

1 Managing Conflict with the E-R-I Model

The possibility for conflict exists everywhere. Conflicts arise out of everyday differences of opinion, disagreements, and the interplay of different ideas, needs, drives, wishes, lifestyles, values, beliefs, interests, and personalities. Yet conflicts are more than just debates or negotiations. They represent an escalation of everyday competition and discussion into an arena of hostile or emotion-provoking encounters that strain personal or interpersonal tranquility, or both.

For example, a bill from your doctor is higher than you expect or think it should be. You go to your doctor to discuss it, and he explains that the amount increase is justified because he spent more time than in a usual office visit. He detected a potential problem and needed to examine you further. Is this a conflict? It's more accurately described as a disagreement or a difference of opinion. But as with any difference of opinion or divergence in personal needs and goals, there is always the potential that a real conflict might develop if the emotions become engaged or hostility is expressed. Say you claim you won't pay the increase because the doctor didn't advise you in advance, and the doctor threatens to no longer treat you as a patient. You then raise complaints about the doctor's previous use of tests you don't think were needed. The result is that at some point, unless you choose to give in

and pay whatever the doctor is asking, this discussion turns into a conflict. It becomes a heated verbal combat based on competing or opposing interests, and in some cases, tensions rise even more.

This kind of scenario plays itself out again and again at all levels in human relationships—between spouses, lovers, friends, parents and children, business associates, relatives, neighbors, everybody. And it can occur internally when you face opposing desires and needs that pull you in different directions.

When you don't know how to deal with these situations, the uncomfortable feelings generated by the conflict can be destructive to you and the relationship. The actual outcome of the conflict can be even more unproductive and detrimental. For instance, returning to the doctor example, you might end up paying the increased amount, and feel resentful toward your doctor as a result. This might trigger further hostile encounters, leading eventually to your leaving a doctor who has provided you expert care or to your doctor refusing to further treat you as a patient. In the worst case, the initial discussion might actually escalate from an exchange of heated words to physical violence.

On the other hand, with proper strategy, the potential conflict could be steered into a more favorable resolution. The doctor might agree to defer the extra payment this time or seek to get an extra amount from your insurance carrier, while you agree that you will clarify what you expect on future visits. You might also determine when you need to see this more expensive specialist and when you might obtain routine treatment first from doctors at a local clinic.

Similarly, at work, you might turn a potential conflict into a win-win situation, such as when you and a co-worker are vying for a similar position. Maybe your co-worker is more interested in the title, management duties, and the larger office with a great view that come with the position, while you are more interested in the more challenging technical work you will be doing in the new job. By clarifying what you are each looking for in the new job, you might each be able to get what you want and turn the conflict into a source of opportunity for you both.

In short, with the proper conflict management skills, potential conflicts can be averted or defused—and even turned into a positive source for improved interpersonal relationships and personal growth. The key is not to *avoid* conflict, which is potentially inherent in all social interac-

tions and in all choices we make, but to recognize it and manage it skillfully to produce the best outcome.

Using the E-R-I Method for Conquering Conflict

An ideal technique for managing conflict is the emotional-rational-intuitive (E-R-I) method of conflict resolution. In essence, this method involves first getting the emotions—yours or the other person’s—out of the way. Then, you use your reason and your intuition to make choices about how to react in conflict situations. You base your approach on the circumstances, the personalities, interests, and needs of the people involved, and on your own goals, interests, and needs.

This is a powerful approach because at its heart any serious conflict engages the emotions of its participants. Therefore, one of the first steps in resolving conflict is to defuse the negative emotions generated by the conflict—both your own feelings and that of others. To do so, you need to call on your reason or intuition, because if you react from your own feelings to these already heightened feelings, you will only help to further raise the emotional tension level instead of defusing it.

Once emotions are defused, you can use your reason or intuition, as appropriate, to figure out possible resolutions acceptable to all involved. But say this is an extremely difficult situation and you can’t realistically resolve or defuse emotions now. You might use the rational-intuitive method to decide that the best thing to do now is to delay and walk away so you can obtain more information, as well as cool off the heat of the argument. Then, you can regroup and come back prepared to resolve it. So initially, avoidance can sometimes be just the ticket, rather than trying to work out the problem when you and the other party are still upset and you don’t have all the information you need.

Once you learn to understand and assess the situation and make effective choices in the conflict or potential conflict situations you encounter, you will optimize your ability to not only resolve a conflict but even gain from the people with whom you are in conflict. And if a conflict is a barrier to something you want, overcoming it will help you achieve your goal, too.

Here are the basics on how the model works. Subsequent chapters will discuss in more detail how to use each of the three aspects of the model, while the many examples will help you see how the method might be applied in various conflict situations.

How the E-R-I Conflict Management Model Works

The basic way to use the emotional-rational-intuitive approach to managing conflict is to look on any conflict situation as a problem or potential problem to be solved. First, you must get past the emotions involved, so that you can use your reason and intuition to deal with the core problem. Then, you select the appropriate problem-solving techniques from an arsenal of possible strategies for dealing with the conflict. The strategy you select will depend on the stage of the conflict (potential conflict, developing conflict, open conflict), the importance of a particular resolution to you, an assessment of what the other person needs and wants, and the types of emotions released by the conflict.

Once you select the appropriate technique, you then determine the best way to apply it. The optimal choices depend on your ability to assess the situation and the alternatives rationally, your ability to intuit what option is best for the situation, and your ability to put that choice into action.

Whenever you find yourself in a conflict or potential conflict situation, go through a quick “self-assessment” like the one that follows. Depending on your answers, choose the appropriate response. Give yourself time to learn to do this, because at first you will have to think through your reactions. But in time, as you use this approach regularly, the choices will come to you spontaneously. It will be like flashing through all the options in your mind in a moment, then intuitively choosing the ones you want to employ in that situation.

The following chart, which is adapted from my out-of-print book *Resolving Conflict* (originally published in 1990 by New Harbinger Publications, Inc., Oakland, CA), describes the questions to ask and strategies to use. Subsequent chapters describe how and when to use each of these strategies in more detail, so when you are in a conflict situation you can review your options and decide the best ones to choose.

Questions to Ask

- 1.** Are emotions causing the conflict or standing in the way of a resolution? If yes: What are these emotions?
 - ANGER? If so, whose?
 - a.** The other person's?
 - b.** Your own?
 - MISTRUST? If so, whose?
 - a.** The other person's?
 - b.** Your own?
 - FEAR? If so, whose?
 - a.** The other person's?
 - b.** Your own?
 - OTHER EMOTIONS (jealousy, guilt, etc.)? If so, whose?
 - a.** The other person?
 - b.** Your own?
- 2.** What are the underlying reasons for the conflict?
 - WHAT ARE THE OTHER PERSON'S TRUE NEEDS AND WANTS?

Strategies to Use

- 1.** No matter what the emotions, there are techniques to calm feelings, both your own and the other's, so that solutions can be worked out.
 - ANGER
 - a.** Techniques to cool down or deflect the anger, such as empathetic listening, letting the other person vent his or her anger, soothing hurt feelings, and correcting misunderstandings.
 - b.** Techniques to channel or control your anger, such as short-term venting, deflection, and visualization to release anger.
 - MISTRUST
 - a.** Techniques to cool down or deflect the anger, such as empathetic listening, letting the other person vent his or her anger, soothing hurt feelings, and correcting misunderstandings.
 - b.** Techniques to channel or control your anger, such as short-term venting, deflection, and visualization to release anger.
 - FEAR
 - a.** Techniques to reduce fear.
 - b.** Techniques to assess the accuracy of this fear or to deal with it openly and productively.
 - OTHER EMOTIONS
 - a.** Techniques to calm the other person.
 - b.** Techniques to calm yourself.
- 2.** Ways to search for the true needs and wants of both parties.
 - OTHER PERSON'S NEEDS AND WANTS
 - a.** Direct communication, asking the person to outline reasons, needs, and wants.
 - b.** Intuitive and sensing techniques to pick up the underlying reasons if

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the person isn't willing to speak or isn't self-aware enough to recognize these underlying needs and wants.

- WHAT ARE YOUR OWN TRUE NEEDS AND WANTS?

- YOUR NEEDS AND WANTS
 - a. Self-examination to determine your real desires and needs if you aren't already clear about them.
 - b. Intuitive and sensing techniques to consider your underlying goals.

You Statements
(sound accusatory)

I Statements
(express feelings, make requests,
are solution-oriented)

"You never call me to go somewhere or do something until the last minute."

"When you call me to make plans at the last minute, I'm not always free, although I would like to go with you if I could. I sometimes feel hurt that you wait so long. I would appreciate it if you would call me earlier so we can make arrangements in the future.

"Why do you always interrupt me?"

"When you try to talk to me while I'm talking, I can't really pay attention to what you're trying to say because I'm thinking about something else. I'd really appreciate it if you could wait until I've finished talking, unless it's really important and you feel you have to interrupt right away.

"You don't respect me. You never remember my birthday."

"When you don't remember my birthday I feel like you don't care about me or respect me. I would like to feel that you care."

"You are annoying me with all your questions."

"When you ask me questions while I'm doing something else, I feel distracted and irritate, because I'm not really ready to pay attention to them. I'd appreciate it if you could ask me these questions again at a more convenient time, such as " [you specify when].

"You never do what I want; always what you want."

"When you make a decision for us without asking for my opinion, I feel hurt and I feel that you aren't interested in my ideas. I'd like it if we could discuss these things so we could do what we both want."

What the Person Says	What You Think He or She Means or Feels	What You Might Say to Bring Out the Real Meanings or Feelings
“Do what you want.”	“I don’t like what you want to do, but I don’t feel like you care about what I think. I feel that you are going to do it your way in any event.”	“I feel that you may not really want this. What do you <i>really</i> want, and can we talk about it?”
“I don’t care.”	“I do care, but I feel frustrated. You aren’t listening to what I am saying.”	“But you do seem to be annoyed by what happened, and I’m concerned about how you feel.”
“Have it your way.”	“I’m too tired to struggle with you anymore. Do what you want, but I don’t like it.”	“But I’d like to be sure I have your input and agreement, too. What would you like to see happen, so we can both get what we want?”
“Fine” [or any other words of apparent approval that are spoken in a reluctant or angry tone of voice].	“It’s not the slightest bit fine, and I’m really very angry with you. I feel like I’m being pushed around.”	“But it sounds like it <i>isn’t</i> fine for you. What do you really feel about this? I’d truly like to know.”

Questions to Ask (cont.)

Strategies to Use (cont.)

- 3. Is the conflict due to a misunderstanding? Whose?
 - a. The other person’s?
 - b. Your own?
 - c. Both, or Uncertain?

- 4. Is the conflict due to someone failing to take responsibility for some action, in the past or in the future? Is an agreement to do something needed? Whose responsibility?
 - a. The other person’s responsibility?
 - b. Your responsibility?

- 3. Techniques for overcoming misunderstanding through better communication
 - a. Techniques to explain and clarify.
 - b. Techniques to be open and receptive to the other person’s explanations
 - c. Combination of techniques to explain and clarify to the other person, and to be open and receptive to the other person’s explanations

- 4. Techniques to determine who is responsible and to gain acceptance for this responsibility.
 - a. Techniques to get the other person to acknowledge responsibility and agree to do something.
 - b. Techniques to recognize and acknowledge this.

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- 5.** What kind of conflict styles would be most suitable to use in this situation?
- a.** Is it possible to reach a win-win solution? If yes:
 - b.** Is the conflict worth resolving now? If not:
 - c.** Are there power considerations that will affect the outcome? Who is more powerful?
- 6.** Do special personality factors come into play?
- a.** Is the other person a “difficult” person?
 - b.** Do you have difficulty stating your true needs and wants (for example, recognition)?
- 7.** What alternatives and solutions are available?
- 8.** How can this conflict/problem be turned into an opportunity?
- 9.** What is the best outcome?
- 5.** Techniques to assess the available conflict styles, and choosing between them, based on:
- The conflict style you prefer.
 - The conflict style you and others feel most comfortable with.
 - The conflict styles that would be most effective under the circumstances.
- a.** Choose the style of compromise or collaboration, using techniques of negotiation and discussion.
 - b.** Choose avoidance or delay to postpone dealing with the situation now.
 - c.** If you are more powerful, choose competition or offer to compromise. If the other person is more powerful, choose accommodation or offer to compromise.
- 6.** Unfortunately, don’t they always?
- a.** Special techniques for dealing with difficult people.
 - b.** Techniques for expressing your needs and wants effectively.
- 7.** Both parties should be encouraged to make suggestions about possible solutions.
- 8.** Techniques of brainstorming and creative visualization help achieve positive outcomes.
- 9.** Using your rational skills to prioritize possible outcomes will help you create a solution that is the best you can achieve in the circumstances of this particular conflict.