

## How to Use Conflict to Drive Positive Change



Conflict is a natural part of life, whether in personal relationships, at work, or even within ourselves. But not all conflicts are created equal. Amanda Ripley, journalist and author of *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*, distinguishes between two types of conflict: **high conflict** and **good conflict**. Understanding the difference can transform how we approach disagreements and help us move beyond entrenched positions.

### High Conflict vs. Good Conflict

In Ripley’s framework, **high conflict** is the kind of disagreement that escalates quickly and becomes all-consuming. It involves intense emotions, demonization of the other side, and a sense that there’s no way out. High conflict often traps people in a cycle of escalation, making it hard to think clearly or find common ground.

In contrast, **good conflict** is constructive. It’s the kind of disagreement where both sides feel heard, and there’s room for understanding. Good conflict encourages curiosity, problem-solving, and finding solutions that satisfy everyone’s needs without shutting down the other person or resorting to personal attacks.

Ripley’s insights show that it’s not about avoiding conflict entirely; it’s about fostering the right kind of conflict—the kind that leads to growth, insight, and stronger relationships.

### Managing Conflict: Understanding Over Resolution

Rather than rushing to resolve a conflict immediately, Ripley suggests that a better approach is to focus on understanding the root causes of the disagreement. When considering the ‘understory’ of any conflict, there are four primary categories: care and concern; respect and recognition; power and control; and stress and overwhelm. For each of these types of conflicts, here are three strategies to help manage conflict in a way that prioritizes understanding:

1. **Practice Active Listening:** Instead of preparing your counterargument or waiting for your turn to speak, listen to understand. This means acknowledging the other person’s perspective, even if you don’t agree. By validating their feelings or concerns, you create a space for dialogue that is less about winning and more about mutual understanding.
2. **Avoid Tripwires:** Ripley highlights that certain topics or phrases can act as emotional “tripwires” that immediately escalate a conflict. For example, phrases like “you always” or “you never” often trigger defensiveness. By being aware of these tripwires, you can choose more neutral or open-ended language that keeps the conversation productive and reduces the chances of escalating the conflict.
3. **Use “Looping” to Reflect and Clarify:** One of Ripley’s most effective tools for managing conflict is “looping,” which involves repeating back what the other person is saying in your own words. This technique shows that you are actively listening and gives the other person a chance to correct any misinterpretations. For example, you might say, “It sounds like you’re saying that you feel overlooked in meetings, is that right?” Looping helps de-escalate emotional tension and fosters a deeper understanding of the other person’s perspective.

By focusing on understanding rather than jumping straight to resolution, we can shift from high conflict to good conflict, creating healthier and more productive conversations. The goal isn’t necessarily to “win” the conflict but to navigate it with empathy, respect, and a deeper understanding of the needs at play.

There may be times when it’s helpful to seek guidance from a mental health professional. To learn more, contact your Assistance Program. Services are free, confidential, and available to you and your family members. You can access them 24/7 by visiting [Member Support](#).