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## Conflict Resolution: The Art of Transforming Differences Into Opportunities

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### Introduction

Conflict is traditionally viewed as a negative experience -- one that causes disruption, high emotions, fear, hard feelings, alienation and... war. The notion is perpetuated by its definition used in Western cultures. The root of “conflict” comes from the Latin word *confligere* meaning to strike together. This definition is often translated into meaning to *fight; battle or contend*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, conflict is viewed as a win/lose, destructive or negative experience – one to be avoided.

The Chinese approach conflict from a different perspective. The word for conflict or crisis consists of two symbols: *Danger* and *Opportunity*. So, while there may be challenges, dangers, or difficulties inherent in conflict, there is also opportunity -- a notion that seems to elude Western society’s socially accepted definition.

This white paper focuses on ways to embrace conflict as a healthy part of life, using it as stepping stone to expand insights, understanding, and awareness of oneself and others. Conflict can become a unifying force rather than a devastating experience. The information and processes presented here form the basis of a resolution system that can be easily replicated within an organization, team or even between two people.

### Intra-personal and Inter-personal Conflict

Conflict can be divided into two dimensions: **intra**-personal -- a conflict that rages <sup>2</sup>inside of an individual; and inter-personal, one that exists between people<sup>2</sup>. These dimensions are interdependent in that one can trigger the other. An **intra**-personal conflict occurs when an external event causes an internal reaction that is tied to a person's belief system, values, assumptions, self-esteem, or experiences.

When an **intra**-personal conflict is externalized or "taken out on others", it can ignite an **inter**-personal conflict because it causes person #2 to have an emotional reaction – an **intra**-personal conflict. Both reactions (or intra-personal conflicts) continue feeding on each other, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle in some cases. Consider what happens when person #2 has a neutral response to person #1's externalized **intra**-personal conflict. Person #2 often will switch to a creative problem-solving mode, eliminating the fuel for an **inter**-personal conflict. The expressions “plugging me in,” or “triggered a reaction” are examples

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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s New World Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> [http://erc.hrea.org/Library/primary/Opening\\_the\\_Door/part4.html](http://erc.hrea.org/Library/primary/Opening_the_Door/part4.html), p. 2

of how an external action causes a reaction that has to do with an internal issue of the other person. Conversely, an intra-personal conflict, if “taken out on others” can wreck havoc.

### **Root Causes of Conflict**

Conflict exists around us all the time; it is part of the human condition. In its most destructive form, conflict can result in war between people or countries. On the personal level, it manifests as breakdowns or a disruption in the status quo. The intensity of the breakdown or disruption is directly related to the intensity or magnitude of the situation. For example, a disruption or breakdown can be a disagreement, a cancelled contract, plans going awry, a misunderstanding, misalignment, unmet expectations, or a heated argument.

The following are some examples of causes of conflict that are applicable both on the personal as well as professional level:

Differences in styles: Words, behaviors, communication, emotional reactions, cultural expressions, facial expressions, etc. can often result in misunderstandings or misinterpretation.

Unrecognized or unacknowledged common motivators: Frequently, both parties are motivated by the same interests, only expressed differently. These common motivators are often lost either due to differences in styles, taking a hard line position, or being engulfed in an emotional cyclone.

Differences in approach: “All roads lead to Rome” but each may have their unique twists and turns. Is one approach better than the other? Or, is it possible that a more dynamic outcome can result by blending the approaches? We allow the differences to separate us, rather than unify us.

Differences in the vision of the future: Creating a vision is like looking at a painting—it conjures up different images, understandings, or expectations. Again, combining different visions can produce a result where the “whole is greater than the sum of its parts”.

Unrecognized or unacknowledged common fear: Fear is also part of the human condition – it is a normal, natural experience. Frequently, expressing one’s fears is interpreted as weakness and vulnerability. However, it takes internal fortitude to be authentic, expressing the good, bad, and the ugly. When the layers are peeled back, one often finds that the fear of scarcity, failure, being taken advantage of, or harm is common to everyone.

Differences in a sense of timing: Western society is time-centric; compulsively driven to make quick decisions or to take advantage of opportunities that may “vaporize” quickly (the “window of opportunity” syndrome). The “survival” instinct overtakes us driving our actions with a sense of urgency, often with a lack of regard for the needs of others.

**Differences in values:** Values (beliefs, standards, social principles, or goals that are held by individuals) evolve over time and represent a multitude of influences: environmental, generational, emotional, experiences, education, age, gender. While values are the most elusive aspect of individual's persona, they are potent contributors to conflicts.

Conflict resolution is never easy. It takes commitment, strength, patience, mutual consent and vulnerability. Having a high degree of emotional intelligence (EI) forms the basis for successful settlement and resolution. Each aspect of EI (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management) ties directly to managing one's reactions when one's "triggers are tripped".

### **Settlement vs. Resolution**

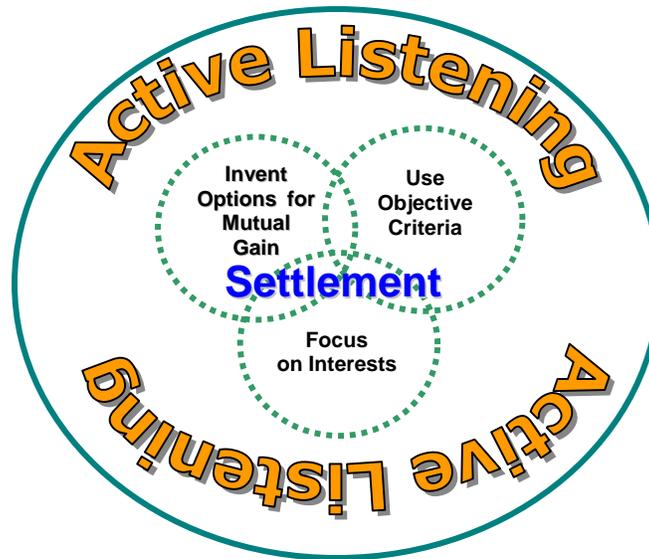
*"If we keep following the idea of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will end up with a toothless, eyeless world." Gandhi (Levine, 1998, p. 97)*

When parties are in conflict over specific issues, they lack the trust necessary to even begin the process of resolution. They are unable to see past today's problem. In these circumstances it is best to first settle the immediate issues.

Typically, the settlement process looks only at the surface facts and issues. Since everyone approaches a conflict with their own filters and attitudes, these perceptions must be put aside if the parties are to achieve a successful settlement. It is critical to separate the people and the emotions from the issues.

The settlement process consists of four non-sequential components: active listening; focusing on interests rather than positions; inventing options for mutual gain; and using objective criteria. However, each component is interconnected and all contribute equally to reaching a mutually agreeable settlement. The following is a model of the process.

## The Settlement Process



### From Settlement to Resolution

*“Resolution is an outcome. Resolution is the condition of everyone and each one’s resources after a conflict, dispute... is put to rest. Resolution induces everyone to address his or her relationships. Resolution returns everyone to productivity and coordination.”* (Levine, p 151)

Settlement is a critical step when the parties are engaged in positional, time-sensitive conflict. But it fails to create an enduring means to solve problems. It has been suggested that those who seek settlement continue to see conflict as an unnecessary evil.

However, resolution can lead to learning, necessary change, maintaining an innovative edge, stronger teams, and putting aside differences.<sup>3</sup> Resolution is fundamental to building a dynamic, resilient and agile organization.

There is a direct relationship between how things get done by executive management and the behavioral expectations within an organization. If leadership promotes a Machiavellian approach to management, or *The Art of War* mentality for conflict resolution, the end result will likely be a “siloesd” organization that is riddled with sabotage and poor communication. Successful leadership skills encourages collaboration, creative problem-solving, and open communication – all behaviors that make excellent “resolutionaries”.<sup>4</sup> (1998, p. 155). Following is a model that promotes collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

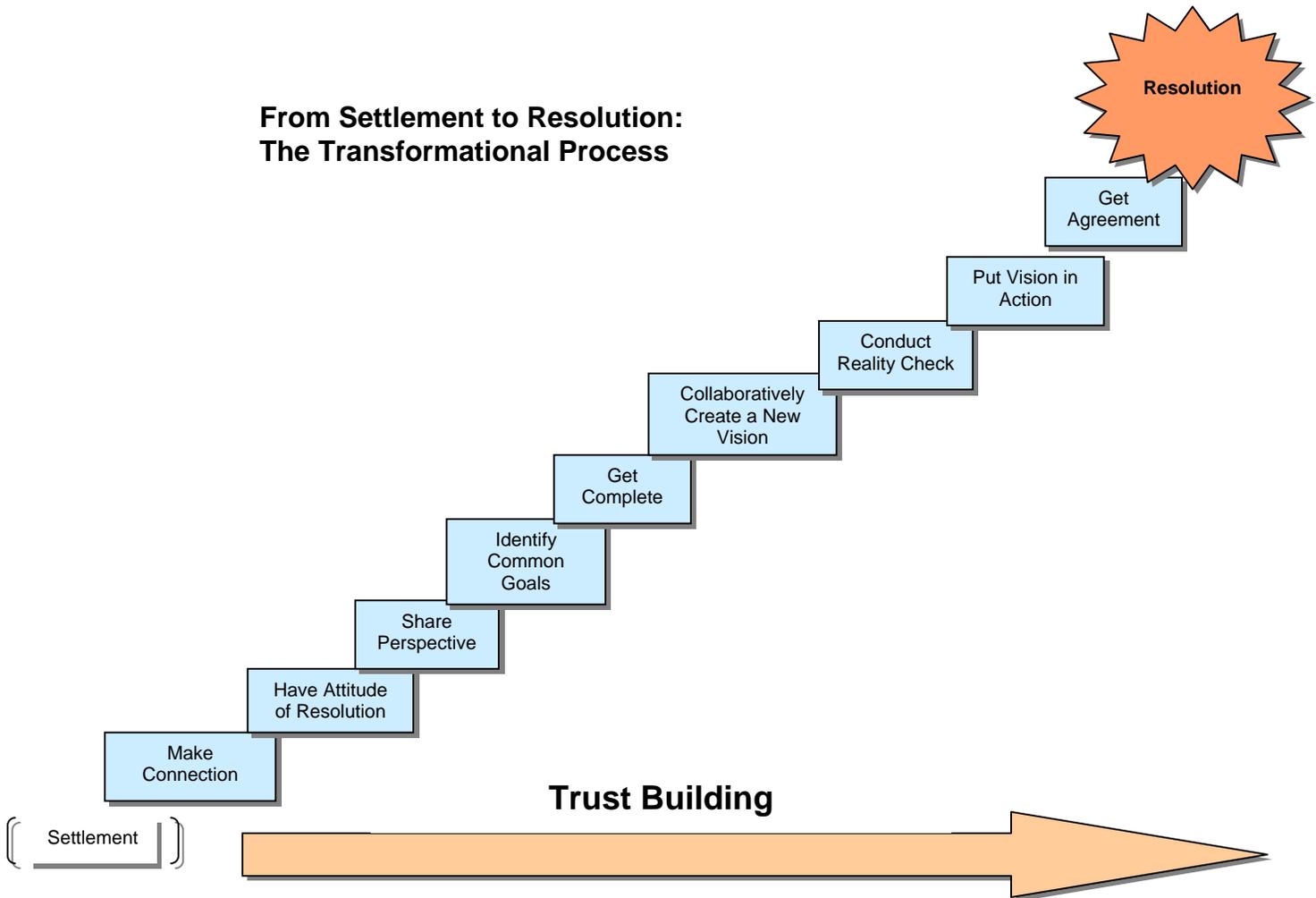
<sup>3</sup> Cloke & Goldsmith, p. 12

<sup>4</sup> Levine, p. 155

Resolution is a state of mind. It is the ability to see conflicts, upsets, or disruptions as opportunities for growth, new possibilities, change, learning, effectiveness and stronger relationships.<sup>5</sup> It is accepted as part of the human condition and is embraced because it paves the way for creativity and progress.

When has the Art of War been transformed into The Art of Resolution? When conflict or confrontation is no longer avoided; when differing opinions are no longer viewed as opposition or negative, and when conflict resolution is defined as creative problem-solving.

### From Settlement to Resolution: The Transformational Process



### Conclusion

The transformation of conflict into a creative, empowered experience is no easy task. Many books have been written about it and many models have been created to help guide

<sup>5</sup> Cloke & Goldsmith p. 13.

people and organizations through the quagmire. The process presented in this paper is designed to create distinctions that support navigating through rough seas.

Each phase and each step is designed to create a safe environment in which people can feel supported, acknowledge, and honored leading to their willingness to be vulnerable, self-reflective, and responsible. Conflict will no longer be an enemy; rather it will be a rich opportunity for growth and understanding, deepening relationships and strengthening teams.

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