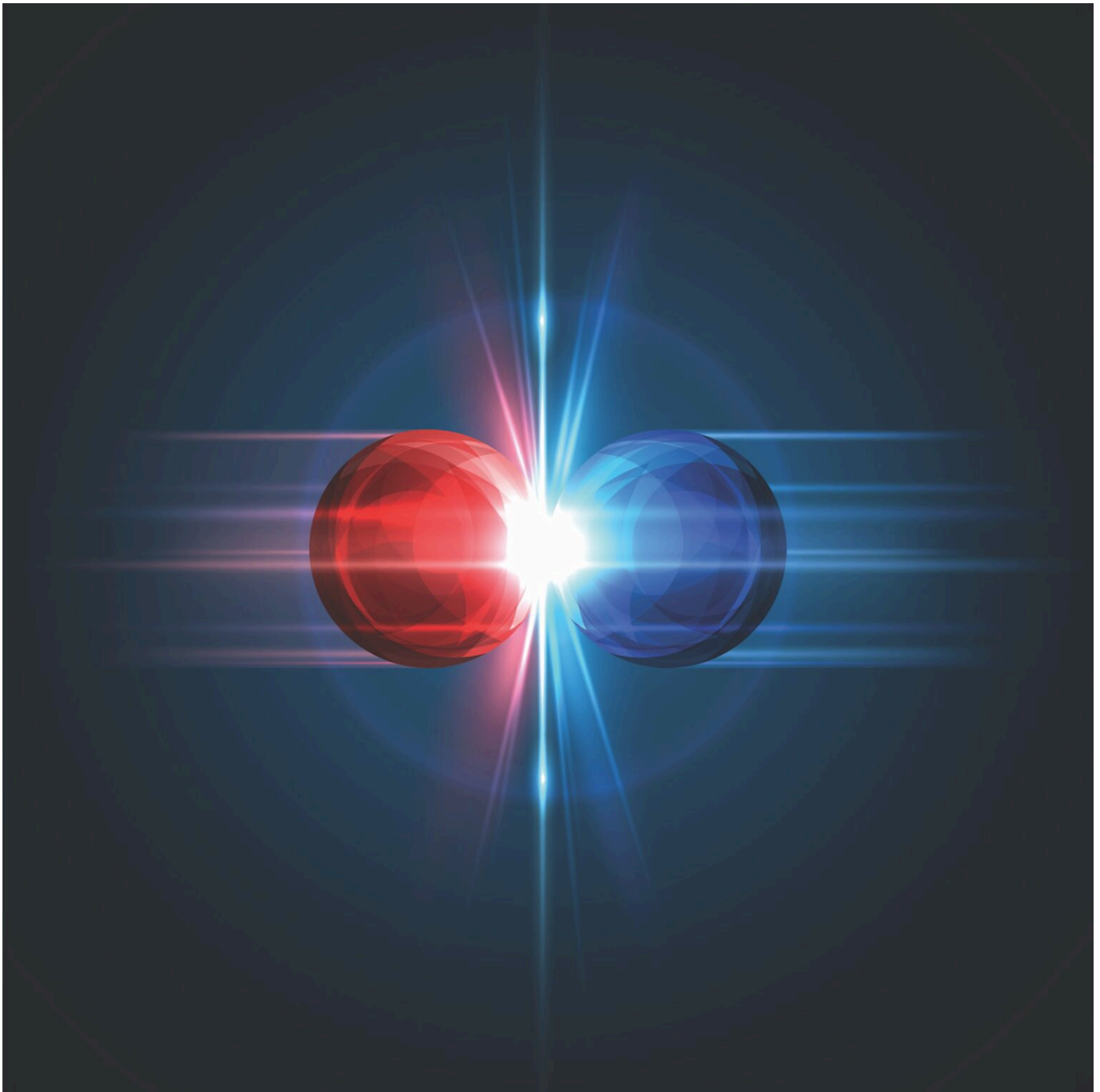# Dialogue

Menu

Face your fears

28 May 2025 by Dialogue Review

In a world of remote and hybrid working, it's all too easy to duck difficult conversations. Leaders must learn how to confront, not avoid, conflict

In my work with countless leaders over the last 20 years, I've observed an alarming level of discomfort with conflict. Most can readily recognize conflict when it arises, and understand that it needs to be addressed – yet many loathe confrontation. They attempt to avoid or bury issues, hoping they will simply disappear or fade. They rarely do.

In the executive classroom, I often ask leaders to reflect on how they would react in a given situation. Imagine discovering that information you shared privately with a colleague had been shared with others, potentially damaging your reputation. You realize that you need to confront this individual to understand what happened, and express your disappointment about the damage caused. How many of you would readily schedule that conversation? In a room of 25-35 executives, typically just one or two hands are tentatively lifted.

Now, the demographic make-up of the group may impact the numbers who raise their hands: I've observed that men are slightly more likely to lift their hands than women, for example. And more direct cultures (e.g., Dutch, Israeli, German) are more likely to speak out than less direct cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Indian).

Yet for any leader, being "too polite" is a problem. Leaders are role models. Avoiding conflict is an unhealthy habit that can be emulated by employees who may be similarly uncomfortable with conflict.

When I press executives further about their willingness to avoid dealing with conflict, there are some common justifications.

"The cat's out of the bag… there's not much I can do now"

"It's not that big an issue; I've experienced worse conflicts"

"Conflicts like these will resolve themselves in time"

"Someone else will speak to him/her"

"If I talk to him/her, they'll get really defensive... better to let sleeping dogs lie"

"Nothing would change if I did speak up"

Perhaps you see yourself or someone you know in some of these explanations. Is this pattern of avoiding conflict and confrontation to elude uncomfortable situations resulting in more or less discomfort? Consider the strain that comes from avoiding a colleague, or engaging with them with a half-smile while feeling your jaw clench and your stomach lurch, painfully aware of how their behavior impacts you. Fears it will happen again may be realized if feedback is withheld.

Unfortunately, however common this experience was before Covid, it's even more common now.

The pandemic effect: conflict avoidance grows

When we all worked in offices, employees still had to work to avoid conflict, such as by minimizing optional interactions (skipping the watercooler moments or happy hour gatherings). In the mostly-remote workplace that suddenly emerged in 2020, however, employees were mere squares on a screen (often without video) – making it all too easy to ignore conflict.

It's no surprise, then, that research demonstrates that five years of minimal face-to-face social interaction during and following the pandemic has dulled people's social skills. This decline shows up in employee communication, where digital methods (e.g. text, Slack) are increasingly dominant, and in work behavior (quiet quitting). Both remote workers and those in companies that have returned to the office (fully or partially) are experiencing disconnection (see 'Prioritize connection', *Dialogue* Q3 2024). That can encourage people to avoid conflict, especially when they perceive little to any downside.

Damaging though our collective remote-working experience may have b
could it also be that returning to the office is throwing fuel on the fire of this

problem? Emerging research shows that employees are increasingly responding to news of return-to-office (RTO) mandates with anger, plans to quit, and searching for remote work elsewhere. For example, at the end of 2023, 63% of Dell employees said they would recommend the company to others; at the end of 2024, following Dell's announcement of RTO plans that would take effect in early March 2025, that percentage dropped to 48%. Similarly, when Amazon announced in September 2024 that all employees would have to return to the office five days a week (up from three) as of January 2025, 91% of its workers surveyed by Blind were dissatisfied.

The combination of stunted conflict resolution skills and anger at being forced into the office has created a volatile, conflict-ridden environment that will hinder proactivity, productivity and innovation if it persists, unresolved.

Confronting conflict
Consider these scenarios of conflict at work

1 Howard, a senior professional at a mid-sized organization, was regularly micromanaged by his boss, Carlene. Despite 20 years of experience producing high-quality work, Howard's work was regularly re-done by his boss – who often took the credit – and his efforts to engage with internal customers were often thwarted by his boss, too. He tried to give her feedback, but she only offered explanations for her actions. Eventually, Howard largely stopped exercising initiative, and just waited to be told what he needed to do.

2 Thomas, a member of the leadership team, told the client organization to expect the final word on a project proposal at the end of the week – but didn't check with Ephraim, another member of the leadership team. Ephraim's department was unable to fulfill the request for at least another week. When Ephraim informed Thomas of this, he became irate and threatened to "resolve the issue" by going to the CEO. Thomas seemingly avoided checking in with Ephraim first.

Stop avoiding the problem

Every time I ask executives to reflect on what happens when they finally muster the courage to address a conflict, their responses are unsurprising. They range from "What a relief!" to "It wasn't that hard after all" to "I suffered in silence for years and didn't have to."

There are two main obstacles to overcome: inertia and fear. First, we avoid doing what we don't like or don't expect to excel in. And as long as there isn't an immediate or serious downside to the status quo, it will continue.

Start by asking yourself, how is this pattern working out for you, professionally and personally? Does the thought of coming into the office make you uncomfortable, fearing that you'll bump into the person who might force you to have an uncomfortable conversation? How long will you let this fear hold power over you and your ability? How much effort will you expend to continue avoiding the situation, including leaving the company or town?

Then, to break free of inertia, focus on the value or benefits of conflict-resolved outcomes compared to the investment you're making in the status quo. Ask yourself: who are you helping (and hurting) by avoiding face-to-face conversations that uncover the truth? How does leaving issues unresolved impact your productivity, stress levels, and ability to get things done that involve others? Doing it all rather than asking for help or collaborating with another department is not sustainable.

Moreover, recognize that conflict spurs growth. Product and process innovations often start with a customer complaint or a new employee who 'breaks' the rules. If businesses do things the way they've always done them, what was once a competitive edge will become outdated.

A second obstacle to overcoming conflict avoidance is the fear of being rejected. We mistakenly believe that if we verbally disagree with or confront someone, we will no longer be liked – and most humans deeply feel the need for attention and affection from others. Leadership scholars, however, tell us that what's important is for a team to respect, not like, their leader. In fact, being courageous enough to address difficult situations is positively associated with rankings of leader effectiveness.

It can help to reframe how you think about confrontation. Start with the etymology of the word itself (which dates back to the early 1600s).

Confrontation is the act of bringing two parties face-to-face for examination and discovery of the truth. The two parties need not be enemies; in fact, just as with negotiations (which many people see as contentious), it can be thought of as a process where two parties engage in collaborative problem-solving to find solutions that benefit both parties.In a confrontation between Thomas and Ephraim (see scenario box), this reframing is a matter of depersonalizing the issue. If the two can't resolve the problem, the "truth" that these executives need to discover is the importance of checking with another department before a delivery promise is made – otherwise customer trust and the business's reputation will erode.

Similarly, Howard could ask Carlene what projects, if completed successfully, would strengthen her and the department's standing, and then engage in a discussion that highlights tasks and accountable employees.

We can overcome the inertia and fear of rejection that underpins conflict avoidance by embracing a four step '**Fear**'-busting process.

Fast-forward the feelings/outcomes

How many times have you put off something "scary" only to finally do it and think, "That was a lot easier than I thought it'd be. Why did I wait so long?" Most commonly, in my experience, the offending party in a conflict doesn't realize the effect of their actions on the other party. They may apologize – even thank you for raising your concerns. So, close your eyes and envision the aftermath of a positive resolution. Feel your stress level decrease. Imagine the relief of being your authentic self around the person, not drained from the effort to mask your frustration. Use this fast-forward visualization of the end-state to motivate yourself to starting. The longer we wait, the harder it is to start.

Envision the conversation

One of the best ways to approach a difficult conversation is to plan it. Start by clarifying: what is my specific goal and the desired outcome? How will resolution benefit them and me? Realize that even if one party doesn't

recognize it, a conflict is likely to damage a relationship. Consider how you will tee up the conversation to ensure openness to the message. Rather than blindside the other party, you might ask, "Ephraim, is now a good time to talk? I need about 10 minutes of your time. Tomorrow after 2pm is also good."

Then think about how you start the conversation. A warm-up question or two about something you have in common (e.g. sports, vacation plans) can build trust. Plan what you will say about the conflict to ensure that the message is understood, while minimizing defensiveness. One tool is to use "I" language, owning the impact the other person's actions have had on you, without blaming them.

Also, plan open-ended questions to ensure you understand their point of view and intentions, and their suggestions for moving forward. If you try to dictate what they need to do, expect defensiveness and little buy-in to the resolution.

Act

Just do it! Invite the person for a chat – virtually or in person. Remember the fast-forward visualization and stress relief. To increase your comfort going into this conversation, consider role-playing the conversation with a trusted friend first.

Reflect

After the conversation, reflect on not just the outcome but also the process. How did it go? How did I feel before and after? What about the conversation was painful – or was it just uncomfortable? What did I do or say that resulted in a positive response, that I'll be sure to do again in the future? What did I do or say that may not have been so helpful, and what could I do or say differently next time? Even if the conversation was a complete success, reflection is an important step in our growth and comfort with confrontation and conflict.

Courageous conversations

In the end, conflict is not the enemy – avoidance is. Leaders who face up to discomfort, foster dialogue, and learn to reframe confrontation as collaborative problem solving, will find themselves enduring fewer energy-sapping personal situations – and will create healthier working environments for their teams, too. Do you have the courage to confront conflict?

Suzanne de Janasz is a professor and corporate learning executive, and Duke CE faculty

🏷 conflict, leadership

READ THE ISSUE

"To anticipate and appropriately react to exponential change requires a different way of looking at the world – and the courage to make different decisions."

Rita Gunther McGrath – 'Masters of Velocity,' Dialogue Q3 2025

Dialogue is a premier leadership and management journal featuring insights from the world's leading minds and corporations.

Duke
CORPORATE EDUCATION

Discover _Dialogue_'s
Knowledge Partner