



# Making Conflict an Asset Rather than a Liability

by Mike Hawkins  
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)



Is conflict good or bad? Do you look forward to a vigorous debate and exchange of opinions or do you avoid it like the plague? Many people avoid conflict, yet when it is engaged constructively it is beneficial. It is through healthy disagreement and debate that problems are solved. Healthy conflict enables people to build on each other's ideas. It challenges people to raise their performance. It helps people grow and develop. It helps people understand each other's personalities, motives, and needs. It enables better collaboration and synergy.

In contrast, conflict is unhealthy when disagreements turn into arguments. Conflict is unconstructive when the conversation turns from sharing perspectives to defending positions, proving each other wrong, attacking each other, or seeking revenge. Conflict that is unhealthy is costly. Improperly handled, conflict contributes to unnecessary work, low employee productivity, low morale, low engagement, and high turnover. It creates stress and illness. It tarnishes an organization's image. It exposes organizations to legal issues and the costs of litigation.

Working with people is not always peaceful. People have different values, perspectives, motives, and personalities which cause differences of opinion and disagreement. As in a marriage or best friendship, conflict at work is unavoidable. The issue then with conflict is not about avoiding it, but in properly handling it.

Marriages that last do so because the spouses know how to handle their disagreements. It is not because they don't disagree. All couples disagree. But marriages that last do so because the spouses, or at least one spouse, knows how to disagree constructively and manages their disagreements. Anyone can handle agreements. It is how people handle disagreements that determine the quality and longevity of a relationship. It is how well people handle the unhappy moments rather than the happy ones that matters most.

Conflict can tear people and organizations apart, or it can enable top performance. It depends on how it is engaged. Follow these six principles that start with letters that spell out the acronym "LEADER" to make your disagreements constructive dialogs instead of unconstructive arguments:

- **Listen** - Listen and understand each other's perspectives and motives. Many arguments are the result of simple misunderstandings that could have been avoided had the people just taken time to listen to each other and understand why each person did what they did.
- **Empathize** – Put yourself in the other person's position. Admit that you might not feel, think, or behave any differently. Mention your own mistakes to show that you're not perfect either. Validate the other person's feelings and needs even if you disagree with their thinking.
- **Agree** – Agree on common ground before focusing on differences. Establish an equal level of appreciation for the benefits of maintaining a positive relationship. Build an equal motivation and commitment to resolve the issues. Establish a cooperative spirit on both sides.
- **Demonstrate respect** – Give a complement or perform a gesture of kindness to show a willingness to be civil. Maintain self-control and professionalism. Be careful not to say or do something that trips the other person's defense trigger and draws their ire.
- **Explore** – Explore new perspectives and solutions beyond what each person initially supplies. Identify different solutions that address both parties' concerns. Create blended solutions that incorporate both parties' ideas rather than just one party's. Agree on win-win solutions.
- **Review** – Review and evaluate progress regularly. The resolution to the dispute isn't complete until it has been fully implemented and any desired behavior changes have become part of the normal routine. Gently and considerately hold each other accountable until it is no longer necessary.



## Making Conflict an Asset Rather than a Liability

---

Follow these principles and you'll enjoy the benefits of more harmony and less hostility.

---

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](http://www.activatingyourambition.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corporation ([www.alpinelink.com](http://www.alpinelink.com)), a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

For other articles on reaching your peak potential, visit [www.alpinelink.com/Leadership\\_Sales\\_Management\\_Consulting\\_Papers\\_Tools\\_Templates.aspx](http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx).