

It Takes Two to Fight, but

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You've experienced it before, probably in the last few days, either with people at work or family at home. Someone says or does something that offends someone else. A disagreement ensues. After both parties become embroiled in the conflict, who started it and often the reason are long forgotten. From an outsider's perspective the cliché "it takes two to fight" comes to mind and both parties are deemed equally at fault.

By some estimates, managers and employees spend two-thirds of their work day dealing with conflict. Managers regularly deal with disgruntled employees while workers at all levels contend with upset customers, sub-standard suppliers, uncooperative colleagues, or hard-to-please bosses. For some, home is not much different. Raising children, managing finances, and maintaining relationships involves conflict too. Whether working with colleagues, maintaining friendships, or living with family, conflict is an everyday occurrence for many people.

Fortunately, conflict can be healthy and beneficial. The process of disagreeing brings out insightful perspectives and creative ideas. Rigorous debate of opinions and options results in better decision making. Conflict creates deeper understanding and once settled, stronger relationships. Yet the process of debating, understanding, and reaching compromise can be difficult and emotionally draining. Conflict can also be unconstructive.

Conflict generally occurs for two reasons—a disagreement over an issue or a dislike for a person. Disagreements over issues are easier to overcome. Once emotions subside, people with mature communication skills can discuss, resolve, or if needed—agree to disagree on substantive issues. In contrast, overcoming a dislike for another person is not as easy. When a person believes another lacks honorable motives, decent values, or respectable personality traits, conflict becomes deeper. Conflict becomes personal. This conflict is usually only overcome by changing one's values, motives, biases, or personality traits—not a simple change for most people.

There are many tactics people use to overcome conflict ranging from being empathetic to engaging mediators. Yet when tactics fail, there comes a point when conflict can't be resolved. If one or more parties don't take responsibility, don't like each other, or are unwilling to change, conflicts don't go away. The course of action then shifts from overcoming conflict to getting away from it. Attempts at resolution are replaced with measures of avoidance or separation. In the workplace, the solution for unresolvable conflict is reassignment or removal. At home, the answer for irreconcilable differences can be dissociation with family, changing friends, or divorce for spouses.

I once managed two executives who couldn't get along despite repeated attempts to overcome their differences. After a couple of months it became clear that one had to go. At first, the cliché "it takes two to fight" embodied my thinking as it seemed both were equally at fault. But after more thorough investigation, one was clearly more responsible than the other. One was quicker to become emotional, more likely to take a conversation into an unconstructive direction, less likely to seek understanding, less likely to take responsibility, and less likely to admit wrong. Hence, he became the one I let go.

While it takes two or more to argue, not all parties are equally responsible. One is generally less rational. One is more unrealistic. One is more selfish. Complicating matters, one can also be more charming, but deceitful and dishonest. Hence, one is generally more responsible.



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How do you know who is more responsible? How do you know which of your kids, employees, friends, or family members are the primary source of conflict or the cause of an impasse? Or if you are?

Consider these questions before assigning blame, accusing someone, or pursuing corrective measures:

- Who lacks self-awareness of their thoughts, behaviors, or shortcomings?
- Who is unwilling to take responsibility?
- Who is most resistant to change?
- Who isn't making the effort to understand the other?
- Who is averse to compromise?
- Who is hot-tempered and quicker to become negative, irrational, or unconstructive?
- Who is greedy or overly self-centered?
- Who lacks honorable motives?
- Who is unwilling to forgive and let go of the past?
- Who is less transparent with their true thoughts and feelings?

If one party stands out on the majority of these questions, the impasse is probably their doing. Maybe they deserve more compassion, understanding, or help. Or maybe they deserve time-out or time-off. Or maybe they need to move on. Whatever the appropriate next step is, you can move in that direction with a higher degree of confidence that you are addressing the responsible party.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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