

# **Seven Mistakes People Make In Conflict And How To Avoid Them**

By Gordon White



## **Mistake #1: People see their conflicts as predominately negative**

Many people view conflict as something to try to avoid. But change is part of life and change will frequently produce conflict. It's more realistic to view conflict as inevitable and to prepare for it. Furthermore, there can be many benefits to conflict engagement including the opportunity to generate creative ideas and strengthen relationships.

Since it's inevitable, learn how to make use of conflict.

Engage constructively rather than destructively.




## **Mistake #2: We don't see the downside to having supporters**

When we're in conflict, we gather supporters around who agree with us. When we talk with the other party, our views are appropriately challenged and our views may become nuanced or even shift considerably. Then we're faced with having to explain or justify to our supporters how we have shifted.

Ironically, the group that supported us can become an obstacle we have to face in order to resolve the dispute.

Your best supporters are those who can see the situation broadly and provide different perspectives. Ask your supporters to challenge you



and assist you to put yourself in the shoes of the other party. Tell them you want to see the big picture and ask them to help you do so.

You want to consider how engaging with the other party might benefit both of you and plan how to engage constructively as possible.

Your supporters should be there for you, but should not automatically agree with how you view the other party.




## **Mistake #3: We justify our anger**

Sometimes anger is helpful. It can lend empowerment to disadvantaged people or enable us to speak to power when we might otherwise be unable. It can motivate us to complete what we set out to do. In these and many other ways anger can enhance power and strength.

But ongoing venting over a conflict situation is weakening and detrimental to one's health.

When it's a habit, anger loses its creative and redemptive potential and instead entrenches us in narrow and unproductive ways of viewing the world. Anger becomes addictive and blinding.



Conflict is challenging and we need all our wits about us in order to serve ourselves as best we can.

We must develop the means of managing defensiveness and reactivity both during times of communication with the other party and when contemplating various courses of action.




## **Mistake #4: We think that standards, laws, and regulations will support us more than they frequently will**

Based on how we have experienced events it's clear to us that the other party is wrong and that we have been wronged. On this basis we assume that policy, the law, or arbitration will support us but frequently, it will not – or at least not in the way that we assume it will.

In the same way that events as we experience them lead us to conclude that we are right, events as the other party experiences them lead him to conclude that he is right.

You both think you're right.




In determining the likely outcome of your case or situation, seek the counsel of a detached expert. Research the detail of regulations and laws. Don't make assumptions based on common sense.

Lawyers try to provide an objective perspective of how a case will proceed but as your advocate, they are sometimes placed in a challenging position from which to do so. For a number of reasons they may provide a view that is more optimistic than realistic. A primary reason for this is that they have not heard the other party's perspective *from the other party*.

If you have a lawyer for your situation, ask her if both of you can put yourselves in the other party's shoes and come up with all the legal arguments that would





favour him. Also, think of all the different ways the other party might have determined that you are a scoundrel.

Through this exercise you begin to see the situation in a more balanced way.

You begin to appreciate that you see it your way; the other party sees it his way; a judge or arbitrator will see it her way.




## **Mistake #5: We neglect to *systematically* consider our alternatives**

Counter-intuitively, establishing an alternative to communicating directly with the other party builds your power and assists you in planning how to communicate.

What is your best way of addressing differences other than talking with the other party?

There are dozens of possibilities depending on your situation. It could be legal or regulatory means, talking to a superior, walking away, or finding a different route to meeting your interests.



Whatever your best alternative is, gather information about it. Mentally and emotionally rehearse going through it step-by-step, beginning to end, in some detail.

Following this exercise you'll be more clear about how much power you have in your situation and what kind of outcomes you should accept or reject.




## **Mistake #6: When we are hurt, we *assume* the other party hurt us on purpose**

This cognitive bias contributes to the escalation of conflict.

The intentions of the other party are usually unknown to us and the effects of her actions are often unknown to her.

My mediation experience tells me that much hurt is caused unknowingly or through inattentiveness. When parties assume that the other is malicious or hard-hearted, every observation becomes a reinforcement of current negative perceptions.



In order to resolve most disputes, we have to be willing to give the other party some benefit of doubt. If we are hurt, we owe it to the situation to disclose to the other party something about how we were hurt and ask her what she was intending to do.

You may not hear the compassionate response you would prefer, but you will likely hear a perspective that is different from the one you have formulated. You should consider it and also be curious about how your actions have impacted the other party.


## **Mistake #7: We focus too much on the other party and lose sight of what really matters**

We become offended by the other party and in our focus on them and the chaos of the conflict, we become distracted from what is most important to us.

Conflict challenges us where our own growth and development are wanting. We need to put attention on ourselves as well as the other party in order to gain the benefits of the conflict.

If you're embroiled in a conflict, answering the following questions for yourself is a practice that I suggest you undertake:


- ~ What direction is your life going in?
- ~ What direction would you like it to be going in?



Your answers to these questions will assist you to have more clarity about what is most important to you in the long run. Conflict has a tendency to distract us from the big picture of our lives. With clarity, you'll know better how to prioritize your interests in your conflict situation.

To read more about putting attention on yourself, read blog #31 at <http://www.theconflictjourney.com/2015/02/06/31-shift-attention-to-yourself-break-impasse/>

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I've outlined seven common mistakes people make in conflict and how to begin to overcome them. If you have questions about them, contact me at [gordonwhite@telus.net](mailto:gordonwhite@telus.net). You can also connect with me at [www.ca.linkedin.com/in/gordonwhiteconsulting](http://www.ca.linkedin.com/in/gordonwhiteconsulting)

If you know of anyone who will benefit from this guide, feel free to share it.

For more information that will benefit your journey through conflict, head over to [www.theconflictjourney.com](http://www.theconflictjourney.com) to read my blogs. To navigate, use the tag cloud on the right side. When you click on any word that piques your interest, the site will queue blogs related to it. Or simply scroll through the blogs.



If you're currently experiencing a troubling conflict and you see yourself making one of the mistakes, take action today to address it.

Thank you for downloading this guide. I hope it proves to be a useful resource for you and I look forward to hearing your success with it.

*Gordon White, Mediator and Organizational Development Consultant*

