



From
Conflict
to
Courage

How to Stop
Avoiding and
Start Leading

MARLENE CHISM

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→ *For my first teachers:* ←
Mom and Dad

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Preface

I used to think conflict was due to some difficult personality or situation, but then one day I started playing with an idea: the idea that there is no conflict unless there's an inner conflict. When you're disturbed, angry, emotional, or impatient, when you're thinking about what other people are doing wrong, or when you're dredging up the past and rehashing old grudges, you'll have conflict even when no one else is physically in the room. I asked myself the question, Could it be that the first step to effectively managing conflict is to resolve inner conflict first? To be sure, you can't resolve inner conflict if you don't even know you have it, so I started paying attention to how inner conflict arises and grows in my own life. I'm willing to share my challenges for the purpose of learning.

Inner conflict arises when I want something but I hesitate to ask for what I want, or when I'm impatient but everything around me is moving slowly. Inner conflict grows when I believe every thought without challenging my narrative, or when I assume I know someone's motives but don't have the courage to question their behaviors. Inner conflict deepens when I hold a grudge or continue to harbor past resentments. When I put off a conversation because I fear the other person's defensiveness, it's only my inner conflict keeping me from moving forward; after all, the conversation hasn't even happened yet.

One of the most difficult aspects of leadership is managing conflict instead of avoiding it. My hope is that after reading this book, you will no longer avoid conflict but instead realize that conflict can be your greatest teacher and a catalyst for leadership growth.

Introduction

Conflict Is Not the Problem

Leaders have an opportunity to be a channel for chaos or a catalyst for clarity.

One of the toughest parts of your job as a leader is managing conflict. You'll have to initiate difficult conversations about performance with employees you care for, and you'll have to speak about behavioral issues with those you wish would move on. The conflicts you'll face on your leadership journey won't only be with employees. Having a title or positional power doesn't make conflict any easier; advancement requires you to become more conflict capable. You'll experience conflict with those in higher power, perhaps a board of directors, a top-level executive, a peer, a partner, a vendor, or a client. You'll have to make difficult decisions where you feel misaligned and uncertain, and you'll feel "inner conflict," that feeling when your values clash. Conflict can be seen as a problem that keeps you stuck, or conflict can be seen as a teacher that helps you grow.

Why I Wrote This Book

I wrote this book because the ideas in this book have helped me and thousands of other leaders, and I think the ideas, tips, techniques, and methods will help you. My philosophy is this: if I've had

a problem, it means I'm not alone. It means millions of other people have the same problem or will have the same problem. Everything I now teach, speak, or write about is something I either have worked through or am working on.

I'm not trying to be a guru. It's dangerous to put anyone on a pedestal or give someone else the responsibility for your decisions. I don't believe in gurus, but I believe in teachers. Teachers show up as authors, speakers, facilitators, thought leaders, professors, or experts.

Our teachers also show up as the boss we can't stand, the complaining coworker who drains our energy, the employee that won't engage, and the person who has a different political viewpoint. *Teachers are all around us if we have the eyes to see.* I'm inviting you, as you read through this book, to see conflict as your teacher and me as the facilitator.

Over the last twenty years of working with other leaders, I observed that conflict that had escalated to creating a toxic work environment was due to one simple area of neglect: a conversation that should have happened but didn't. I saw avoidance of conflict at every level in almost every organization.

I've also surveyed hundreds of leaders in various industries over the years to get a sense of how they viewed conflict and how they assessed their own skills and confidence around resolving conflict. The more experienced the leader, the more awareness they seemed to have about their conflict aversion and lack of capabilities. The more experienced leaders scored themselves as average in confidence and competence, indicating they knew there was room to grow. What was interesting was how new or inexperienced leaders perceived their competencies. The least experienced leaders scored high on both confidence and capabilities. For example, new supervisors in manufacturing, construction, healthcare, or education often overestimated their ability to manage conflict. Instead of avoiding, they were overly aggressive; I would say a little "drunk with power." Others used appeasing as a way to get everyone to like

them. All leaders had the desire to be good leaders, but they often lacked specific skills to have conversations in a way that inspired or motivated employees. When the issues included conflict with their superiors, appeasing seemed to be the top coping method. While many leaders gave head nods and lip service to embracing conflict, very few of them lived that reality in their leadership behavior. In private conversations, top leaders admit that they want to avoid or eliminate conflict.

What This Book Is About

This book isn't about avoiding or eliminating conflict. It's about redefining conflict. This book isn't as much about embracing conflict as it is about facing conflict. This book isn't about getting agreement from others; it's about seeking alignment within. This book isn't about changing others, or changing the world; it's about transforming yourself.

The paradox is that when you see conflict as a teacher, when you define conflict differently, courageously face conflict, and work on transforming yourself first, you often get the agreement or the resolution you were seeking. You change minds. People open up. They grow. You get collaboration and not just compliance. Instead of trying to change others, you become the change.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for anyone who identifies as being a leader, regardless of your level of power, political orientation, gender, race, religion, seniority, industry, or education. This book is for any leader who says, "I have an anger problem, and I'm embarrassed that I don't know how to control my triggers." This book is for the leader who is thinking about leaving because they don't know what to do next or where to start, the leader who wishes everyone could just get along but it just gets worse. This book is for the leader who doesn't know

how to ask for support. This book is for any leader who has a hard-to-get-along-with boss or colleague that undermines their leadership or employees who make the open door a revolving door full of complaints. This is for any leader who wishes their employees felt more empowered. This book is for any leader who has already had all the training offered by their own corporation, as well as the leader who works for a small organization with no resources to devote to leadership development. This book is for leaders who want to create a book club and are courageous enough to learn from someone in a “lower” position and not intimidated to learn from someone more senior. This book is for any leader who wishes they’d had that conversation sooner and now they don’t know where to start. This book is for an employee who wants to be a leader but doesn’t have experience or confidence. This book is for anyone who thinks conflict is a problem.

————— Why Conflict Is Not the Problem —————

Most leaders avoid conflict because they see conflict as a problem, *but conflict isn’t really the problem; mismanagement is*. How do leaders mismanage conflict? By avoiding it, putting it on the back burner, getting emotional when they need to stay calm, or getting aggressive when they’re at capacity. Leaders mismanage conflict when they keep important issues from their boss because they don’t want to be seen as incompetent. Leaders mismanage conflict when fear guides their behaviors—for example, when they don’t listen to employees who feel misunderstood or mistreated or who experience gender, religious, or racial discrimination.

When employees complain about each other, mismanagement includes moving people around to different departments to appease someone or listening privately to hearsay to get a leg up on what’s happening. These methods almost always backfire. Even if the mismanagement is unintentional, by not facing the issues head on, leaders increase misunderstandings and risk to the organization.

Leaders mismanage conflict when they promote the “pot stirrer” to another position, give special favors to someone they feel sorry for, or forget to document their progress. There are dozens of ways we leaders mismanage conflict, and we’ll talk more in depth about those ways later, but let’s first look at the cost of mismanaging conflict.

————— The Cost to the Organization —————

It’s estimated that employees spend almost three hours per week arguing, and those arguments amount to \$359 billion in hours that are focused on conflict instead of on productivity.¹ That’s a big cost to time and productivity. Now think about what happens when these small arguments go on for too long and blow up because the manager doesn’t know about the conflicts or doesn’t know what to do, or when the manager does try to intervene and the conflict is mismanaged. I’ve seen numerous examples where a complaint was ignored, employees were shuffled to different departments, and after a year or two, the problem turned into a harassment or discrimination complaint.

The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) had 67,448 charges of workplace discrimination in fiscal year 2020, with *retaliation* cited as the largest percentage of all charges filed. Although the trend is moving downward, with 5,227 fewer cases than in 2019, the results show that there’s still a lot of work to do and a lot to learn. The fact remains that unresolved conflict is costly. The agency secured \$439.2 million for victims of discrimination in the private sector and state and local government workplaces through voluntary resolutions and litigation.²

To quote the EEOC release at [eeoc.gov](https://www.eeoc.gov): “The agency responded to over 470,000 calls to its toll-free number and more than 187,000 inquiries in field offices, including 122,775 inquiries through the online intake and appointment scheduling system, reflecting the significant public demand for EEOC’s services.”

An employment discrimination case can take two to three years to reach a reasonable resolution and thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees.³ Financial costs notwithstanding, any leader or employee who has gone through an investigation knows how distracting the mental and emotional toll can be on collaboration and productivity.

The Cost to Well-Being

Conflict doesn't feel good. Leaders are human beings, and we humans tend to avoid situations and people that make us think things we don't want to think and feel things we don't like to feel. When you're preoccupied with conflict, it affects your sleep, your nervous system, and your ability to make rational decisions. In simple terms, these experiences create a thought-feeling loop.

Let's look at the thought-feeling loop that happens when we're immersed in a very small conflict. Suppose your employees are coming in late, and they're gathering at the coffee shop before work hours, and they've missed meetings and important phone calls. You think to yourself: "They all know better! I've addressed this issue twice, and I'm being ignored." Now you feel resentment. You don't like the choices you're faced with, but you also realize you've let your employees get by with the behavior. You enjoyed the fact that they have camaraderie, but now it's affecting productivity. The behavior allowed has become the standard. The last time you had a performance conversation with the supervisor of this team, you got resistance and excuses. You got roped into a nonproductive conversation playing ping-pong: yes, I did; no, you didn't; that's not fair; and I knew you would say that, and here's what everyone else thinks. You took the bait and engaged in nonproductive hearsay. Then there was the time one of the employees cried when you tried to intervene. You feel stuck and angry. How can they do this to you when you're so nice to them? Don't they realize what you're up against?

This example is a small but common conflict compared to a conflict that has escalated, but the point is that unmanaged conflict affects your productivity and well-being simply because you're a human being, and human beings have a brain and emotions. It helps to know how it all works.

I'm not a neuroscientist or a psychologist. My goal isn't to overwhelm you with information you won't remember. My goal is to provide ideas you can remember and use—something practical for your leadership growth. So here it is. An emotional experience is triggered in the body, and that leads to an interpretation or a series of thoughts. The thoughts lead to feelings such as fear, resentment, anger, rejection, and sadness, to name a few. These feelings lead to thoughts about revenge, retaliation, and retreat, which produce chemicals in the brain that motivate you to do whatever it takes to make it all stop. This cycle is what is responsible for bad decisions such as avoiding, appeasing, aggression, or what I call “moving the chess pieces around,” shuffling employees to different departments to keep peace. When the employee who was moved perceives your action as unfair, or as retaliation, you've just created a much bigger problem than the one you were trying to avoid.

But you're not at the mercy of your thoughts and feelings. With a little work, you can develop a measure of control over your thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and behaviors. The bottom line is that when you mismanage conflict, you feel it. Mismanaged conflict affects your well-being. Mismanaged conflict also affects your leadership growth.

The Cost to Growth

When you avoid a difficult conversation, you wire your brain to avoid. While you might breathe a sigh of relief initially, this pattern of avoidance becomes your go-to method for anything that triggers you. Just as avoidance hampers growth, so does the pattern of aggression. Aggression is a sign that you don't have the right tools

for managing stress when the heat is on. Aggressive behavior makes a statement about who's in charge and can create compliance, but it rarely contributes to collaboration, connection, or creativity.

The Cost to Collaboration

When there's serious conflict, the missing pieces are often related to trust, relationships, and collaboration. When the proper foundation of trust is laid, conflict is relatively easy to manage and resolve, but without trust, small conflicts erode collaboration.

For over twenty years I worked in manufacturing. I wasn't in Human Resources, and I wasn't a manager. I worked on the lines. I did everything from packing product to stacking skids to driving a fork-lift to tearing down equipment for sanitation on third shift. I had many great bosses who helped me to grow, but I also had some bosses who were my "teachers" and who mismanaged conflict. At one point in time, I had an overly aggressive (and avoidant) boss. If anyone had a complaint, he would say, "That's just the way it is. I didn't ask you to work here. If you don't like it, find another place to work." There were times when employees had ideas to improve production, stop a jam on the production lines, or prevent tendonitis, but he didn't want to hear it. His aggressive behavior made him seem unapproachable. When you mismanage conflict by resorting to aggression, people don't want to approach you and you don't get their best work, their ideas, or their engagement. You get resistance at worst and compliance at best. If there's excessive turnover in one department, look at two things: the job itself and the department leader.

A Message to Leaders

My advice to aspiring leaders is this: before you say yes to becoming a leader, understand your culture, understand the dynamics of conflict, get familiar with your own reactions to conflict, and

learn how to manage yourself before trying to resolve conflict with others. Know this: even though the organization may not have the resources to offer mentoring, coaching, or skills development, you must take the initiative to learn anyway because if conflict escalates to the point of getting attorneys involved, the easiest path to end the drama is to fire you. That's the uncomfortable reality in many organizations.

The good news is there's something practical you can do if you're a frontline leader. Ask for mentoring. See if you can get your boss to agree to speak with you on a *scheduled basis* to discuss your decision-making. Be humble and make the case that you're looking out for the good of the organization. This is easy if you admire your boss and more difficult if you don't. The very fact that you asked will elevate your boss's awareness and will help you form a better relationship and understand things from their viewpoint. If your boss is growth oriented, they will be happy you asked. This keeps the door open when you start to have problems. These days, transparency is not really a choice; it's a given. You'll either choose transparency up front or be exposed later. When you let your boss know what you're up to, you'll never be accused of hiding information.

For more seasoned leaders, my advice is this: know how to identify red flags that conflict is brewing. Become aware of small complaints, resentments, blame, noncompliance, and other negative vibes that indicate something's wrong. Don't brush off complaints and negativity as someone's character flaw. Instead, interpret these behaviors as a sign that a conversation needs to happen. Learn how to initiate inquisitive conversations to uncover what's really going on. If you see yourself as a "hands off" leader, my suggestion is to become a bit more hands on so that you aren't caught off guard when things blow up. The biggest concern is "I don't want to micromanage." There's a wide gap between having a light touch, having a hands-on approach, and micromanaging. It's your responsibility to know how things are being managed when you're in charge. This requires you to get honest about the way *you* handle conflict

because, ultimately, you're a role model in the organization. If you admit that you aren't that confident or competent when it comes to conflict, that's perfectly OK. Don't judge yourself. The truth will set you free! You can grab some skills and understanding now and make learning your own choice, or you will be forced to learn later. And when learning is forced, you'll spend hours consuming content that may not help you the way you need to be helped.

We live in a litigious society, and my belief is that we could significantly reduce workplace lawsuits if we knew how to build trust and create a culture of inclusion, curiosity, and camaraderie. Mismanaging conflict creates lack of clarity, and where there's lack of clarity, there's negative experiences, and when people feel discounted, retaliated against, or excluded, there will be division and misunderstandings that waste time and take years to repair, if ever. The conversation avoided today is the lawsuit three years later.

I'm not suggesting that the reason to get better at conflict is to avoid lawsuits or work the system. My message is that if the system needs to be changed, we are the system. The change starts with me. The change starts with you—how you think, how you behave, and how you courageously address and manage conflict. As leaders, we need to stop looking for all of the answers on the outside of ourselves and, instead, become the change we seek to end sexism, prejudice, injustice, and inequality. The part we can most easily control and change is ourselves. It benefits us personally to nurture relationships so that work is both enjoyable and productive. In addition, it makes business sense to be able to identify and manage conflict before it gets out of hand.

Here's the unfortunate reality: once your organization perceives they are at risk due to leadership mismanagement, it'll become mandatory to watch hours of sensitivity training or other video presentations, not necessarily for the purpose of leadership growth, or because it's a good idea, but instead for the purpose of *proving* that the organization cares and that they take the problems seriously. Even though there's some good training out there, it might

not help you build better relationships and give you exercises to become better at self-regulation. The standard trainings might give you insights but not help you to learn why people do what they do, and this type of training most likely won't give you a blueprint for initiating difficult conversations.

This book will.

———— The Opportunity for All Leaders ————

We are living in exciting yet volatile times. There are many global issues affecting us all, and let's face it, many of us are uncomfortable engaging in conversations about important issues of gender equality, political division, social justice, racial tensions, and human rights. As I write this, we are in the second wave of experiencing COVID-19, a devastating pandemic affecting the entire globe. We should know by now that what affects one of us affects us all. Instead, we see division, conversations about conspiracy, political agendas, and fear about other people's intentions. What does this have to do with the workplace? These issues are so profound and expansive, and our access to connectivity through the internet is allowing unchecked controversy that's now leaking into every crack and crevice of the workplace. People are divided, and they don't know how to disentangle from the heat of conflict. Leaders have an opportunity to be a force for division or a force for unity, a channel for confusion or a catalyst for clarity.

— Social Media: A Snapshot of Conflict to Come —

In the wake of the pandemic, I saw a post from a social media influencer and business entrepreneur, a seven-figure businesswoman with a massive following. The context on her social media thread was clearly about COVID-19, but many, including me, thought the message was unclear. Others thought they knew exactly what she intended.

This entrepreneurial thought leader posted a beautiful picture of herself with a concerned look on her face, and the copy said, “Me hoping more humans ‘wake up’ soon, otherwise this perma-fear clown town will never end, and our children’s future freedoms will never be the same.”

The themes were about freedom, fear, the pandemic, and wishing more people would awaken, but what was she asking people to awaken to? Was she asking for more people to be vaccinated, or was her message to awaken to an idea that a pandemic is nothing to fear so we should go about business as usual? Was she for masking or against masking? Was she talking conspiracy theory or science? Curious, I scrolled down and read a couple dozen of the more than six hundred comments and over seventy shares. Here’s a sampling in no particular order, but all of these particular comments were speaking directly to the thought leader:

“I 100 percent agree!”

“Love seeing more leaders like this speak up!”

“Why don’t you share a real point of view instead of talking in code to your tribe. I don’t know what this post is about.”

“You are entitled and privileged. You need to wake up!”

“It’s much worse for China and other countries!”

“You’re not awake you’re paranoid.”

“What planet did you come from?”

“What is your post about? I don’t know what you mean?”

“It’s no longer our job to wake up the sheep, it’s time to wake up other lions!”

“None of us knows what this really means and look at how we’re giving it all this energy!”

Did this thought leader intentionally post something controversial to get engagement? My perception is that this business leader usually sends a unifying message that is very inclusive of all viewpoints. At the same time, with thousands of followers, she's also a savvy businesswoman, and she knows how to increase algorithms. High engagement mixed with high controversy means you're cutting through the noise.

————— The “Us versus Them” Mentality —————

I didn't feel good after reading this post. I felt concerned about the ways in which we're all handling conflict. “But wait a minute, this is social media,” you say. “These verbal attacks only happen where people can hide behind their computer screens or devices.” Many downplay the insensitivities and incivility on social media because it's “virtual,” and many think this kind of behavior won't happen in real life, face to face. My belief is that we're becoming desensitized to disruptive behavior on social media, and this type of “entertainment” and exposure is building a platform for more intense and unpredictable conflict. When I see name-calling, judgment, accusations, and misunderstandings based only on a partial understanding of the issue at hand, I wonder if this is a forewarning of what's to come in face-to-face conversations in the workplace, at the grocery store, in airports, and beyond.

While reading through the thread, I realized I was getting distracted. It drew me in—not enough to get entangled in conflict, but enough to observe some of the common themes I'm addressing in this book: conflict capacity, leadership identity, leadership clarity, emotional integrity, structures, and choice. I'd like to expand on these themes right now and how these themes are showing up in our workplaces and in our world.

Many of the participants on this conversation thread showed a complete lack of conflict capacity: being offended without taking a pause to understand or question intentions, relying only on

one's own interpretation, and when at capacity, resorting to name-calling, judgment, and accusations—divisive language about who is awakened and who is not, conversations about “who are the sheep” and “who are the lions.” The tone of superiority and disrespect was palpable; I could feel it in my bones.

This behavior is not just about social media. The heart of the issue is “us versus them.” The us versus them mentality is alive and well in the workplace as much as it is on social media. The reality is, we have a choice to ignore social media. We can shut down our devices and ignore what's right in front of us, or we can observe the trends. Today's leader needs more than skill sets to deal with high-conflict situations that escalate without much warning. Let me give you an overview of what to expect in this book.

An Overview

In **chapter 1**, we'll talk about why skill building is important but insufficient on its own and why the inner game is necessary for good decision-making in today's time. Today's leader needs conflict capacity, the result of which expands a leader's courage to listen when it's difficult, get curious when they're certain, and practice critical thinking when it's easier to follow the crowd.

In **chapter 2**, we explore how identity drives behavior. On social media it's pretty easy to see what someone identifies with most, whether it's gender, race, politics, women's rights, religion, health-care, country, or any combination of identities. I'd venture to say that what we identify with the most creates the most vulnerability when that identity is questioned or threatened. Observe conflicts on public forums and you'll notice that very few people are curious about opposing views. (The truth is, very few of us are willing to consider another point of view when we feel threatened, discounted, or violated.) That's why it's important for leaders to understand how to spot distractions and gain leadership clarity instead of resorting to appeasing or aggression when difficulties arise, and to model civility and curiosity.

Chapter 3 presents a method to help leaders gain leadership clarity. How can a leader make good decisions when they can't describe the current situation, can't articulate the intended outcome, and don't understand the perceived or real obstacles? You can't change a situation if you don't understand it, and you can't help someone get what they want if you don't understand them. Without clarity there is no alignment. Leadership clarity helps leaders make aligned business decisions.

My goal with **chapter 4** is to do some myth-busting around anger. It's common for clients to confess to me that they have an anger problem. If you struggle to self-regulate, or if you work with a hothead, this chapter sheds some light. You'll see that anger has its place and that managed emotions produce decisive, purposeful action versus destructive, self-serving action.

In **chapter 5**, we'll look at conflict from a different lens, to realize that not every issue is about personality: sometimes the conflict is due in part to the visible and invisible structures that invite conflict. We'll explore the ways in which leaders can shape structures (invisible and visible) to determine the behaviors they want to see.

In **chapter 6**, we get to the heart of dealing with negativity, game-playing, excuses, blaming, and other dysfunctional behaviors that hamper productivity and waste time. You'll learn how to quickly identify pockets of resistance. For anyone working with a difficult colleague, a complainer who doesn't want your advice, or a closed-minded coworker, this chapter offers strength training you can use in multiple areas of life.

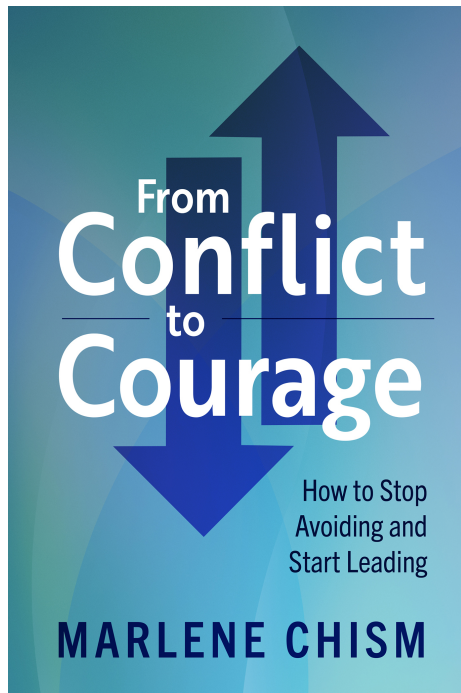
If you need to initiate a difficult conversation but don't have the skills or don't know where to start, **chapter 7** offers a complete blueprint of where to start, how to think about the conversation, and how to promote accountability. You'll learn how to use intention to guide the conversation so that you aren't talking just to "document" but to inspire and support the employee to improve performance.

Chapter 8 is about the greatest power we all have, the power of choice. One of my aspirations is to help people become the creative

force in their own lives. As long as we buy into a victim narrative, we imprison ourselves. Leaders have a new choice to make, the choice to see the value in each human being and to help them realize their own power through their choices. Many of our daily conflicts would end if we could recognize the power of choice.

Conflict mismanagement is a problem, but there's a big opportunity for leaders to become change agents. As a leader, you aren't going to solve world problems or make people change their habits on social media, and you probably won't convince someone to see politics, religion, or world events differently if they aren't open to conversation. What you can do is model the behavior of one who knows how to manage conflict so that you can build trust, collaboration, and inclusion—a real sense of purpose and belonging—so that mismanaged conflict doesn't escalate in your own workplace.

We hope that you enjoyed this excerpt from
Marlene Chism's *From Conflict to Courage*.



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