

## Communicating in Conflict



“Workplace conflict?”

One of the realities of project life is every once in a while, you are going to become embroiled in a dispute or argument that is emotional and personal. It does not matter how cool and professional you are, you cannot control the other party’s emotions and perceptions, and very often you also feel need to ‘win’ the dispute.

In *Why are they (you) fighting?*<sup>1</sup>, I looked at the power of emotions in a dispute to escalate a disagreement into a ‘fight’. In this article I intend to cover off some of the approaches that can help minimise conflict and lead to a successful outcome.

When you are dealing with a really upset and emotional person the first thing to remember is, they are not acting rationally and are not interested in optimising their outcome. It is not uncommon for someone to be far more interested in ‘hurting you’ rather than in achieving a mutually acceptable outcome (even if this hurts them as well). This is not sensible and perhaps better stakeholder management could have averted the problem but it is impossible to go back in time and do things differently – you have to deal with the problem as it exists. This is never easy but there are a number of tactics you can use on yourself to firstly stop the dispute getting worse and then hopefully move forward to an outcome you can live with.

### Take Care

The most important thing to keep in mind is the simple fact you cannot un-say something or un-send an email. If in doubt don’t say/send it! Every communication needs to be crafted from a minimalist viewpoint, conveying nothing more than the necessary information. And you should not respond to provocation! In particular making threats or statements that can be interpreted as a threat will be highly counterproductive. Your demeanour needs to remain in the ‘strong assertive’ space rather than being either too aggressive or too passive. An aggressive stance simply adds to the fight, but if you are too passive the other side may not feel any need to respect you and drop into a ‘bullying mode’ and then get even more upset when they find out you are not an easy ‘push over’.

Both of these are extremely hard to do, best practice is to find an impartial mentor who can help you stay calm and collected and who can review every communication before it is sent. It is extremely easy to get caught up in the emotions of a ‘fight’ and the time lag needed to deal with the mentor’s review and comments helps you stay in control of your feelings. If you cannot find someone willing to help postpone any action and literally sleep on it – come back to any message in the morning and see if you really need to send it.

<sup>1</sup> Download *Why are they (you) fighting?*:  
[https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag\\_Articles/SA1026\\_Why\\_are\\_they\\_fighting.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/Mag_Articles/SA1026_Why_are_they_fighting.pdf)

## Use Time to Your Advantage

Very often a deliberate strategy of doing nothing or saying nothing can be very effective, and powerful, if it breaks a tit-for-tat cycle of escalation. The considered action of not responding is itself a communication to the other party and should be considered in the context of helping to resolve the issue. But you cannot simply 'opt-out' of most disputes, every action you take and communication you send needs to be framed within a strategy that:

1. Seeks to stop the conflict getting worse, and then
2. Seeks to move the conflict to a status you can 'live with' (which also means the other party can live with it as well)<sup>2</sup>.

The one thing you must not do when dealing with a really upset person is to offer practical or helpful advice, they will automatically assume you are in the same place they are and everything you do or say will be interpreted as either an attack on them or a ploy to gain an advantage for you. The only way around this impasse is to try to find a third party who is trusted by the other party and can act as a messenger. But even then any communication has to be carefully thought through – *never in the entire course of human history has anyone ever 'calmed down and become reasonable' just because someone has told them to.....* You need options that may be rejected in the short term but allow the person ways to move forward once they have 'calmed down' enough to start working towards an outcome.

Time is a valuable ally – it takes a lot of energy for someone to remain really upset for an extended period of time and sometimes Napoleon Bonaparte's advice to one of his Generals can be very useful.... "*Never interrupt your enemy while he is making a mistake*". As far as possible control the tempo of the dispute, take time out and reduce pressure. If you can identify the other person's 'hot buttons', the things that will instantly reignite the full intensity of the dispute look for ways to avoid them.

## Have an Exit Strategy

Even in the most bitter of disputes, the usual 'rules' of negotiation should still apply (at least to your actions), but remember negotiation requires a degree of willingness on both side so you may have to wait for any reciprocation. However, regardless of the 'other parties' approach, you still need to focus on outcomes and your real requirements rather than positional bargaining and 'winning at all costs'. You need to clearly understand what's in it for you and when to walk away and make sure you have an exit strategy in place, some people get so wound up in the emotions of fighting they won't let you simply back out of the dispute, you need to engineer an exit that forces the dispute to a point of closure.

As strange as it may seem, in really bitter disputes the dispute becomes the centre of the other person's existence and they cannot see anything else. Therefore, having a number of exit strategies is critically important – your time and energy are valuable resources and there is no point in fighting a dispute if there's nothing in it for you. The ideally the exit strategy will allow you to walk away and block the other parties' attempts to keep the fight going. If this is impossible look for ways to lose elegantly, allow the other side to feel they've won whilst not losing too badly. It's far easier to get into a dispute than it is to get out of one once it is in full swing. Smart negotiators always understand their 'BATNA'<sup>3</sup>. In the type of dispute we are discussing in this article, your BATNA should be the trigger for your exit strategy and every move you make should be planned to keep these strategies open.

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<sup>2</sup> A **win-win outcome** is always an ideal and should never be ignored, but you also need to be realistic. For more on negotiation see: [https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032\\_Win-Win\\_Negotiating.pdf](https://mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1032_Win-Win_Negotiating.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> **BATNA** = Best Alternative To A Negotiated Agreement.



Remember, when Napoleon invaded Russia, he won every major battle and still lost his 'Grande Armée' and the war – the Russians simply reframed the rules of 18th century warfare and abandoned Moscow rather than be drawn into another battle or (as was expected) surrender.

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