

Conflict Resolution – A Case of Gain or Loss!

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The word “conflict” can conjure up a variety of impressions and feelings, mostly of a negative tone. Conflict has been a normal part of human psychology and society from the very earliest known civilization. Conflict, by its most basic definition, implies disagreement— or more commonly quarrel, argument, or dispute; and this usually occurs between two parties or groups. However, not all conflict is negative in nature. For example, every year there is a need for the American Football Conference (AFC) as well as the National Football Conference (NFC)—the two professional sporting groups that make up the American National Football League (NFL)—to put forth their respective representatives at the Super Bowl, the grand finale of American football. Each conference faces the conflict of selecting the team that deserves the honor of representing the conference—even after a sixteen-game regular season produces a team with a superior win-loss record—and this conflict is settled through the process of a playoff. The playoff process is a good thing—it is enjoyable, entertaining, and fair; and everyone plays by the same set of rules. The emerging winner from each conference earns the respect of its peers and goes on to represent that conference at the Super Bowl.

Most conflicts unfortunately are negative in nature—negative because the involved parties perceive them as negative. Conflicts can occur at various levels — on a global scale, as seen between ethnic groups; on a national scale, as seen between political parties; on a local or community scale, as observed between working groups; and on a personal level, as observed between couples in a relationship, or between employees. Conflict resolution, therefore, refers to a process of bringing to an end a disagreement between two parties. Conflict resolution is sometimes confused with negotiation—it is not the same; while conflict resolution often requires negotiation, the need for negotiation does not necessarily stem from a conflict.

Conflict is quite often a major cause of disrespect in many situations and settings in life—within family, personal relationships, workplaces and organized entities in general. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to cover this topic in this edition of Ektimis. I am not going to delve into the practice of conflict resolution—there are many books by several notable authors and thought leaders on the subject. However, I am going to provide insight into the role and importance of respect in the process of conflict resolution. The title of my book, *Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*, alludes to the possibility of gaining respect. There are an infinite number of ways to lose respect, as I outline in the book, but there are a finite number of ways to gain it. Any opportunity to resolve conflict should be viewed also as an opportunity to gain respect—Earned Respect, one of the three categories of respect outlined in the book. Why? Because life is all about opportunity; and opportunity always creates a path to achieve gain—if you are prepared.

The ultimate outcome of conflict resolution is to reach a mutually acceptable deal that meets certain interests of both parties, and that strengthens and continues to sustain the relationship between both parties. If you are involved in conflict resolution and you employ an approach that ultimately strengthens and continues to sustain a relationship, you stand to gain a tremendous amount of (Earned) respect from both sides. Why? Because an approach such as this would require fair valuation of the opposing party and the opposing

party's point of view—fair valuation does not necessarily imply agreement with the opposing point of view.

How do you achieve fair valuation of an opposing party and an opposing party's point of view? The only way possible — by getting to know more about the opposing party! The more knowledge you learn about the opposing party and the more you uncover about the basis of the opposing point of view, especially if the basis is rooted in values and core principles, the better you are able to make a fair assessment. It is this process of seeking to learn more about the other party, and this process of seeking to understand the basis of the opposing point of view that will lead to a gain in respect.

Here is a scenario—modeled after a real life business situation. David and Tom are two business owners who both have successful businesses in the city. They both grew up in the same suburban town and have been friends ever since their childhood years. David now lives in the city while Tom drives into town from his suburban home. One day they decided to collaborate on a business deal that afforded them a very lucrative opportunity. Several months into the deal Tom uncovers an opportunity to increase their financial profit by as much as 10%, but it would require both Tom and David to agree to replace an active vendor with a new one. This active vendor happened to be a small business owner and a relative of David's wife. Standing firm on principle and commitment to family, David refuses to pursue the opportunity for additional profit; Tom, on the other hand, believes business is business and personal feelings should not mix with sound business decisions. He presses hard on David. They arrive at a crossroad and the path forward could badly damage their lifelong relationship. One way or another they will have to get through this conflict.

Without taking the time to better understand David's position and the basis for this position—that is (David's) value system and core belief never to put money above family ties—Tom hastily withdraws the increased profit opportunity, concludes the original business deal, and vows never to work with David again. David, on the other hand, cannot imagine any good reason why Tom would place financial gain over family relationship, and he fails to seek to understand Tom's position and view—that is (Tom's) work ethic focused on cost efficiency. David adamantly maintains his position, concludes the original business deal, and reconsiders his relationship with Tom. They have resolved their conflict, but their relationship has weakened significantly. Neither one has gained respect from the other.

Alternatively David and Tom could have pursued a different course of action which follows. Upon sensing David's reluctance to pursue the increased financial gain, Tom backs off and expresses interest in understanding David's rationale for not wanting to reduce cost. Tom listens carefully as David shares his view and provides insight into his value system and his commitment to his wife and her family. David also shares a few past incidents when his wife's family had offered aid and provided much needed support to him. Tom appreciates David's position much better and is able to value his (David's) beliefs and strong family social structure.

Subsequently, Tom offers to provide insight into his position and David readily agrees to listen. Tom explains his sound work ethic and shares some of the secrets to his business success—to always focus on customer needs and keep cost down. Tom clearly had a more savvy business mind and David knew it; while they both had their respective successful businesses, Tom's had grown larger and was more profitable. David acknowledged Tom's better business judgment and asked how they could reach a

compromise that would keep David's relative in the game. Tom had an idea and David was willing to explore it.

Upon reaching a surprising compromise and increasing their financial profit by 6%, and not the originally anticipated 10%, David had a whole new appreciation and increased level of respect for Tom, his longtime buddy. Tom also valued David more than ever, having gained insight into his strong value system and firm principle. They resolved their conflict and also increased the strength of their relationship in the process, creating a stronger foundation to sustain their friendship for years to come.

This scenario presented two different approaches to the same problem. Comparing the two approaches the following factors are observed, as it relates to gaining respect when resolving conflict. First, **mindset**—the right mindset, or attitude, is necessary when entering conflict resolution to ensure that the conflicting situation is not perceived as a negative situation with no hope for a positive outcome; second, **fair valuation** of the other party—appreciating the other party by learning more about them helps them value you in return; third, **fair valuation** of the other party's point of view—understanding the basis of the other party's point of view by allowing them to express their rationale and sentiment affords you an opportunity to consider potential compromise; and fourth, **sustained relationship**—awareness of an opportunity to strengthen and sustain a pre-existing relationship, or the opportunity to forge a new one, for the purpose of ongoing mutual benefit. Conflict resolution always presents opportunities, especially an opportunity to gain respect—Earned respect.

About the Author



Niyi Taiwo is the founder of EKTIMIS and the lead editor for the EKTIMIS eLibrary articles. He is the author of several books, including the EKTIMIS Top Ten Laws series. He is a continuous improvement expert with over 21 years of industry experience – operational, management, and consulting. He holds an undergraduate degree from WPI and a master's degree from RPI. He is also a certified Lean Expert and an ASQ-certified Six Sigma Black Belt.