

Conflict Resolution for the Animal Welfare Field



How to help cats and dogs without fighting like them

by Karen Green

About the Author...



Karen Green has been working in the animal welfare field since 1996, first at Best Friends Animal Society and now with the Alliance for Contraception in Cats & Dogs. She is committed to improving communication and strengthening relationships and organizations in the animal welfare field. Karen lives in Portland, Oregon, with two dogs and one very large cat.

Why this Handbook...

Most people working in animal welfare can provide examples of conflict that has hindered progress toward common goals or caused personal and professional frustration. As the capstone project for her BA in Organizational Communication and Certificate in Conflict Resolution and Mediation, Karen Green surveyed 227 animal welfare professionals and volunteers to quantify and assess the impact of conflict within this passionate community.

Results of the 2009 study confirmed that indeed, destructive conflict is hurting animal welfare organizations and the people working and volunteering for them. Furthermore, with limited financial resources and even less time to spend on formal education, survey respondents reported that few practical options were available to support conflict-resolution training. Despite high interest in such material, reading books or taking classes is simply not an option for those whose time and money are spent caring for the animals that need them most.

In the course of studying communication and conflict, Karen has seen first-hand how improving conflict resolution skills can have a significant, positive impact. **Her intention with this handbook is to provide an accessible resource for those who work to help animals.**

Feedback on this handbook is encouraged, so please feel free to share your comments (karen@thesingingturtle.com). Copies of the full 2009 survey report, "Conflict in the Animal Welfare Field," also may be obtained upon request.

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Conflict is not a Four-Letter Word



Conflict happens. Conflict occurs in all relationships and in all organizations. We cannot escape conflict. We can refuse to face it, but try as we might, we *will* be a party to conflict and it *will* impact us. Given that reality, it makes sense to invest some time and energy in becoming more knowledgeable about and skilled in conflict resolution.

This handbook was created to provide a concise, accessible, and relevant conflict resolution resource tailored for those working and volunteering in the animal welfare field.

If you apply the information and skills outlined in this handbook, you can significantly improve your ability to experience conflicts more positively and to resolve them more successfully. The approaches in this handbook are tried and true, and they are highly appropriate and applicable to the animal welfare field.

What to Expect from this Handbook

If you're looking for a conflict “fix-all,” neither this book nor any other resource will provide it. Conflict happens between people; you alone can't predict or determine how a conflict will unfold. Additionally, some issues—such as those based in differences in core values—may not be able to be negotiated, mediated, or otherwise collaboratively resolved. And the emotional state of people in conflict (yourself included) can severely impair resolution efforts. However, you can significantly improve your conflict experiences by increasing your awareness and developing your conflict communication skills.

“The difference between what we are doing and what we're capable of doing would solve most of the world's problems.”

—Stephen R. Covey, *The 8th Habit* (2004)

Conflict 101



Defining Conflict

We're all familiar with the word "conflict." However, it's worth defining the term as it will be used in this handbook. In this context:

"Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals."

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker
in *Interpersonal Conflict*, 2007

Impact of Conflict

Unresolved and destructive conflict results in significant costs to organizations and the people working within them. Conflict can take attention and resources away from the important work we're doing. Conflict can drive employees, volunteers, adopters, and supporters away from our organizations. The impact of conflict on employees and volunteers can be severe, sapping energy, embittering attitudes, and impairing productivity.

However, conflict can also be a catalyst for growth. Perhaps you've experienced the satisfaction of having worked through a conflict with a friend or colleague, emerging from the experience not only with a resolution but with a stronger relationship and greater confidence that you'll be able to work through whatever challenge might arise next. Conflict can stimulate creativity, strengthen relationships, and result in better decision making and more effective and efficient processes, products, and programs. By managing conflict with knowledge and skill, we can experience more of these positive conflict outcomes.

"Leaders to do not avoid, repress, or deny conflict, but rather see it as an opportunity."

— Stephen Covey, *The 8th Habit* (2004)

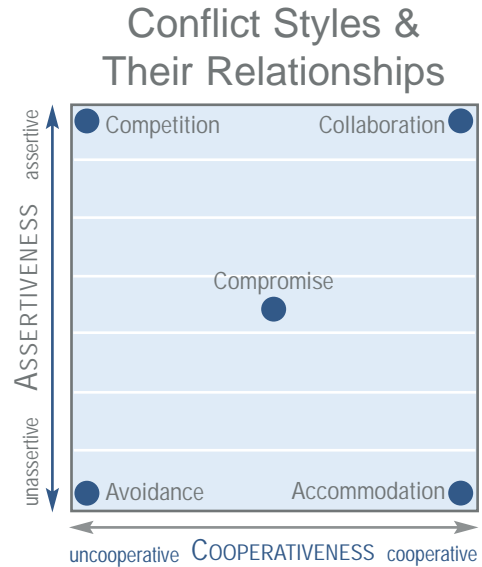
There are several different contexts in which conflict often occurs in the scope of animal welfare work. Conflict occurs between:

Individuals, groups, or departments within an organization (i.e., between the adoptions staff and the intake staff)

Two or more organizations or groups of people (i.e., between a shelter and the city council)

Members of the public (i.e., pet-related disputes between neighbors)

Destructive conflict distracts and drains energy from individuals and organizations. Achieving lifesaving results for the animals in a community requires working together, on both individual and organizational levels. That is to say, people within their own shelter or rescue groups must be able to work well together, and animal welfare organizations must be able to work with each other productively, even when they don't always agree. Fighting between groups gives animal welfare organizations a bad reputation in the community, which can put off donors and volunteers. Additionally, grantmakers increasingly want evidence of collaboration before awarding sizeable grants to organizations.



Source: William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict* (2007), p. 130

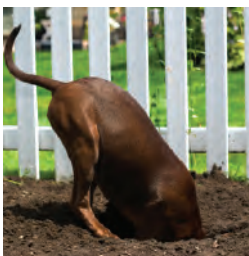
Conflict Styles

There are a number of different ways people approach conflict. It can be helpful to recognize what conflict style we and others are using. The graph to the right offers one helpful way to look at different conflict styles, placing each according to how cooperative/people-focused it is versus how assertive/task-focused it is.

You'll probably recognize at least some of these styles, seeing people you know (and perhaps yourself) in these examples. Certainly, none of us is locked in to one conflict style. Most of us use a variety of approaches based on the situation. However, each individual person tends to gravitate toward a specific area of the grid.

To demonstrate how each of these styles might look in a conflict, let's consider an example of a conflict over whether an animal shelter should continue to pay for coffee for the employee break room. The topic has been added to the agenda of a special staff meeting. Consider the situation from the perspectives of a shelter employee who believes that the shelter should continue to provide coffee.

Avoidance. The Avoidance style ranks low on both assertiveness and cooperation. Self-preservation is the priority. When we avoid a conflict, we may be achieving self-preservation, but we are not getting our other needs met. Our goal is to make the conflict go away.



Adam pretty much ducks out of the discussion. He tells his friend that he thinks the shelter should provide coffee, but he does not talk to management about his feeling, and signs up to work an off-site adoption the night of the staff meeting. Adam sees conflict as messy and painful and thinks it's best to just stay out of it.

Accommodation. The Accommodation style ranks high on cooperativeness but low on assertiveness. Pleasing—or at least not upsetting—the other party is the priority. When we accommodate, we do not stand up for our own interests, instead giving in to other's needs. Our goal is to preserve harmony and to be liked.



Angie agrees with her peers when they say the shelter should provide coffee. But when a manager mentions the need for trimming the budget, Angie switches sides, sympathizes, and acts as though she supports the proposal to discontinue the coffee “perk”. Angie sits quietly during the meeting. Angie's need to keep peace is stronger than her need for free coffee.

Competition. The Competition style ranks high on assertiveness but low on cooperativeness. Self-interest is the priority. When we compete, we attempt to persuade, manipulate, or overpower the other party in order to get our way. Our regard for the other party and for the relationship is low. Our goal is to win.



Carrie starts a petition and pushes peers to sign it in order to pressure the management. She demands the meeting time be changed because she's unavailable at the posted time. At the meeting, she undermines the authority of the managers and demands that the employee's rights be respected, suggesting that a strike is not out of the question.

Compromise. The Compromise style ranks in the mid-range on both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Self-interest and the interests of others are equally important. When we compromise, we attempt to meet some of each party's needs at the expense of other needs of each party. Our goal is to come to an agreement that provides some benefit to both parties and maintains the relationship.



Carlos really likes coffee and believes the shelter should provide it, but he realizes there are budget issues and he doesn't want to put up too much of a fuss with management. Carlos proposes that the shelter continue to provide the coffee but that the employees bring in creamer, sugar, cups, and straws. Carlos thinks it's worth giving in on some points to come to an agreement.

Collaboration. The Collaboration style ranks high on both assertiveness and cooperation. Both self-interest and the interests of others are very important, as is the relationship. When we collaborate, we commit to engaging with the other party and finding a solution that meets our needs as well as theirs. Our goal is to strengthen the relationship and find a win-win solution.



Kenny recognizes the shelter's has budget issues to address while realizing that coffee breaks give employees an opportunity to solve problems, share concerns, and build relationships in an otherwise dizzyingly busy day. Kenny offers to facilitate some creative problem-solving strategies at the meeting. During the discussion, it's discovered that the shelter really just needs to cut the coffee budget in half, and that one of the employees has a family member who owns a café that roasts its own coffee. A plan is developed to propose a partnership to the café in which it donates 10 pounds of coffee to the shelter each month. In return, the shelter inserts a café coupon in each adopter's goodie bag and acknowledges the café as a partner on the shelter website and newsletter. The shelter saves more money than needed while establishing a mutually beneficial partnership, and the employees enjoy an upgrade to organic, free-trade coffee.

In Summary...

The point of considering these is not to say that one is right and the rest are wrong. In fact, each of these approaches is ideal under certain circumstances, and none of them is appropriate under all circumstances. However, in general, a collaborative approach holds the most promise when both the relationship and the issue-at-hand are important. It may be more time-consuming, but is more likely to result in effective outcomes and stronger relationships.

Unfortunately, most people are not skilled in collaborative approaches to conflict. This guidebook aims to help fill that knowledge gap and help prepare you to view and engage in conflict in constructive and satisfying ways. (Yes, it *is* possible!)

How We Think About Conflict

Conflict has a special way of bringing out people's issues. You know it's true, because you've seen it in your friends, colleagues, and family members your whole life. When we enter conflict, we bring our past conflict experiences, perceptions, insecurities, biases, and fears with us. So in our quest to become more skillful at conflict resolution, it's important that we develop a greater sense of self-awareness and that we address any issues that are preventing us from being more successful. In this section, you'll be introduced to some common biases and behaviors that contribute to destructive conflict. Keep your mind open as you read these and consider whether there might be opportunities here for you to improve the way you're relating to conflict.

**“Out beyond the ideas of right and wrong doing,
There is a field.
I'll meet you there.”**

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker,
Interpersonal Conflict (2007)

Dalmatians are Black & White; People are not



In the animal welfare field, things often seem black or white, good or evil. We deal with victims and perpetrators on a daily basis. We see the devastating effects of poor judgment, ignorance, and downright cruelty on the lives of innocent, furry little creatures who couldn't possibly deserve the suffering they've endured. Then there are the good guys: the generous donor who makes our new spay/neuter program possible; the restaurant owner who offers to cater our next event for free;

the adopter who steps forward to take in the senior, semi-feral, half-blind cat with litterbox issues. It's no surprise we can come to see things in black and white.

Yet, we set ourselves up for a lot of destructive conflict when we take a black and white approach. Since we tend to think we're right (and therefore good), we assume the other is wrong (and therefore bad). Entering into any dialogue with an attitude that the other party is an idiotic, insensitive, or just downright terrible person is a waste of time.

Check Your Intentions

Often, people act as though they want to resolve a conflict when what they really want is to prove that they're right. To be able to resolve a conflict, we all have to believe the other party has valid interests that are as important to address as our own. However, it's often easier to engage in behavior that reinforces our rightness in ways like unconstructively engaging the other person, stewing over the conflict internally, or talking to others about our conflict.

“Crisis in dialogue occurs when the participants... fail really to address each other but turn away defensively, each within himself, for the purposes of self-justification.”

— Robert Bolton, People Skills (1979)

Destructive communication. Sometimes we just assume the other party is wrong and don't test that by actually communicating with them in an open and honest way. We might, for instance, communicate with the other person in such a way as to push them into acting as terrible as we think they are, and therefore justify our criticism.

By committing to communicating honestly, directly, and respectfully, we can pave the way for a solution-focused, collaborative dialogue.

Keeping it all in. One extremely effective way to remain right is to simply stew quietly over your conflict. Dwell on how the other person has wronged you. Dig up supporting evidence from your history with that person.

Holding in our feelings, running negative thoughts and stories through our heads, builds anxiety and tension. It puts us in a mind frame that makes it nearly impossible to enter into respectful dialogue with another.

Conflict Alliances. Another way we avoid direct engagement is by talking to other people about our conflict, instead of talking to the person with whom we have the issue. Now *that* can be validating! Our friends and colleagues—viewing the conflict through our subjective lens—are almost certain to take our side.

Certainly, there are times when we need to vent some frustration or when a friend or colleague can help us develop an approach for resolving a conflict. Yet, it is important to consider whether our outside conversations about our conflict are helping or hurting.

A Bit of Communication Theory

Communication theory may shed some light on these tendencies.

Attribution theory says that we attribute our own bad behavior to outside influences (i.e., “I was late to that meeting because my cat vomited on my briefcase”), while attributing other's bad behavior to their character (i.e., “He was late to that meeting because he has no respect for other people's time”).

Another factor that comes into play is *confirmation bias*—a term that means that we pay attention to information that confirms what we already believe to be true, while paying little or no heed to information that contradicts our positions.

“Prolonged thinking about disputes in the absence of communication focuses individuals on their own perspectives and enhances biases.”

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker,
Interpersonal Conflict (2007)

One of the patterns in disputes is that as you get more convinced you know what the other wants, you are less accurate.

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker,
Interpersonal Conflict (2007)

“Before you decide what you're going to do to fix things, you must really look inside and take responsibility for the situation, for your role in it, and for your reaction to it.”

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker,
Interpersonal Conflict (2007)

How We Think About Conflict

By recognizing these very human tendencies and realizing that they can prevent us from effectively resolving conflict, we can begin to see when they're in play and choose to redirect our thoughts in a more productive direction.

When in a conflict, take a moment to check your intentions. Is the goal to prove you're right and/or the other person is wrong? Or is the goal to resolve the conflict? If you're aiming for resolution, you'll do best with an attitude of respect, curiosity, and possibility.

When Something Deeper is Going On



For persons dealing with deep emotional trauma around conflict, experiencing burn-out, or living with an emotional imbalance, such factors can severely interfere with their ability to resolve conflicts. Resolving those issues is a subject well beyond the scope of this handbook. If one or more of these conditions exists, seek professional help from a mental health provider.

Conflicts Reported in the Animal Welfare Field

a survey of 227 paid and volunteer workers

	almost always	frequently	sometimes	occasionally	rarely or never	N/A
Conflict between two or more individuals or departments within your organization (e.g., an employee involved in a conflict with a supervisor, or a conflict between the animal caregivers and the adoption staff)	4.6% (10)	22.2% (48)	25.0% (54)	24.5% (53)	18.5% (40)	5.1% (11)
Conflict between your organization and other organizations, companies, or policy-making groups (e.g., conflict between your organization and another animal welfare organization in the community)	6.5% (14)	20.1% (43)	26.2% (56)	20.6% (44)	25.7% (55)	0.9% (2)
Conflict you observe among other animal welfare organization or individuals within those organizations (e.g., a feral cat organization in conflict with a bird preservation group)	14.0% (30)	35.5% (76)	23.8% (51)	12.6% (27)	12.1% (26)	1.9% (4)
Conflict between members of your community related to animals (e.g., a feral cat caregiver and a property owner involved in a dispute)	9.8% (21)	30.2% (65)	27.4% (59)	18.6% (40)	11.6% (25)	2.3% (5)

Source: Green K. Fighting Like Cats and Dogs: Conflict in the Animal Welfare Field. April 23, 2009.

How We Think About Conflict

The Impact of Conflict in the Animal Welfare Community

a survey of 227 paid and volunteer workers

		Response Percent	Response Count
Conflict has had a positive impact on my experience		21.8%	46
Conflict has not had a significant impact on me		21.8%	46
Conflict sometimes interferes with my satisfaction with my work		58.3%	123
Conflict often interferes with my satisfaction with my work		14.7%	31
I have withdrawn emotionally in my work or personal life because of workplace conflict		14.7%	31
I have seriously considered leaving my organization because of conflict		22.7%	48
I left a position with a previous animal welfare organization because of conflict		31.8%	67
I have a friend or colleague who left a position in animal welfare because of conflict		66.8%	141

Conflict, Personal Satisfaction, and Emotional Well Being in the Animal Welfare Field

a survey of 227 paid and volunteer workers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My organization has a healthy approach to conflict	21.4% (45)	50.5% (106)	18.1% (38)	7.6% (16)	2.4% (5)
Conflict has little or no impact on my organization	6.3% (13)	18.3% (38)	18.3% (38)	47.1% (98)	10.1% (21)
Members of the organization spend significant time "venting" about conflicts	9.5% (20)	34.8% (73)	22.4% (47)	27.6% (58)	5.7% (12)
Conflict somewhat interferes with our organization's ability to achieve goals	7.6% (16)	41.4% (87)	17.6% (37)	21.9% (46)	11.4% (24)
Conflict often interferes with our organization's ability to achieve goals	6.2% (13)	20.5% (43)	22.9% (48)	29.5% (62)	21.0% (44)

Source: Green K. Fighting Like Cats and Dogs: Conflict in the Animal Welfare Field. April 23, 2009.

Twelve Tips for Conflict Resolution



So, you've learned a bit about conflict and hopefully you've learned some things about yourself and what's impacting how you approach conflict. Now it's time for the fun part with twelve tips and tools for resolving conflict.

1. Set the Stage

Here are some simple steps you can take to help set up your conflict resolution effort for success. Although you won't always have the luxury of setting things up "just so," applying these techniques whenever possible

can start moving the process in the right direction.

Schedule a time to talk that works for you and the other party

Select a location
on neutral ground
that is private, quiet, and comfortable
where interruptions are unlikely

Avoid positioning yourself so that you're directly facing the other party, or putting a barrier (such as a desk) between you. Ideally, you will be oriented such that you're both facing approximately the same direction. For example, you might sit at adjacent sides of a table, rather than directly opposite.

2. Focus on Interests, not Positions

Focusing on interests rather than positions is a core principle in conflict resolution, negotiation, and mediation. Here's how it works.

Your *position* is what you've decided must happen for your needs to be met. Positions are extremely difficult to negotiate, especially when they are in direct opposition to each other. To clear the way for a mutually satisfying solution, it is critical to identify both party's *interests*. Once you've done that, you're a good ways down the road to resolution. Those interests—once identified—become the criteria by which you'll evaluate possible solutions.

Consider the following example:

“Your position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to so decide.”

— Roger Fisher, William Ury,
and Bruce Patton, *Getting to Yes* (1991)

Twelve Tips for Conflict Resolution



Jenny's two cats keep pooping in her neighbor Miriam's vegetable garden, grossing out Miriam and stinking up her salad ingredients. If this continues, Miriam may come to take the position that Jenny's cats have to go. Miriam's interests are the needs she is trying to meet by taking that position. In the poopy garden situation, Miriam's interests might include a sanitary and esthetically pleasing garden and an enjoyable gardening experience.

In the Jenny and Miriam situation, Jenny loves her cats and—understandably—wants to keep them. In response to Miriam's angry complaints and demands that the cats be done away with, Jenny fiercely responds that under no circumstances will she “get rid of” her cats. Jenny's position is in direct conflict with Miriam's. Miriam wants the cats to go; Jenny wants the cats to stay. There's no middle ground, no room to negotiate. Jenny is infuriated that Miriam would suggest taking the cats to a shelter. Jenny considers herself a responsible and caring cat owner. Miriam must be some kind of cold-hearted cat hater, not to mention an insensitive neighbor and terrible human being, to suggest such a thing. After being “told off” by Jenny, Miriam is wishing Jenny would just move and take the cats with her. Miriam likes cats, but she knows cat feces can carry disease. What kind of neighbor would allow their pet to compromise another person's health? Plus, ever since Miriam's husband passed away two years ago, gardening has been her one true joy. Jenny must know that. After all, she sees Miriam out in the garden all the time. Jenny seems to care more about her cats than another human being! Miriam and Jenny are at an impasse.

But what if Miriam takes an interest-based approach instead. When she talks to Jenny, she tells her what's been happening with the cats and how it's been impacting her. She explains that she's concerned about food safety and that the poop problem has been making gardening—which is normally therapeutic for her—an unpleasant experience. Jenny, who cares not only about being a responsible cat owner but a good neighbor, apologizes and expresses her willingness to find a solution. She explains that it's important to her that her cats be able to spend time outside, and suggests that she and Miriam brainstorm some ideas. Together, they come up with several options: Jenny could build a cattery for her cats, or get special fencing that would keep the cats confined to her property. She could buy some deterrents for Miriam to place around her garden to discourage the cats from spending time there. Jenny could set up an outdoor “bathroom” area for her cats in her own yard (with nice loose soil like what they find in Miriam's garden) to tempt them into relieving themselves closer to home. Any of these solutions could meet the interests of both Jenny and Miriam, as well as the cats. Jenny realizes the cat-fencing idea would be best, since she's been worried about her cats getting into the road or fighting with other cats anyway. She commits to having the fencing installed within two weeks, and she and Miriam agree to check in with each other to make sure the solution's working for everyone.

Types of interests. In order to identify your own and others' interests, it's helpful to recognize some different types of interests that may be in play. In the text *Interpersonal Conflict*, the acronym “TRIP” is used to refer to the interest categories Topic, Relationship, Identity, and Process. Let's look at these a bit more closely.

Twelve Tips for Conflict Resolution

Topic interests are often the easiest to spot. Examples of topic interests include, “We need to shave \$300 off our coffee budget,” “I need the food from my garden to be safe to handle and eat,” or “The building must be complete by August 15.”

Relationship interests are often more difficult to identify, even when they're our own. These interests are about our relationship with the other party, or even with a third party. Some examples are, “I want to maintain an open relationship with my manager” or “I need to feel comfortable with my neighbors”.

Identity interests are about preserving our sense of who we are. These are sometimes considered “face-saving” interests. Examples include, “I see myself as a compassionate manager” or “I am a responsible pet owner”.

Process interests are about how something will happen, what the process will be. Here are some examples: “I think we should hold a vote to decide the coffee issue” or “I'd like to try brainstorming to come up with some options”.

When you're involved in a conflict, it's critical to identify what your interests are. Without doing so, you run the risk of producing a solution that doesn't meet your needs, even if you use a collaborative approach. It's also helpful to try to understand the other party's interests. This isn't always easy, but it is extremely important.

You may be able to figure out some of the other party's interests by reflecting on his statements or past behavior. (If you do, be sure to check your assumptions with the individual in question.) The best way to determine the other party's interests is in direct communication. We'll talk about that more in a bit.

A few other helpful things to know about interests... Do not underestimate the importance of relational and identity interests. They are often more difficult to see; in fact, you (or the other party) might not even be aware of your own relationship or identity interests. Nonetheless, your resolution will not be satisfactory if these needs are not met. Understandably, people tend to be much more emotionally invested in their relationships and their identity than in other types of interests. The better you know people, the more signs you'll be able to identify for how they see themselves and their relationships. Your awareness of these dynamics can help you craft satisfactory solutions.

Here's an example of how hidden interests can prevent real resolution:



Mark has been running the off-site adoption program for three years and is proud of the hard work he's put into the program and how it's increased adoptions. Recently, Cindy, a former adopter, started volunteering at the weekend adoption events. Cindy is enthusiastic about applying her marketing skills to improve the program and believes she can make a real contribution to help the cats. On her first day volunteering, Cindy pro-

“66 percent of the conflicts in which the issue was clearly stated were successfully resolved, whereas only 18 percent of the conflicts in which the issue remained vague and nonspecific were resolved.”

— William Wilmot, Joyce Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict* (2007)

poses a new cage card design. Mark responds somewhat defensively, saying there's more important work to do and that the cage cards are fine. Soon after, Cindy proposes adoption ads in the local paper. Mark acts annoyed and suggests that Cindy might enjoy a different volunteer position with the rescue group, since she seems to disagree with how the adoptions are run. Cindy feels unappreciated and quits, telling her friends about her bad experience.

In this situation, cage cards and newspaper ads were not the real issues. Rather, it was Mark's need for respect and acknowledgement and Cindy's need to make a contribution. Because the underlying identity needs were not recognized, no one's needs were met.

“[R]elational goals are at the heart of all conflict interactions.”

— William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker,
Interpersonal Conflict (2007)

3. Separate the People from the Problem

In conflict, we often see the other party as being the problem. Indeed, it may well be that you're dealing with someone with a truly difficult personality. But regardless of the specifics of your situation, you'll do best if you can separate the problem from the person. If your approach is to treat the person as the problem, it's quite unlikely the individual will be willing to collaborate with you to find a solution. Think of yourself as positioned next to the other party, with both of you facing the problem, rather than standing in opposition to each other. The former assumes both parties want to find a resolution; it's an orientation conducive to creativity and collaboration. The latter assumes the other person is a foe; its orientation is conducive to a competitive, win-lose, knock-down fight. Consider this example:



Jane is a volunteer coordinator for a foster-home based rescue group. Daniel is one of Jane's foster parents, and he's great, except for one problem: He frequently shows up late on adoption days. Jane could say the problem is Daniel's tardiness, irresponsibility, etc. Or she could take the approach that the problem is that the dogs are not getting the exposure they need to find a home and make space for another needy dog to enter the program. Daniel—who has demonstrated his commitment to the dog's welfare by volunteering as a foster parent—is much more likely to work with Jane on solving the latter than the former. Additionally, Jane doesn't want to get into whether or not Daniel is a responsible person. If he's not, Jane's not going to be able to fix him. She wants to set up herself and Daniel to succeed by identifying a specific problem with clear boundaries.

4. Listen to Understand



What we often call listening is simply waiting until it's our turn to talk. Ineffective listening is not only a recipe for disaster in conflict conversations, it's often the reason a conflict arose in the first place. You can make a huge impact on your conflict communication—as well as in all of your communication—by making a sincere and consistent effort to really understand what the other party is trying to tell you. This may sound like common sense, but it's not common practice. And while there are scores of techniques for effective listening, you can have great impact just by listening with that intention.

When the other party is talking, focus your attention on really understanding what they are communicating. Pay attention to their body language and tone of voice in addition to their actual words. Ask clarifying questions if you're not sure what they meant (i.e., “When you say 'pediatric neutering', what age are you talking about?”). Then, before you respond with your own impressions, confirm that you understood their message. That might sound something like this: “So, what I'm hearing is that you think we broke the law by taking Bruno out of your yard. You believe our officers were rude to your wife, and if they had been more polite, the situation wouldn't have escalated. Do I understand that right?” If you're not right, the other party will correct you. Keep going until you can explain the other party's perspective such that they believe you have understood them. Not only will this help ensure that your communication is effective, it demonstrates your commitment to hearing the other party's side of the story, which goes a long way.

“Over 90% of all communication problems are caused by differences in either semantics or perceptions.”

— Stephen R. Covey, *The 8th Habit* (2004)

5. Describe

Often when we communicate—especially when under stress—we do so based on the meaning we assign to other people's behavior. We then proceed as though our assumption were fact, resulting in a raft of problems. You'll generally be more effective as a communicator when you describe what you see. Consider this example:



Steve is the kennel manager at a city shelter. Today, it's Nicole's job to ensure the kennels are clean. But Steve's walked through the kennels three times in the past two hours and has seen the same piles of poop in several of the kennels. Steve might interpret this as carelessness or laziness on Nicole's part. But he doesn't know the circumstances; he just knows what he's seen, so he starts with that. “Nicole, I've walked through the kennels several times this afternoon and have seen messes left in some of the kennels.” Steve described what he saw without

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making assumptions or judgment. Nicole can now contribute the information she has to the conversation, which can move forward toward resolution.

6. Be Specific

For communication to be effective, each party's message needs to be understood by the other. Being specific in your language can help ensure that you are understood. Steve's descriptive statement in the previous example was specific to the problem, including the what, where, and when. If Steve had said, "Nicole, I've noticed your area has been messy lately," or "Nicole, you're not doing your job," she could perceive that in a number of different ways.

7. Use 'I' messages

"I" messages communicate your experience of a situation and are much more effective than "you" messages, which tend to put people on the defensive. An "I" message identifies a feeling in response to a behavior and provides a brief explanation based on needs or interests. The statement is followed by a request or proposal.

I feel ____ when you ____ because _____. Would you _____?

The order of the components of an "I" statement may be altered or slightly different words may be used to best fit the situation. Here are some examples:



"I feel worried when you say you plan to declaw Daisy. I've learned that declawing is painful and prevents cats from exhibiting natural behavior. Can we talk more about why you think declawing is necessary?"

"When you complained about that volunteer during the meeting last week, I felt really uncomfortable. There were two other volunteers there who could have been offended. In the future, could you save those stories for more private settings?"

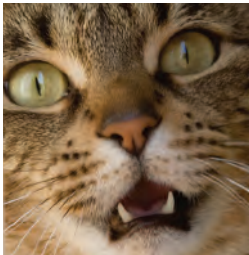
When a more assertive approach is warranted, the request may be stated as a need.



"I feel frustrated when you interrupt me because I have valid contributions to make to this conversation. I need you to let me finish what I'm saying. Then I'll give you my full attention."

8. Express, Acknowledge, and Validate Emotions

In the workplace there's often a perception that bringing emotions into our work is inappropriate. But your emotions and those of your colleagues are very much in play. In a conflict situation, if you conceal your feelings about an issue or a person, you may be holding back information that may be key to finding a resolution. It's not necessary—or appropriate—to share all of your emotions in all contexts, but where emotions are part of a conflict, they need to be acknowledged to come to resolution.



“Whoa! I didn't realize that lay-offs were being considered. I need a moment for that to settle in. Right now I feel shocked, confused, and fearful for my job.”

“I'm feeling really irritated about the lack of progress on this project. We've met three times, and I can't see that we've made any headway.”

“I'm embarrassed that I missed that deadline, and I'm frustrated that we're now behind schedule.”

Just as your (relevant) emotions should be put on the table in your conflict communication, the other party's emotions are critical as well. You can help encourage the other party to share their feeling using open ended questions that elicit descriptive responses rather than one-word answers.

You may not agree with the way someone is dealing with their feelings. Still, those feelings are a reality for the other party, which means they're very real to your conflict.



“I realize this new policy will have a big impact on your department. Tell me how you're feeling about this change.”

“That board meeting sure was tense. How are do you feel coming out of that?”

Feelings are facts, just as perception is reality, and emotions are non-negotiable. They don't have to make sense (and often they don't). You may not agree with the way someone is dealing with their feelings. Their feelings may be uncomfortable for you to hear about. Still, those feelings are a reality for the other party, which means they're very real to your conflict. You can acknowledge and validate feelings without approving of actions, behavior, or decisions. Here's what that could sound like:



“It sounds like you're really angry about our decision to cancel that event. I know you put a lot of work into it and had high hopes for the outcome.”

“What I'm hearing is that you've been upset with me about adopting Shadow out to that home. That helps me understand why things have been tense between us. It's important to me that we have a comfortable and

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productive relationship. Let's talk about where we go from here."

9. Communicate Commitment and Hope

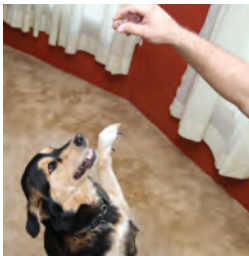
It's important to approach conflict with optimism that you can and will actually resolve your conflict. If you can't muster hope for your conflict, get help before you move forward. You can use statements that communicate your commitment and hopefulness to the other party:



"This has been a rocky year for our department, and I know it's been hard on all of us. I'm confident that we can identify the problems and find workable solutions."

"I know this policy issue has been a huge obstacle, but I believe we can work out a plan for the joint adoption event that will be acceptable to all the groups."

10. Make a Request, not a Complaint



Making a request rather than a complaint is an easy way to resolve conflicts and to help prevent small conflicts from becoming big ones.

Take a look at the examples below. If you were on the receiving end, which approach would you be more receptive to?

Complaints vs. Requests

"Your music is so loud I can't hear myself think!"

vs.

"Would you mind turning down your music or using headphones? I'm having trouble focusing over here."

"I'm tired of you bossing me around!"

vs.

"When you need my help with something, it would be really helpful to me if you'd ask for help, rather than just telling me what to do."

"You're really getting in my face. Back off or I'll have to call security!"

vs.

"Please step back. When you stand so close I can't focus on helping you with your concern."

11. Develop Multiple Possible Solutions



Often we jump to the “solution” part of conflict resolution too quickly. We accept the first proposed solution that might solve our problem (especially if the idea is our own) and call it a day. In simple conflicts, this may suffice. But complex conflicts are best resolved with a fuller solution-finding process.

When you're trying to find a solution, consider many options. Try brainstorming a full page of ideas. In brainstorming, your goal is to stimulate creativity. Brainstorming involves a free-flow of suggestions without evaluation. When it comes to brainstorming possible solutions, far-fetched is fine. In fact, the wilder, the better. Get the ideas flowing. Then later you can come back and consider each option against your criteria (i.e., your interests, which you defined earlier).

When you're trying to find a solution, consider many options.

Try brainstorming a full page of ideas to stimulate creativity.

12. Come to Agreement, Make a Plan



Once you've identified a solution that meets both parties' interests, your next step is to come to an agreement. Depending on the complexity and formality of the situation, you may have a simple verbal agreement, or you may need a more detailed written agreement. Either way, be explicit about the factors that are important—the who, what, where, when, and how. It's often helpful to build in a plan for revisiting the issue. You might set up a time to talk again to see

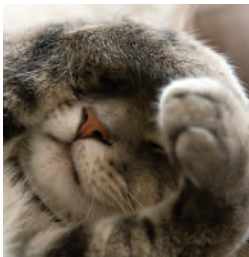
how things are going. Consider any “what if” situations that could impact your plans. For example, one of your solutions might require the approval of a third party, so your agreement should include a contingency plan in case that approval doesn't come through. Remember to thank the other party for their willingness to work through the issue with you.

Conflict resolution can be both stimulating and exhausting. Whatever the result, collaborative conflict resolution requires each party to be present and to participate fully. In addition to thanking the other party, congratulate yourself for committing to the process.

Questions and Concerns



You've learned a bit about conflict, become more aware of your own attitudes about and within conflict, and taken in a dozen ways you can be more effective in conflict. How are you feeling now? Excited? Overwhelmed? Terrified? Curious? Concerns are understandable, so consider these thoughts in response to what you may be thinking.



'I can't do this!'

All these tools and techniques may seem overwhelming. Don't worry about remembering them all. The next time you find yourself in a conflict, try applying just one or two of these tips. The best any of us can do is develop our awareness and skills and apply them as we can.



'People will think I'm weird'

You might worry about how others will react if you change your behavior around them. Change is tough for all of us, and it can make people feel vulnerable. In particular, people with whom you have a long history may be resistant to change in your behavior. They may even respond worse to your new behavior, just because it's new. Be consistent in making changes you've committed to and give yourself and others time to adapt.



'That's just not the way I do things'

You may find that applying some of these practices feels contrived or awkward at first. That's a natural response when you're learning new ways of communicating. Don't let it discourage you. You might want to find a conflict resolution buddy who also wants to work on these skills so you'll have someone you can practice with and talk to for support.

You might try using your pets for practice. For instance, instead of just removing your cat from the table when you catch her licking the sour cream off your burrito, try an "I" statement. "Amy Jean, when you lick my sour cream I feel angry because I want my food to be free of cat spit. I need you to stay off the table while I'm eating." Your new skills won't actually change your pet's behavior, but it may help you become more comfortable using new language.

Questions and Concerns



'What if it doesn't work?'

The fact is, your efforts to resolve a conflict may not result in a positive resolution every time. There are countless reasons this could be the case. Communication isn't math. There's no formula that will predict the outcome. If you're coming out of an unpleasant or unsuccessful effort to resolve a conflict, take some time to consider whether there's something you can learn from the experience. If there is, remember it the next time you're in a conflict situation. If there's not, move on.



'What if I need help?'

In particularly intense or complex conflicts, it makes sense to bring in a third-party mediator. An impartial mediator can facilitate the process of conflict resolution and leave the parties to focus on the issue at hand. A mediator can be an invaluable resource. Mediators are trained and experienced in conflict resolution. You can search for a dispute resolution center or professional mediator in the Yellow Pages or on the Internet.

Conclusion



This handbook has presented new ways to think about and engage in conflict. Our lives can be measurably improved with greater skill and understanding of communication and conflict resolution.

When you find yourself in your next conflict, look back at this book for support and guidance. Communication is not a formula where everything has to be precisely entered and processed in order to get the “right”

answer. Even if you just remember one or two of the things you learned in this book, you'll be communicating more effectively than before.

So get out there and skillfully engage in some conflict!

Recommended Reading

The 8th Habit: From effectiveness to greatness. By Stephen R. Covey. Published by Free Press (2004).

Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most. By Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project. Published by Penguin Books (1999).

Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in. By Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton. Published by Penguin Books (1991).

Interpersonal Conflict. 7th edition. By William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker. Published by McGraw Hill (2007).

The New Why Teams Don't Work: What goes wrong and how to make it right. By Harvey Robbins and Michael Finley. Published by Berrett Koehler (2000).

People Skills: How to assert yourself, listen to others, and resolve conflicts. By Robert Bolton, Ph.D. Published by Touchstone (1979).

Resolving Conflicts at Work: Eight Strategies for Everyone on the Job. By Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith. Published by Jossey-Bass (2000).

Resolving Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations: The leader's guide to finding constructive solutions. By Marion Peters Angelica. Published by Amherst. H. Wilder Foundation (1999).

The Zen of Listening: Mindful communication in the age of distraction. By Rebecca Z. Shafir, M.A. CCC. Published by Quest Books (2000).

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— a note from the author —

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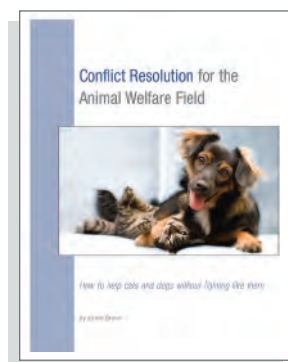
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The **227 animal welfare professionals and volunteers** who completed my survey of conflict in this field, providing me with invaluable insight and clarity on their personal experiences and their preferences for conflict-resolution resources.

All the **animals and people** who've inspired me to dedicate my career to advancing the welfare of companion animals and the people who care for them.

Thanks as well to you, my reader, for investing the time and energy to increase your conflict resolution skills. May you have healthy, fruitful, and constructive conflict in all aspects of your life!



Sincerely,



Karen Green
Author