

Leadership

Seeking the Minimization of Conflict

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 8 min read

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Let's take a step away from combat scenarios for a second and look at everyday life for a change.

You're at the office, nothing today is going right for you, that board meeting was a waste of time, your project hasn't made any progress, and you're feeling the pressure. You're already frustrated enough as it is, but then one of your team members walks up and hands you some more bad news... what do you do?

It's Friday, and after this hard day at work, you decided to go out with some friends – perhaps your teammates – and grab a beer or two at the pub, but while there, some guy starts talking trash on your company, or the civil project you've worked so hard on, or veterans, or your favorite team, or whatever. It's angering to hear such ignorance... what do you do?

How would you handle these everyday situations?

Being a warfighter isn't always all about combat situations, but make no mistake, we are masters of conflict, and even on our best days can we find ourselves right in the middle of it. Life is unpredictable, and as we well know, so are situations where conflict arises. So when we do suddenly find ourselves in a situation where our good decision-making capabilities are compromised, and we're now on the verge of making some bad choices we know we'll regret later, it is paramount that we first re-evaluate ourselves before attempting to address the other side. Of course it is not difficult to imagine all sorts of advice people would offer up, telling you how best to accomplish this, and there are a vast number of studies that those who offer up advice can turn to as reference for their expertise. However, what's most important in any discussion on conflict is functional simplicity. The more educated we become in a subject, the more we tend to over-complicate it. As such, we must remember that it is very possible to boil down a subject such as conflict to very simple terms and aspects. Therefore, before we begin discussing normal, regular, everyday conflict management, take a minute to remember three simple words that have saved many a warfighter from making some terrible rash decisions in the heat of conflict...

Stop, Walk, Talk.

German military strategist and Prussian General, Helmuth von Moltke, once said, "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy" (Chisholm, 1911). We all know this, from the soldier on the battlefield to the CEO negotiating a business deal, even the best laid plans never survive first contact with the enemy. Indeed, the very moment we enter into conflict, our perspectives on all fronts are altered. Our situation is changed, our plans are destroyed. Because of this, upon recognizing that we are now in a conflict, we must also recognize that we have been mentally compromised. We are now unstable. Before we can go any further, we must "Stop". Stop what we are thinking – because more often than not, we are not thinking at all – stop what we were about to do, stop attempting to justify our actions, and stop making excuses. We need to stop so we can prevent any unnecessary escalation of the conflict by actions we may not have thought through, and may regret after.

Emotions can turn the possibility of conflict management on its head because with emotions also come physical reactions as a result. "Emotions tend to elicit certain types of behavioral responses. These biologically based responses help us to deal with the events that stimulated the emotion" (Folger, et al, 2013, p. 47). This means that verbal aggressiveness can result, leading the conflict down a path that might also result in physical attacks. "Common responses to anger include physical attacks, verbal attacks, and nonverbal expressions of disapproval (Fehr et al., 1999)" (Folger, et al, 2013, p. 49). Furthermore, due to some internalized natures within conflict, a person's own self-judgements may also have a direct impact on the situation. "Anxiety influences conflict interaction by causing members to be excessively rigid and inflexible" (Folger, et al, 2013, p. 45). So we must stop, and evaluate ourselves before attempting to press forward.

Conflict is dynamic, and like a chess game, you must be able to predict the best course of action before making a move. After preventing yourself from taking what might end up as the regrettable path, the next course of action would be to "Walk". Now, this of course does not always mean to literally walk – however, sometimes simply walking away from conflict can be the correct decision – but rather, we're talking about a mental walk. We must think about our actions, as well as the possible outcomes. Do we really intend to vent our anger and frustrations on our teammates? Do we really intend to hit this guy at the pub? Knowing full well that working out a conflict, versus laying one into the next guy, could also mean the difference between keeping a job and going home that night or getting fired and possibly spending the night in jail, might very well be what helps guide us down a better path.

The mental walk is a time to check yourself, to self-evaluate where you're coming from and the situation around you. It's a Psychodynamic Perspective of conflict management, and it offers a very broad, free-thought process for you to understand where conflict stems from, and even why it is so important to go for a mental walk in the first place. Folger, et al (2013) highlight that a Psychodynamic Perspective is helpful in that it "deals with fundamental human issues and has generated important insights that have become part of our day-to-day thinking – concepts like the ego, the unconscious, repression, and wish-fulfillment" (p. 42). Ask yourself, is the conflict driven on suppressed emotions? Is there a possibility that the conflict could be the result of built-up tension in another area? Are there any other directions in which the conflict could be

sent? Are there any other ways to approach or address the conflict? These psychodynamic questions could all be a part of your mental reflection (your mental walk), and should help you address how best to go about resolving the conflict itself.

Lastly, we need to talk. Conflict is not so easily resolved without words, and we must use our negotiating skills to collaborate with the other side in an effort to resolve the conflict. We want to lead it towards the best possible outcome, for both parties. This requires that we talk out the issues. We may need to use less aggressive speech, we may need to apologize, we may need to become commanding, or we may need to start with a time out, but resolution can only come with the use of language. Additionally, the type of language you choose to use will actually have the biggest impact on the course of the conflict, and its outcome.

Social cognition theories can help give us some perspective into what are commonly held beliefs about conflict in a way best suited to talking it over. These include thoughts about how the other side will react, we can overcome disagreements by talking them over, and even whether or not the conflict is desirable. These common social beliefs are the result of cultural influence, and have a direct impact on conflict. We can see this in our reactions, our assumptions, and our speech. Understanding that someone else may be different than you should also make you understand that their beliefs may also be different. They may see your gestures as polite or threatening, just the same as you might agree with their words or as find them insulting. Of course, we could go on all day on this one subject alone, but to sum it up, when we talk, we must remember who we are talking to, how we are talking to them, and what our motivation and meanings are behind the words.

So what's the lesson here?

As leaders, we must understand that conflict can happen anywhere and at any time, but not always should our response be to engage the enemy with maximum force. We need to be intelligent warfighters here, and the majority of conflict in our lives won't be on the battlefield of combat, but on the battlefield of everyday life. Before we lose control of the conflict, and go off and make rash snap-decisions in response to conflict, we need to check ourselves, think about what we should say and do, and if able, talk out the issue towards resolution. Keeping a rational mind will help you be successful on the battlefield as well as the boardroom.

Stop, Walk, Talk.

Sound Off!

Critical Thinking Exercise:

Only a couple of potential everyday life conflict scenarios were mentioned here, but there exist many, many more.

Take a few moments to think about a single, common, everyday life conflict that you have come across in the past, then let us know what the event was, whether or not you were able to handle the conflict in a positive way, and how. If you weren't able to control the conflict, let us know how you think you could have done better.

Post *YOUR* thoughts in the **Comments Below**. Open discussion helps everyone learn and grow.

References

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About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.