



Conflict

How to Work with Someone Who Creates Unnecessary Conflict

by Amanda Ripley

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Conflict at work comes in many forms. *Good* conflict, the kind that is healthy, pushes us to be better as people and communities. Most organizations need more good conflict, not less. But sometimes, conflict can become malignant. It hijacks precious time, trust, and energy, turning allies against each other and distorting reality. This is what's known as "high conflict," the kind that takes on a life of its own, and eventually, leaves almost everyone worse off.

What causes high conflict? I spent four years investigating this question, following people who were stuck in all kinds of miserable feuds, personal and professional. One pattern, common to every instance I've seen, is the presence of *conflict entrepreneurs*. These are people who inflame conflict for their own ends. Sometimes they do this for profit, but more often for attention or power. They don't exist in every organization, but, according to my research, they seem to be more common in certain workplaces, such as hospitals, universities, and political or advocacy organizations.

Think about someone you've worked with who sends defensive emails that may include ALL CAPS, copying multiple, uninvolved, often more senior colleagues in the cc line. Or maybe they spread rumors and suspicion about the company and its leaders via Slack or even social media. Typically they do this not just once or twice, but again and again.

One obvious response is to distance yourself from the conflict entrepreneurs in your office (or on your Facebook feed). Keep a safe distance from people who use all-or-nothing language or who delight in each new plot twist of a feud.

But what if you *can't* distance yourself from a conflict entrepreneur? What if you must work with this person because you're on a team with them, you manage them, or they're your boss? In these cases, ignoring the person doesn't work. They have a way of recruiting others to their cause. They often tell very persuasive, emotional stories about how they've been wronged by a co-worker, convincing well-meaning colleagues to start doubting, avoiding, and undermining one another. And soon, the problem metastasizes.

Calling a conflict entrepreneur out is equally unwise. "It will make things worse," says Bill Eddy, a lawyer and mediator who specializes in dealing with high-conflict people. "It doesn't motivate change; it escalates conflict." Firing or otherwise parting ways with the employee could help — or make things even worse.

One seasoned manager at a small tech company encountered a conflict entrepreneur for the first time a few years ago. The problems started in a routine meeting, when the employee began demanding to know why others had been promoted. It was not an inquiry, which would have involved asking questions; it was a prosecution. The person “just came out swinging,” the manager said, “I was blindsided. There was no benefit of the doubt, a lot of black-and-white thinking.”

At first, the manager assumed the employee was just going through a hard time and things would improve. But then the employee began studying shared calendars and demanding to know why certain people were invited to meetings and others weren't. Then this person spread misinformation to more junior employees about company decisions and recruited others to complain, sometimes in very public ways. The leadership struggled to respond. They hid their calendars. They tried to snuff out rumors. They considered letting the employee go but worried about getting sued if they did. “We don't have the energy or the desire to work with people who are doing this,” the manager told me. “We're just exhausted.”

So what then? People who deal with high-conflict personalities all over the world, including attorneys, therapists, and conflict mediators, suggest taking a handful of specific, counterintuitive actions — the opposite of your instincts. And taking them with great care.

Identify conflict entrepreneurs — quickly

First, learn to identify conflict entrepreneurs. Remember that people can criticize, disagree, go to HR, file complaints, lead a union organizing drive, and circulate a petition *without* being a conflict entrepreneur. The mark of a conflict entrepreneur is more about the *way* people engage in conflict over time — it's about a recurring pattern of dysfunction, extreme behavior, and perpetual blame. They're often quick to accuse, eager to validate every lament and articulate new wrongs that no one else has thought of. They broker in rumors and conspiracy theories, dividing the world cleanly (usually, too cleanly) into good versus evil.

Once you've identified a possible conflict entrepreneur, resist the urge to demonize them to others (or even in your own mind); it's tempting, but that's the same us-versus-them thinking that causes high conflict. In *Well-Intentioned Dragons*, a book about managing conflict entrepreneurs in churches, author Marshall Shelley puts it this way: "When attacked by a dragon, do not become one."

Keep in mind that conflict entrepreneurs may have unresolved trauma in their background, including experiences of neglect, abuse, and violence. Try to cultivate compassion, however hard it may be. Remember that we are all capable of acting like conflict entrepreneurs.

Spend more time with them

"If they're 90% conflict entrepreneur, speak to the 10%," says mediator and lawyer Gary Friedman. Listen and try to understand — not forever, but long enough to make a connection. "This person may have lots of opinions I don't agree with, but first and foremost, people want to be heard, and somewhere in there, there's an opportunity," says one turnaround specialist who works with underperforming organizations.

In one volatile case, he brought a leader who was a conflict entrepreneur and his most indignant adversary to an off-site restaurant, in what he called a "Camp David" retreat. He asked them both to identify a few common values to drive future interactions, such as respect. Then they brainstormed behaviors that would demonstrate these values (greeting one another with a kind word) or diminish them (sending emails impugning one other's motives). Crucially, they also came up with a protocol for what to do when those values got violated. After three hours, the two opposing parties were drinking together at the bar. They still disagreed, but the deeper values they cared most about had been acknowledged and protected, which meant they could exhale.

Redirect their energy

In her book on global conflict, *A Savage Order*, scholar Rachel Kleinfeld describes how countries find a way out of endemic violence. The first step governments often take is to make bargains with warlords, giving conflict entrepreneurs political power in exchange for a little peace. The goal of these “dirty deals” is to buy time — while reformers reduce corruption and other systemic problems. It’s a gamble, but ignoring conflict entrepreneurs can be more dangerous.

In companies, this might mean channeling the energy of a conflict entrepreneur toward something productive that you both care about. Give them a choice, rather than a mandate. Often, professional coaching is a good option, according to Eddy, the mediator who works with high-conflict personalities. “Focus on the future,” he advises.

Megan Hunter has done dozens of trainings, coaching engagements, and mediations with high-conflict companies (and co-authored several books with Eddy). In one explosive case, which threatened to drive a large family-owned business into bankruptcy, Hunter asked the feuding family members to work together to create a mission statement, which they’d never done before. This effect was surprising, even to her. “It was the first time they had been in the same room without f-bombs being hurled and someone storming out,” Hunter said. “They were so darned proud of that mission statement.” It doesn’t always work, but redirection is worth trying, she says. “Get them making decisions — together — instead of yelling at each other.”

Build guardrails

The best defense is a culture of good conflict — where questions get asked, honest disagreement is encouraged, and everyone behaves with a baseline level of decency.

But good conflict doesn't happen naturally. It requires rituals and boundaries, ways to lean into the tension, not avoid it (or get consumed by it). This means creating, alongside employees, rules of engagement that everyone can agree to. In his 25 years as CEO of Able Aerospace in Arizona, Lee Benson found that he and his colleagues could rehabilitate about two of every three conflict entrepreneurs by instilling a straightforward, common methodology for performance and acceptable behavior. "They can't get away with it when everyone knows the rules of engagement," he told me. "They want to be part of the community, so they typically change."

Here are examples of good-conflict practices I've seen adopted in different organizations:

1. If you have a problem, go to the person you have the problem with first (unless it is a case of illegal, abusive, or dangerous behavior of course). Do this in person or on the phone, never via any form of written communication.
2. Bring a proposed solution with you.
3. Ask a lot of questions, with genuine curiosity, in any disagreement.
4. Reflect back what you hear and check to see if you got it right, even as you continue to disagree.
5. Stop using Slack and other tools that can generate unhealthy conflict (or, if this is unthinkable for your work flow, come to a consensus about *how* you will use these tools with integrity).
6. Find a trusted mediator who can facilitate harder conversations when needed.
7. Reward and demonstrate good-conflict behavior, publicly and often. Tell true stories about this when onboarding new employees — especially stories about junior employees who asked tough questions of supervisors without vilifying them (or being vilified).
8. Target problems, not people.
9. Do not engage in backchannel gossip or anonymous attacks.

10. Rack up at least three positive encounters with each other for each negative. Do this in-person whenever possible. It's harder to dehumanize someone who has cooked you dinner — or lost to you in cornhole.

The goal is not *no* conflict; it's good conflict. In the tech company described earlier, the conflict entrepreneur eventually left by choice. "It's so painful in retrospect," the manager told me. "I wish we would have dealt with them sooner." The company is now actively working to create better conflict rituals. "We have to still have healthy conflict. It's how we get better."



Amanda Ripley is an investigative journalist and the author of *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped—and How We Get Out* (Simon & Schuster 2021).