

SoftEd

A SOFTED POWER SKILLS FIELD GUIDE

Dealing with Conflict

Turning difficult conversations into productive ones.

Deliver. Lead. Innovate.

Facilitated by **David Mantica** · SoftEd · softed.com

Framework & source material: Tommy Re, Vital Communications

Conflict has a bad reputation.

We treat it like a fire to run from — and in doing that, we let it smolder until it does real damage. This guide makes the opposite case: handled well, conflict is where the best work gets done. It's where teams get sharper, products get better, and trust actually gets built.

This is the field guide to the Lunch & Learn we ran together. It pulls the frameworks we covered into one place and, just as important, it keeps the stories you shared in the room — because that's where this stuff stops being theory and starts being useful.

Read it with a specific conflict in mind. The one you've been avoiding works best. And remember the through-line for everything that follows: **the goal isn't to win. It's to move forward.**

— David

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01

The Role of Conflict

Conflict isn't the problem. Avoiding it is.

Let's start with the reframe that everything else hangs on. Conflict is not the enemy. The enemy is what happens when you hide from it: the problem festers, the relationship strains, and the discomfort compounds every single day you wait.

And here's the part most people skip — **it starts with you**. Not the other person. It's how you process the conflict, how you work through the challenge in front of you, and whether you can change your own conception of it from a fight to a conversation, a debate, a push toward a better understanding.

FROM THE SESSION

In the military, they talk about the point of friction. Picture a big machine coggling along, and you've got these friction points — that's where the wear and tear happens, where things slow down. But as a leader, that's also where you deliver the most value. That's where you inject yourself.

The Marines run toward the sound of gunfire. Where there's friction, you go to it, you resolve it, and you move on.

— Tyler

What avoiding it actually costs

Friction gets measured in hours. According to the CPP Global Human Capital Report, U.S. employees spend **2.8 hours every week** tangled up in conflict — about **\$359 billion** in paid time a year. For managers, dealing with it can eat **20 to 40%** of the day.

Think of it like a leaky roof. Do you fix it the moment you see the stain, or do you wait? We know what waiting buys you: rot, mold, and a much bigger bill — plus the line we all say eventually, “I wish I'd just handled it when I first saw it.” Conflict works exactly the same way. It doesn't dry out on its own.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Conflict is already on the payroll. The only question is whether you're **managing it** — or paying for it twice.

So what is conflict, really?

Strip away the drama and it's simple: a situation where **your concerns or desires differ** from someone else's. That's it. There are no villains. The moment we start vilifying the person who doesn't think the way we do, we've made the problem about character instead of difference — and difference is all it actually is.

It also shows up constantly, because conflict is tied directly to two things you already do every day: **making decisions** and **negotiating**. McDonald's or the salad from Whole Foods? That's a small conflict you resolve to get to the other side. The skill isn't avoiding the gap. It's working through it.

Where it comes from

Before you react, find the source. Most arguments aren't about what they appear to be about, and naming the real root changes the whole conversation. There are four places to look:

Facts & Information

Two real datasets telling two different stories. Before you poke holes in theirs, ask whether their information might actually be better.

Methods

You agree on the goal but not the "how." Common in project and sales work, where the way the work gets done runs deep.

Goals

You're aiming at different outcomes. A customer wants it free; you're not in business to give it away. Different goals, real gap.

Values

The hardest kind — it's the basis of who we are. Smart hiring to shared core values heads most internal value conflict off at the pass.

Run your own conflicts through this. The one at home with a teenager, the one with a coworker, the one with a vendor — each maps cleanly to facts, methods, goals, or values. Diagnose it, and you'll know what kind of conversation you're actually about to have.

WHERE IT SHOWS UP AT WORK

Take a furniture delivery that the dealer botched, right before a customer's grand opening. Everyone's upset, the perceptions are flying, reputations are on the line. It's a conflict on a condensed timeline — but it maps the same way every other one does. Find the source, understand the perspective, and you can work it through.

02

Same Facts, Different Stories

You don't go into conflict to win the story. You go in to understand it.

We ran a simple exercise in the session. Half the room closed their eyes while the other half looked at an image, then we swapped. Same object — a big multicolored beach ball — but depending on your angle, some of you saw red and some saw blue. Everyone was certain. Nobody was wrong.

That's the whole game. **Same facts, different conclusions, and neither person is lying.** We narrate the world from where we happen to be standing, and then we defend that narration as if it were the entire picture.

“The first move in conflict isn't to win the story. It's to ask what the other person is seeing.”

So lead with the question, not the verdict. “Help me understand how you're seeing this.” “Teach me what you're looking at.” You're not conceding — you're gathering the information you need before you respond. And it matters at work especially, because perspective gets quietly skewed by things people don't say out loud: their role, their compensation plan, their experience level, the outcomes they're measured on. Sales and operations will see a delivery differently. Marketing and selling will see a customer differently. None of them are wrong from where they sit.

✓ Truth, told well

Eventually you do have to be honest, and honesty can be uncomfortable. The skill is delivering it in a way that helps people grow rather than just proving you're right. Kim Scott's *Radical Candor* is worth your time here — it's about caring personally while challenging directly. Because the truth is the only thing that sets any of us free, and we all have blind spots we genuinely can't see without someone willing to point at them.

TRY THIS

Next time you feel the urge to correct someone mid-conflict, ask one genuine question first: **“What are you seeing that I might be missing?”** Then actually listen to the answer before you say a word back.

03

Emotions in Conflict

A quick reinforcement from our EI session — pointed straight at conflict.

We've already done the deep work on emotional intelligence, so this is reinforcement, not a repeat. But conflict is exactly where EI earns its keep, so it's worth connecting the dots.

Conflict drives emotions high, and it starts in the body. Your heart speeds up. Cortisol floods in and the brain fogs. You can't think as deeply, so your picture of the situation distorts. And emotions are contagious — if you're stressed, the room feels it and mirrors it right back. Left unchecked, you end up fully **hijacked**: the rational brain gets blocked and you react from fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Here's the cruel part: the moment you most need a clear head is the exact moment your body is screaming at you to run or swing. That's the thing we have to train for.

Three ways to get back in control



Breathe

4 in, 7 hold, 8 out. One cycle pulls you out of the hijack.



Name it

"I'm frustrated because..." State the feeling instead of acting it out.



Find the fear

Conflict usually hides a fear. Ask what's really at stake.

That last one is the deep one. Most conflict has fear underneath the agitation — fear of looking bad, of losing the sale, of making a mistake, of the customer calling your manager. Name the fear, in yourself and in them, and the heat usually drops.

FROM THE SESSION

Write the email. Just don't hit send. Get it all out, then sit with it.

It works because you're naming the frustration — you're exercising it on the page so you can think about the problem logically instead of firing from the hip. And email has no body language anyway; every line of it can be misread.

— Dan

 FROM THE SESSION

I put a conference together for a client after a long debate, thought it was great, sent it over — and got on a call where she was going off. Passionate, emotional. So I told myself: okay, I've hit a fear. I listened, I wrote it all down, and I said, 'Give me two weeks.'

That time let me actually process what she was reacting to. I came back with about five changes, and her response was 'this is the best thing ever.' Time is one of your most valuable tools when emotions are running hot.

— *David*

04

Trust: The Foundation

You can't resolve a conflict on a foundation of broken trust.

Trust is the lever that turns conflict from a negative into a way to move forward. Stephen Covey called it the speed of trust: more trust, faster everything gets done; less trust, slower. Build it, and you reduce friction before it ever flares up.

What builds it, what breaks it

The builders are **integrity** (your words and actions match — and people watch how you operate far more than they listen to what you say), **empathy** (you take the time to see their world), and **responsibility** (you own your outcomes and you say it plainly when you made the mistake).

The breakers are the mirror image: **inconsistency** (people can't predict which version of you shows up), **apathy** (you signal their concerns don't matter), and **unreliability** (you don't do what you said you'd do).

YOUR 60-SECOND TRUST AUDIT

Two honest questions. **Which builder is your real strength?** Lean into it on purpose. **Which breaker trips you up the most?** That's the one to manage. You can't grow without knowing yourself honestly — at work, at home, in every group you're part of.

Repairing it: the I-ACT model

When you've broken trust, words alone won't fix it — you have to **ACT**. This is Tommy Re's I-ACT model, and it gives you a way to think through a hard repair:

I

Initiate

Take the lead on the conversation. Don't hide from it.

A

Acknowledge

Name the issue and apologize for your part in it.

C

Concern

Show you care about the impact it had on them.

T

Take Action

Commit to something real — then follow through.

Out loud, it's plain and human: *"Thanks for taking the time to meet with me. I want to own that I missed the handoff, and I apologize — I know that put you in a tough spot. It matters to me, and I understand the week it cost you. Going forward, I'll flag risks 48 hours early. And if you see me slip, tell me."*

Two things make it work. The action has to be **realistic** — something you can actually deliver given your workload — and you have to be honest the moment you can't. Marshall Goldsmith points out it takes about a year to change a reputation, but only a couple of missteps for people to think you're back to your old

ways. Trust is slow to build and quick to dent, which is exactly why the follow-through matters more than the apology.

✓ FROM THE SESSION

There was a mishap at Evans Army — errors on both ends that snowballed into a much bigger miscommunication. The customer was forward on the phone and took no accountability, and kept trying to escalate over my head.

I owned my part, stayed on the phone, and worked it. I resolved the whole thing without it ever reaching my supervisor, kept everyone at Intuitive and Evans from being upset, and then fully outlined the process going forward so it wouldn't happen again.

— Maddie

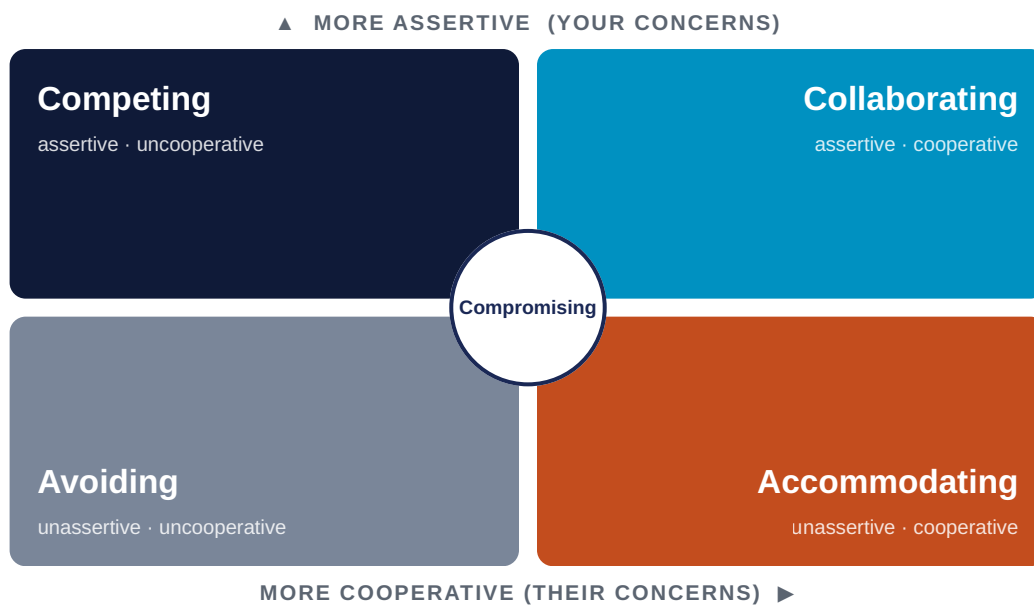
That's the model in the wild. Maddie didn't shrink from the friction or let it sit in voicemail for two days — she went to it, acknowledged the facts, owned her piece, and moved straight to a fix. And notice the deeper move: the customer's anger was really fear of looking bad to *his* people. Help someone through that fear, and you wedge the gap closed.

05

The Five Conflict Styles

There's no right style. There's the right style for the situation.

The Thomas-Kilmann model lays out five ways to handle conflict, and the single most important idea is this: none of them is good or bad. Your conflict mode is **skill plus situation**. Every style is a blend of two dials — how hard you push **your** concerns (assertiveness) and how hard you push **theirs** (cooperativeness).



Most of us default to one or two of these and overuse them. The skill is widening your range so the *situation* picks the mode, not your habit. Here's when each one is the smart play:

STYLE	USE IT WHEN...	ON THE GROUND
 Competing	Speed matters; safety or a core principle is on the line.	<i>Production's down at 2 a.m. — someone makes the call.</i>
 Collaborating	Stakes are high and you need real buy-in from both sides.	<i>Two engineers split on flagship architecture.</i>
 Compromising	Roughly equal power, time-boxed; a workable middle beats deadlock.	<i>Splitting a tight budget across two good projects.</i>
 Avoiding	The issue is trivial, emotions are hot, or you need facts first.	<i>Letting a heated email thread cool overnight.</i>
 Accommodating	You're wrong, it matters more to them, or you're banking goodwill.	<i>Use the font they want. Move on.</i>

FROM THE SESSION

Years ago I ran a network security product line with three brilliant security pros — and I wasn't the security expert in the room. So I told them straight: collaborate and figure it out, but if you can't, I'll make the final call on the business case, not on the technology.

That gave them room to collaborate while everyone knew the competing hammer was there if they deadlocked. Different situations, different tools — you don't swing the same hammer at every problem.

— David

06

The Conversation, Step by Step

A repeatable structure beats winging it every time.

When it's time to actually have the hard conversation, don't improvise. Great negotiators in genuinely complex situations follow the same five steps — because conflict and negotiation go hand in hand.

1

Prepare

Know your goal and the facts before you walk in — yours and, as best you can, theirs. What are they trying to achieve?

2

Set the Stage

Right time, right place, right channel — and not just the one that's convenient for you. A heated customer may need to see your face on a video call.

3

Communicate

Have the conversation. Speak clearly, and listen harder than you speak.

4

Focus on Solutions

It's not about what happened — it's about where to go next. Most people genuinely want to move forward.

5

Document & Follow Up

Capture the commitments and close the loop. This is the step people skip — and it's why they hate meetings where nothing ever gets done.



Listen like it matters

Step three lives or dies on listening. Most people listen to reply; the skill is listening to understand. **Watch the body language** — it'll show you fear or doubt before the words do. **Don't interrupt** — let them get all the way through the thought. And **paraphrase back**, especially when someone's heated: "Here's what I think I heard — is that right?" You might have missed something, or hearing it back, they might catch something themselves.



When the other side won't play

Sometimes the other person isn't a rational actor — they're negotiating in bad faith. You can't control that. You can only control your own reaction and response. When you hit that wall, you put a line in the sand, make your decision, and be willing to walk away. Doing the right things can still get you to a resolution — it just might look different than you pictured.

 FROM THE SESSION

Right before the close on selling SoftEd, the buyer started playing games with the price. From a conflict standpoint I just had to say: we talked, this is it — take it or not, and if I need to walk away, I'll walk away.

Sometimes you have to draw that line and mean it. I did, and it moved forward.

— David

 FROM THE SESSION — FINDING COMMON GROUND

The first time we sat down with a tribe we'd been in conflict with — and I mean real conflict, we were being shot at — it took two months of coaxing and patience to broker something. There was loss on both sides. But once we got there, we realized those folks wanted exactly what we wanted: their kids in school, their animals fed, and to be safe.

Find that common ground and you can build something stable. Boil it way down and it's the same skill behind a botched delivery and an upset customer — just a shorter timeline and far lower stakes. Understand where the other person is coming from, and you move toward what makes it right for both sides.

— Tyler

07

Make It Yours

Start, stop, continue.

None of this works as theory. So before you close the guide, make it concrete — name one of each, and be specific. Specific beats ambitious every time.

**START**

One thing you'll begin doing in conflict.

**STOP**

One habit that's making conflict worse.

**CONTINUE**

One thing you already do well.

And hold onto the through-line that connects every chapter. Don't avoid it — move toward the friction. Remember it starts with you. Understand the other perspective before you try to win. Regulate yourself before you engage. Build and repair trust as you go. Pick the style the situation calls for. Then run the conversation with a plan, and listen harder than you talk.

“You're never going to have a life without conflict. The skill is building the muscle to work through it — and drive forward.”

Handled well, conflict isn't comfortable. It's just a whole lot better than the alternative. Go find the one you've been avoiding.

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**Conflict, handled well,
is where the work
gets done.**

Built from a SoftEd Power Skills session — and the real stories that made it stick.

Keep it close. Pull it out before the hard conversation, not after.

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