

# Conflict Myths for Managers: 3 Steps to Shift Your Perspective and Build Stronger Relationships

Includes  
3 free  
training  
exercises





## Introduction

When it comes to workplace conflict, some myths hold sway.

**Myth one: conflict is a bad thing.** That means someone's going to suffer and no good will come of it.

**Myth two: there's a goody and a baddy.** We must figure out who is who and take sides accordingly.

**Myth three: your job as manager is to fix conflict.** Just as you're expected to fix every other problem in your team.

In light of this narrative, it's no wonder managers feel stressed at the thought of conflict.

The idea that conflict is bad is bound to put us in a negative frame of mind. The idea of goodies and baddies is inherently divisive. It draws us into judging, blaming and taking sides. As for the assumption that managers have the responsibility to fix conflict – that's a heavy burden to bear.

This guide offers an *alternative narrative* to managers dealing with conflict. For each of the myths above, we propose a new story that challenges outdated thinking about conflict and how to manage it.

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## Step 1: From negativity to creativity

**Let's start with an exercise. Please take a piece of paper and a pen ... and write down the first three words that come to your mind when you think of conflict. Don't censor yourself, or try to be right. Just note honestly what comes to mind. Do this now, before you read the next paragraph.**

Once you've done that, take a look at what you've written and notice the kind of associations conflict brings up for you. In our many years of doing this exercise during Consensio training courses, we know that conflict conjures up unpleasant thoughts and feelings for the vast majority of people. These include: fear, anxiety, anger, stress, hurt, misunderstandings. This helps to explain why we often avoid conversations about conflict. We assume it's going to be difficult, painful, uncomfortable, or just make things worse.

Conflict is about more than those unpleasant thoughts and feelings that most of us have. Conflict can be a door to creativity, new ways of thinking, greater self-awareness, deeper understanding of others, stronger relationships and new discoveries about how to deal with conflict. To make the most of these opportunities, we need to take time to reflect on and explore our conflicts, either on our own or through conversation. If our attitude towards conflict is overwhelmingly negative, we're unlikely to do this.

So what if, at the thought of conflict, our minds immediately turned to the opportunities for learning and creativity? How many more conflict conversations might unfold across our organisations? How much understanding, innovation and insight might flow as a result?

In order to shift our conflict story, we need to do some work. It can take a long time to change the mental associations that have taken hold over the years, but the process can be sped up by active effort. Below is a practical exercise you can do to shift your mindset around conflict from negativity to creativity.

### Exercise 1: Conflict creativity

You may find it helpful to write down your answers to these questions.

- **Think of one thing you have learned about yourself through your experiences of conflict.**
- **Think of one thing you have discovered about other people through your experiences of conflict.**
- **How do you rate your ability to handle conflict today, compared to when you were younger?**
- **How did you acquire your current skill and understanding?**

Your answers to these questions will highlight that, whatever difficulties conflict brought you in the past, it also brought rich insights into yourself, other people, and the art of managing conflict.



## Step 2: From blaming to reframing

The second conflict myth is the idea that in every conflict there is a good person and a bad person, a victim and a perpetrator, a right and a wrong. When we stop to think about it, we know things aren't that simple. Any mediator will tell you that, in most disputes, both sides see themselves as victim. Under the cold light of scrutiny, the story of good and bad doesn't stack up. But the myth persists.

This kind of binary thinking causes two problems. Firstly, it exacerbates the conflict and multiplies the suffering. By assuming the existence of a right and a wrong, we condition ourselves to notice only those things which validate our prejudices. This hardens our feelings against whomever we have cast as the perpetrator, and reinforces the righteousness of the victim. The second problem is that binary thinking shuts the door to the creativity and learning described above. When we're busy pointing fingers and defending our truth, it's harder to notice areas of shared interest that might form the basis for a creative way forward. It's also far harder to access the humility we need to acknowledge our blind spots and gain self-awareness.

In order to move beyond this mindset, we need to develop **curiosity**, **humility** and **openness**. We need to train ourselves, even in the heat of conflict, to hold back on making judgements, and to hold out for a broader perspective.

We also need to demonstrate **empathy**, which is the ability to understand and reflect the feelings of someone else. When we show empathy and compassion during a conflict conversation, the other person is more likely to have empathy for our situation, which helps us to view the situation from multiple perspectives.

Instead of formulating new lines of attack and defence, we can ask ourselves questions, such as:

- *What might be going on for the other person that could explain their behaviour?*
- *Why might this person have reacted that way?*
- *Have I ever behaved in the way that they are? If so, why?*
- *Why might they be upset by my actions?*
- *How might I have contributed to this conflict?*

Even better, we can pose these questions directly to the people involved, through the kind of conflict conversation described above. These questions help to reframe the situation, and open up new perspectives and a way to discover the many shades in-between black and white.

This exercise will help you practise reframing and broadening your perspective.

## Exercise 2: Reframing and broadening perspectives

Choose a conflict that you are experiencing or have experienced.

- Write down the different ways the conflict has impacted you.
- Write down what assumptions you're making about why the other person is behaving in the way they're behaving.
- Now write down how the other person may be impacted by the conflict.
- What assumptions might they be making about why you are behaving as you are?
- Are there similarities and/or differences between what you've written down?
- What new insights or perspectives have you gained?

This practice of seeing things from different people's perspectives teaches us to question our assumptions and judgements, and opens us up to more creative and constructive ways of responding to conflict situations.



## Step 3: From fixing to facilitating

**Most managers are trained to fix things. In the case of technical or practical problems, this may be the right thing to do. But when it comes to conflict, the urge to fix people's problems can be misplaced. By imposing a solution on them, you may be robbing them of the opportunity to *learn* and feel *ownership* over a solution.**

A common third-party problem-solving approach often involves minimising contact between those in conflict, for instance by shuttling between the parties to gather information, and then informing them of your chosen solution. But it is when the parties communicate with one another directly that the learning opportunities are richest. Seeing the other person, hearing the nuances in their voice, feeling their vulnerability, pride, hesitations and fears – these are what allow us to see humanity in someone we had begun to consider our enemy. The attempts to express oneself and understand one another – however clumsy – are where new perspectives begin to emerge and narratives begin to shift.

When this happens, the parties will most likely start to look for things they can do to improve their situation. In other words, they will start to solve the problem for themselves. This is far more likely to succeed than if the manager tries to solve it for them. The ideas they come up with are considerably more likely to work. If the aim is for the parties to find resolution, they are the ones best placed to design the solution, since they best know their own idea of resolution. Through this process, they will gain experience and confidence in dealing with conflict. And they will end up feeling more empowered and fulfilled than if the process and solution had been imposed from outside.

In our new story about conflict, managers are no longer fixers. Their role is to support people in reaching their own, self-determined outcomes. One way to do this is by facilitating an environment in which they can communicate with one another directly and agree their own way forward.

Next time you spot signs of friction or conflict between members of your team, try to facilitate a conversation between them. Below you'll find one possible way to approach this.

### Exercise 3: Facilitating a conflict conversation

- **Find a moment to chat to each team member privately. Invite them to tell you what they are experiencing. Then, if appropriate, play back to them what you have heard them say. You can also ask them if you've understood correctly, giving them a chance to express themselves again if they wish.**
- **Offer the team members a joint meeting where they can share perspectives and the impact the situation is having on them.**
- **Support them to find their own way forward. You can also ask them to think about what support they could request elsewhere.**

Remember your role is not to fix the conflict, but to facilitate a conversation so they can understand one another better and take joint responsibility for finding a way forward.

**For further guidance, please refer to Consensio's Guide to Facilitating Conflict Conversations, which can be downloaded here: [consensiopartners.co.uk/resources/consensio-thought-leadership](http://consensiopartners.co.uk/resources/consensio-thought-leadership)**

## Conclusion

**In Stephen Covey's bestselling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, he tells us that the key is not spending time, but investing it. Any amount of time we invest in changing our conflict narrative is bound to yield returns. With each myth we bust, we are one step closer to embracing the opportunities that lie hidden within conflict.**

## About Consensio

At Consensio, we help our clients to resolve workplace conflict and build resilient workplaces, enhancing the well-being of organisations and their people. We offer support in all areas of conflict management, providing consultancy, leadership development, training and e-learning, coaching and mediation services.

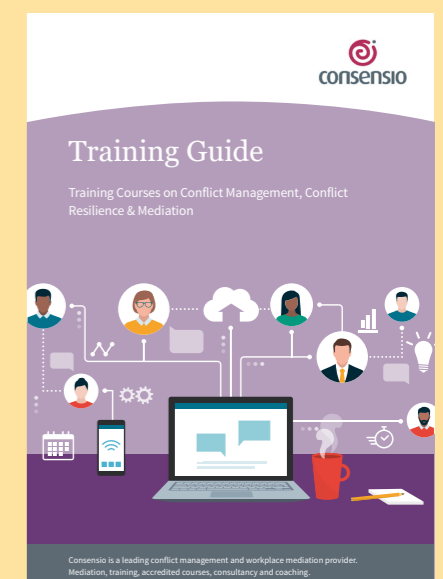
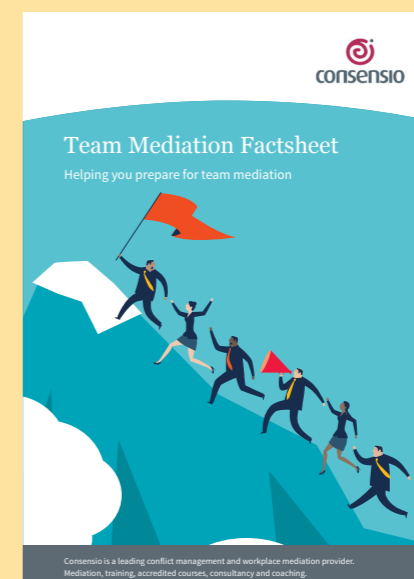
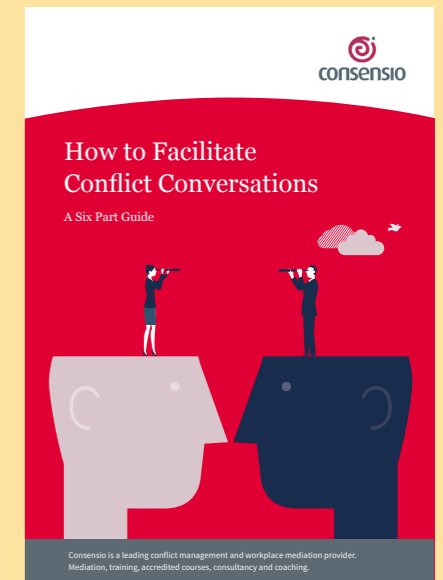
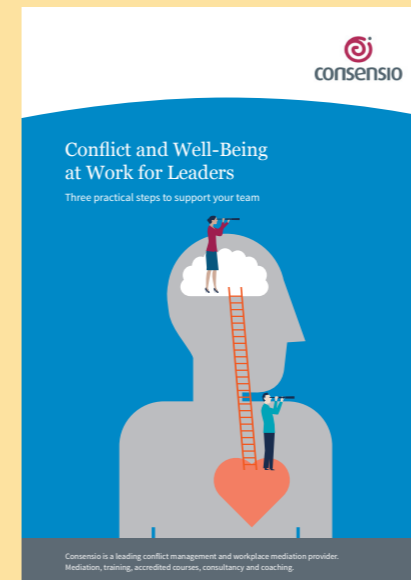
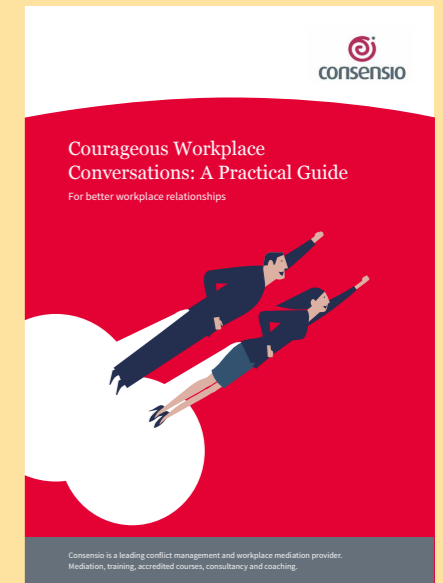
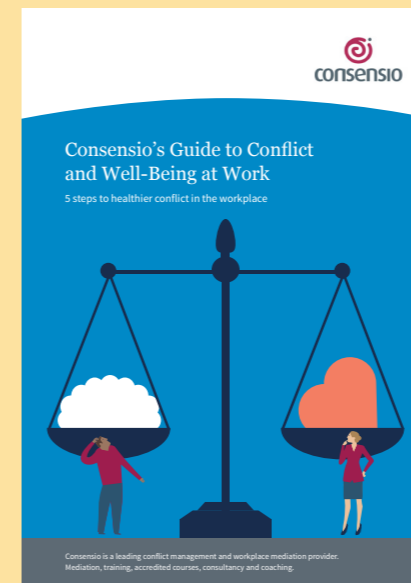
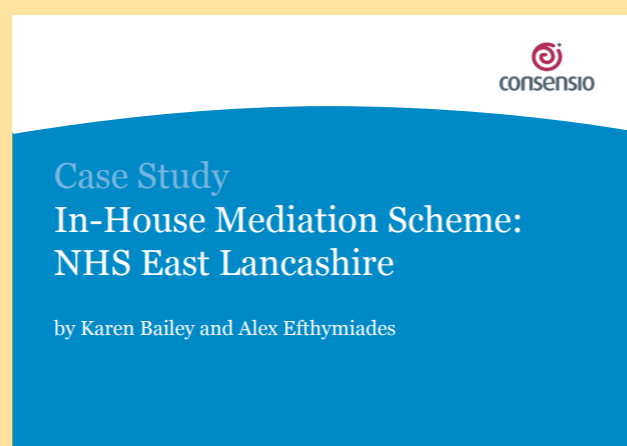
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