conflict can make us more present to the moment? Would we have a different relationship with it if we knew it was there to wake us up? It is very possible that conflict is trying to do just that—shake us loose from strict routines or rigid mental models. If we are quick to judge conflict as harmful, then we may lose the gift of awareness about what that tension is trying to teach us.

We are all creatures of habit and find it easy to embrace what is familiar and known. However, that familiarity can easily limit us in adapting to a changing world. The tension we feel in conflict might simply be the inner struggle in letting go of what feels comfortable, the confidence in what we know, and the routines that please us.

If conflict can be reframed as a calling to deeper awareness, we can use it to enhance our professional capabilities, examine the relationship we have with others and ourselves, and explore how to best respond to the never-ending changes in the world around us. John Paul Lederach (2003), a Professor of International Peace Building at the University of Notre Dame, reminds us that when conflict is present, “something far deeper is at play . . . we are negotiating the nature and quality of our relationship, our expectations of each other, our interpretations of our identity as individuals and as a family/community, our sense of self-worth and care for each other, and the nature of power and decision making in our relationships” (p. 11).

Conflict can be transformational if we see it as a pathway to constructive change. Even nature reminds us how conflicting forces create new possibilities. A forest fire can seem devastating, and yet it is an important tool for a healthy ecosystem to sustain growth and renewal. Forest fires remove old growth, and dead trees, and clear brush to create more sunlight. They also kill diseases and insects that prey on trees. The burned forest floor allows more nutrients to be available to support the stronger trees that survived, and it activates new grasses to feed woodland creatures. And when there are fewer plants to absorb water, this means streams and ponds are fuller, and the soil becomes richer. There are many benefits from a forest fire.

By framing conflict as a catalyst for new possibilities, we can embrace it differently. It may very well be that differences are signaling the need for letting go of old ways that no longer serve us. Lederach suggests that we see conflict not as a threat but to “understand it as providing opportunities to grow and to increase understanding of ourselves, of others, of our social structures” (p. 18). This perspective doesn’t ignore the fact that social conflict can have a destructive pattern. What it does suggest is that any conflict can be useful in paying attention to and addressing fragmented relationships, decaying social structures, outdated knowledge, and practices that no longer serve the needs of today.

Author and presenter in the field of conflict resolution Thomas Crum (1987), in his book *the Magic of Conflict*, reminds us that it is not whether we have conflicts but how we respond to them that makes the difference. He reminds us that conflict is a gift of energy. When conflict is used to

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create a win-win understanding, a new type of conversation is possible. By honoring and respecting each other's dissimilarities, both sides maintain self-esteem and acknowledge an appreciation of the differences.

If we can view conflict as the gift of awareness, then we can experience it differently and use it to wake up to new possibilities for future action. Thomas Crum reminds us that “embracing conflict can become a joy when we know that irritation and frustration can lead to growth and fascination” (p. 153). Teams that consciously embrace healthy conflict not only transform who they are, but the work they do also becomes transformative!