MASTER ANY WORKPLACE CONFLICT

WITH CONFIDENCE AND EASE, HAVE LESS DRAMA, BETTER RESULTS, AND THRIVE AT WORK.

Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Workplace Conflict is an essential resource to help you destress your workday, foster collaboration, and calm difficult customers.

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"Karin Hurt and David Dye's new book beautifully provides what is missing in virtually all books on conflict and conflict management: they provide a plethora of very specific examples of how choosing and then using particular words and phrases can make a huge difference in being able to resolve any conflict situation with others at work. They provide readers with the most effective verbal and non-verbal tools for keeping their challenging conversations going and thus creating an engaging and sustained setting in which all persons are more likely to ask the key questions, actively listen to one another's different perspectives, and then propose creative solutions so everyone can get their most important needs met in the conflict situation."

—Ralph H. Kilmann, PhD,
author of *Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)* and coauthor of the TKI assessment tool

"Thank goodness. This book addresses questions people often want to ask but don't and gives answers and guidance that are practical and real. There's lots of researched-based data, which lends credibility. And there's also experience-based and proven processes and models that lend reality. Many times, data doesn't quite cross over from theory and aspiration to keeping it real! Big thanks to Karin Hurt and David Dye for a book that will help build skills and effectiveness."

—Gloria (Glo) Cotton,
strategic leadership coach, pro-inclusionist,
and collaborative author of *Lead from Within*

"*Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Workplace Conflict* is a fabulous resource for everyone who works with anyone. Why? Because no matter who you are or where you work, conflict happens—and Karin Hurt and David Dye want you to be prepared. (Psst: chapter 3 is worth the price of the book!)"

—Ken Blanchard,
coauthor of *The New One Minute Manager*
and *Simple Truths of Leadership*

POWERFUL PHRASES

FOR DEALING WITH

WORKPLACE CONFLICT

WHAT TO SAY NEXT TO DE-STRESS THE WORKDAY, BUILD COLLABORATION, AND CALM DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

KARIN HURT & DAVID DYE

FOR YOU.

Because your voice matters.

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Introduction

You can't avoid conflict.

When there are problems to solve and people who care (and there are so many things to care about), you'll face conflict. And if you want to have more success, influence, and joy in your work, you've got to navigate it well. But conflict is hard. You weren't born knowing the perfect words to say when you're angry, dealing with a jerk, or when someone calls your game-changing idea "stupid."

You probably didn't learn practical, productive approaches to conflict in school. And, if you're like most of us, you grew up watching role models sometimes really screw it up. You've had some conflicts not go so well yourself, and you don't like how that feels. We hate that feeling too.

That's the reason for this book: to give you practical communication techniques to successfully navigate conflict at work. And when you do, you'll get better results, build trust, have more influence, and collaborate better with your coworkers.

First, a Confession

When Tim, our publisher, called and said, "Hey, we need a book to help people deal with today's challenging and complex workplace conflicts. Want to write it?" our first reaction was, "Yeah, sure. Makes sense. We can do that."

After all, we've been traveling the world shoving all brands of "diaper genies" into overhead compartments of planes for

nearly a decade. ("Don't worry, it's clean," we always assure the surprised flight attendant.) And we've spent many hours walking jet-lagged around the streets the night before a keynote asking, "Hast du einen windeleimer?" or "Yǒu mài niàobù tǒng de ma?" (Do you have a diaper pail for sale?)

If you're not familiar with these stink-containing contraptions, you take a stinky diaper, put it in the genie, give it a twist, and plastic envelops the diaper so tight it doesn't stink. But, of course, the stink is still there, which you know if you've ever had the pleasure of emptying one of those long plastic-wrapped bundles of joy.

We're big believers that with workplace conflict, if you can't smell it, you can't solve it. And while we think these contraptions are a great invention for parents and babies, metaphorical genies can derail your influence and impact and destroy trust. So, "Yes, let's do it" was our first answer.

But, when we thought more deeply about actually writing the book, we had to ditch our own metaphorical genie and ask ourselves hard questions. How good are *we* at navigating conflict at work? Are we really qualified to write this book? As a married couple writing books together and running an international leadership development firm in the turbulence of a global pandemic and beyond, we're in a constant dance of conflict and collaboration. A few examples from our conversations with one another:

"I know you really want to take on this new strategic project, but that's not in our plan. I've got a ton on my plate right now, and there's no way I can do all the things."

"Hey, don't you realize how much work went into this? How about a bit more appreciation?"

"Don't tell me it's a stupid idea! First of all, it's brilliant. And would you ever talk to anyone on our team that way? Maybe

read your own book on *Courageous Cultures* and respond with regard the next time."

Of course, in our "workplace," the stakes of a mismanaged conflict are high. Disagreements and hurt feelings don't turn off just because it's time to go to bed.

Like you, we wish workplace conflict was easier.

And so, we said yes. Not because we do conflict perfectly all the time, but because we know how challenging conflict is and how important it is for you to have practical skills and tools to do this well.

Why Is Conflict Hard?

The problem starts in your head. Your brain makes conflict hard because it treats every conflict as life or death. These instincts help when staring down a bear (either hide, fight, team up, or pretend you're dead). But for workplace conflict, those responses just make a gnarly situation worse. And, if you're like most people, you hope other people get you and maybe even like you. You want to feel safe and included. But your brain's survival instincts and fear of rejection are a little extra in a conversation about how your hybrid team policies aren't working or that nasty mess in the breakroom microwave.

And yet, when it comes to navigating workplace conflict and fostering collaboration, the stakes are high for you, for us, and for the world we are all building for our children. In this turbulent changing world with its messy, imperfect humans, you can't always predict what you'll show up to, but you can always choose how you show up. This book gives you choices so you can be more confident, ditch the metaphorical "diaper genie," show up with curiosity, and have conversations that matter.

How to Use This Book

We almost cut this section because the simple answer is, "Read it and use it." But there are a few quick pointers that can help. If you feel skeptical about whether this book is for you, read Karin's favorite chapter, the "What Abouts" in chapter 2. After that, section II has everything you need to set yourself up for success with any workplace conflict, including how to surface the conversation everyone wants to avoid and our GOAT (greatest of all time) Powerful Phrases. If you've picked up this book because you're in an ACE (acute conflict emergency), the table of contents will direct you to where you can get some quick advice. Of course, once you've aced your ACE, you can go back and get the foundations.

And, because navigating workplace conflict for greater influence and impact isn't just something you read about, it's something you do, we've built a vault of *free* resources and tools you can download to make these conversations even easier: templates, job aids, bonus content, team conversation starters, a book group facilitator guide, and a deeper dive into the research that grounds this book. We encourage you to use (and share) these resources to support your journey.

Resource Center Available
May 14, 2024

I

THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

Workplace Conflict
According to the Research

1

What Makes Workplace Conflict So Challenging?

"Due to burnout, my ability to see the silver lining or think
  holistically has diminished."

—Female, 42, United States

What's Making Conflict Harder Right Now?

People have had conflict with one another since, well, there have been people. But to give you the most useful tools, we wanted to find out what's happening now. So, we created the World Workplace Conflict and Collaboration Survey (WWCCS) to ask people around the world whether they're experiencing more (or less) conflict at work, what's causing those changes, and the effects of workplace conflict. We also asked about significant conflicts they've experienced and what advice they would give their former self if faced with that conflict again. At the time of writing, we've heard from over five thousand people in more than forty-five countries and all fifty of the United States.

At the beginning of each chapter, you'll find a quote from a WWCCS respondent (and a few people we've met in our travels) that includes a bit of their story, or advice, or the results of conflict. And you're invited to the party: we would love if you would add your voice and share your story about workplace conflict. You'll find the survey, more about our research, and the workplace conflict experiences of people around the world in the Workplace Conflict and Collaboration Resource Center.

Resource Center Available
May 14, 2024

More Conflict at Work

If it feels like you're experiencing more conflict at work over the past few years, you're not alone. Seventy percent of the people in our research say that they're experiencing the same or more conflict at work. And of the 30 percent who said they've experienced less conflict, most of this group say they have less conflict because they changed jobs, are working from home, or escaped challenging people. We'd bet that in a lot of these circumstances, those changes made it more peaceful for that individual, but the workplace didn't improve, nor did anyone get better at conflict. Let's look at what's fueling this conflict and making it more intense.

Why Is There More Conflict at Work?*	
Overwhelm, burnout, understaffing	27%
Poor management practices	27%
Pandemic-related mental health, anxiety	21%
Less tolerance, understanding for others	20%
Less motivated workforce	20%
Turbulent economy	16%
Discrimination	15%

*WWCCS participants identified up to three causes.

TIRED WORKERS IN AN UNCERTAIN ECONOMY

The pandemic sped up changes in the workforce. More than ever before, people want meaning in their work.[1] And work itself is changing. The survey results citing continued overwhelm, economic instability, lower levels of motivation, and poor management are symptoms of this upheaval. Larger organizations have people scattered across seven different time zones. In a world of remote work, many of these people have never met each other in person. If you're in a matrixed organization, it gets more complicated. Lines of responsibility can be fuzzy, and your priorities or incentives might clash with your coworkers' goals. But you need your coworkers' help to succeed at your job. That's a conflict cocktail.

Since the pandemic, many industries find it more challenging than ever to attract and keep talent. Employees in the education, healthcare, service, and hospitality industries say they're sick and tired of rude and hostile customers, students, and patients, grueling hours, and impossible demands. And

customers complain about long waits, poor service, apathetic staff, and tip creep. Another potent conflict cocktail.

The pandemic-inspired shift to remote work and hybrid teams left many people longing for deeper human connection. And even for those who've returned to the office (or never left in-person work), a few years of social distancing left many of us feeling unmoored. Many organizations are still wrestling with the new reality of remote and hybrid workforces. Managers are relearning how to lead and support their teams. Teammates are figuring out how to build meaningful relationships and get work done. These rapid changes and missing human connections fuel conflict and make it harder to solve.

PANDEMIC-RELATED MENTAL HEALTH AND ANXIETY

As mask mandates, stay-at-home orders, and online-only schooling fade into the rearview mirror, it's easy to forget the pandemic's disruption on nearly every aspect of life. But the COVID-19 pandemic traumatized many people and left scars. The social isolation bruised our psyches. "Choosing our bubble" of people created "us" and "them" dynamics that politics and social media made worse. For many, the pandemic's hypervigilance, anxiety, and stress created lasting mental health challenges.[2] For others, the resentment of mandates and loss of personal freedoms created another kind of fear and anxiety.

Take the increase in anxiety, stress, and depression, mix in the loss of human relationships, and you get more workplace conflict. And it's more intense. In chapter 3 we'll look at why human connection is so important for navigating conflict. For now, it's enough to say that all the isolation and loneliness people experienced isn't helping.

LESS TOLERANCE OR INCLUSION

We were sad to read WWCCS comments about alarming discrimination and lack of tolerance or inclusion. For many, these trends are getting worse. The pandemic sped up social change and intensified social media impacts, igniting conflict between people and groups and even families. You can't keep that tension out of the workplace. Let's break this down a bit.

Rapid Social Change

When things change fast or change in big ways, people freak out. Rapid change, major change, and unexpected changes can all increase the likelihood and intensity of conflict.[3] The pandemic was certainly an "all of the above" with rapid, major, and unexpected change. But it also happened alongside several other major changes. Social justice movements reached new levels of unrest and action. Thankfully, as a result, many people and organizations around the world have increased their commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

At the same time, we see other troubling changes: an increase in visible white nationalism,[4] and global warming with concurrent droughts, fires, and floods.[5] Incredible leaps in artificial intelligence threaten to completely upend certain industries and careers. Sudden, significant change often leaves people feeling confused, anxious, and uncertain. You can see the consequences at work. One such example is the Society for Human Resource Management's analysis of social change and conflict resolution: compared to previous years, 44 percent of HR professionals report intensified political volatility at work in 2020; in 2016, only 26 percent reported increased political volatility compared to prior elections.[6]

Social Media

Social media thrives on conflict. These companies make their money from advertising and so do everything they can to keep people interacting with their platforms. One of the easiest ways to get people to interact is to push their anger and outrage buttons. This is due to what journalist and author Johann Hari, in his best-selling book *Stolen Focus*, describes as a quirk of human behavior. "On average," he writes, "we will stare at something negative and outrageous for a lot longer than . . . something positive and calm." It's called negativity bias. Hari sums it up: "If it's more enraging, it's more engaging."

Consistent exposure to this version of reality changes people. If you "expose yourself for hours a day to the disconnected fragments of shrieking and fury that dominate social media, your thoughts will start to be shaped like that . . . [you're] less able to hear more tender and gentle thoughts."[7] Social media hurts many people's ability to hear nuance, assume the best, and have a friendly conversation with other human beings. And these trends bleed over into the workplace.

Voices of Experience

Besides the global survey, we've also read and talked with hundreds of business and thought leaders to ask them for their experiences and wisdom about workplace conflict. Throughout the book, you'll find some of these insights in sidebars like this one from accountability expert Nate Regier. He calls us to struggle "with," rather than "against," so our conflict creates and builds a better future.

Expert Insight: Nate Regier

Our experience working in thousands of interpersonal conflict situations shows that when conflict occurs, human beings spend energy struggling. The struggle seems to take one of two forms: we either struggle against or we struggle with. Struggling against is everywhere. It's in politics and religion. On the news. On social media.

Struggling with is a process of mutuality and creation. It's about seeing the solution as a two-way street, viewing the struggle as an opportunity for a win-win outcome, and adopting an attitude of shared responsibility for resolving the discrepancy between what we want and what we are experiencing.

—Nate Regier, PhD, CEO of Next Element and author of *Conflict without Casualties* and *Compassionate Accountability*

The Path Forward

We don't share these causes of conflict to discourage you. The point is to understand where the conflict comes from and why it's happening. When you consider your colleague might be dealing with a ton of unnerving change, it gets easier to show up with compassion and curiosity and look for meaningful solutions.

Nine percent of our WWCCS respondents said the reason they're experiencing less conflict at work is "improved communication." Well, that's a start. Well-intentioned, care-filled

words make a difference. And 32 percent of respondents who report less conflict at work attribute the decrease to "improved communication." That's our hope for you too—more choices in your communication leading to improved relationships, less stress, and better results.

2

What Abouts
Frequent Concerns, Questions, and Why Old Approaches Don't Work

"Drink the vodka."

—Male, 60, Russia

At this point, you probably have a few "what about" questions on your mind. Let's start with some of the most frequently asked questions about conflict from participants in our training and keynote programs. If you have more, head to our Conflict and Collaboration Resource Center and drop us a note. If there's anything we want to encourage, it's speaking up and talking about your concerns.

Powerful Phrases, really? I'm skeptical. You can't script this stuff.

There are many guides out there that claim to offer you a script for an entire conversation. Which of course won't work because: human beings. Every workplace conflict has nuance. You can't know exactly what you'll show up to or what the other person will say next.

We also know how many times our clients have asked us to "please just give me the exact words I can use." And those words, many of them based on the "advice for myself" component of our research, work like magic—repeatedly, across industries, with people at all levels of the organization, all over the world. But these aren't conversation scripts. They're Powerful Phrases that open the door for a meaningful conversation.

So, you're right, in that there are almost no "perfect words" for every situation except maybe "thank you," "I apologize," and "do *not* put that up your nose" (an unusual Powerful Phrase that rarely works but must still be said. Or shouted. Usually after it's too late). Apart from those, it's what the words *do* that matter most—not the words themselves. What the words do is carry meaning, create change, and build relationships by opening the door to a meaningful conversation.

The Powerful Phrases you'll find in this book are words you *can* use exactly as written, if that's comfortable for you. We will also give you the reasons they work and the intent behind them. So, when they don't fit your personality or the situation exactly, you can adapt and find your own Powerful Phrase that carries the same meaning, creates the changes, and builds the relationship. (And when you do, we'd love to hear it. Please share it with us in the Resource Center.)

In chapter 3 you'll learn how to navigate the four dimensions common to most conflict conversations. As you read through any Powerful Phrase in this book, we invite you to consider how the other person might respond, and then how you can respond to guide the conversation through these four dimensions.

I'm so tired of "I" statements, sandwich methods, and that nonsense. It doesn't work.

There's a lot of traditional workplace communication wisdom that gets passed on but makes little sense—or just plain won't work in different scenarios. Most of these suggestions improved what came before and helped in their time. Unfortunately, time has stolen their power, and these old standbys are often punch lines (for good reason).

"I" statements and sandwich feedback are two examples. And if you're unfamiliar with these, don't worry. You won't find them here because they're too easily misunderstood and misused. But before we dismiss these two bits of feedback history, here's a quick look at where they came from and when they're useful.

First, the old-school "I" statement. This is where you don't talk about the other person. Instead, you focus on your experience, starting with an "I" statement. Something like, "I am frustrated, my team can't get our work done, and we can't get you the funding when we don't have your data."

The value of the "I" statement is that it focuses on your experience. And there's a ton of research that suggests starting a feedback conversation with your experience is a good idea.[1] The problem comes because most people just remember the "I" part of the statement and not the intent behind it. So, they say things like "I can't believe you're being such a jerk!"

Well, technically, that begins with "I"—but really, it's still about the other person. And then, when they try to fix it, the sentence contorts into something that would give your high school writing teacher nightmares: "I can't believe that you, uh, I mean, I feel like you're a big jerk. Wait. I want you to stop

being such a jerk. Nope, that's not it. Ugh. Okay, how about I just want you to leave me alone, let me get my work done, and stop being such a jerk? Okay?"

The other feedback technique that people love to hate is called sandwich feedback. You've got something potentially difficult to say, so rather than just say it, you sandwich it. Good-bad-good.

People not-so-lovingly refer to this as a sh** sandwich. Great alliteration, but not so useful for meaningful conversations. The sandwich has two problems when you use it to start a conversation. First, your message gets lost. The person focuses on one compliment and misses the meaningful middle. The second problem is that the sandwich feels insincere and manipulative. "She said something nice. Great, what did I do wrong this time?"

Now, when someone *asks you* for your feedback, yes, reinforce something they're doing well and give them an idea to work on. Otherwise, save the sandwiches for lunch. We'll avoid the confusion and lost opportunities in these techniques and give you some easier ways to open the conversation in chapter 4.

My [boss/coworker/customer] is a psychopath. There's nothing I can do that's going to help.

Ouch. We're sorry to hear the situation is that bad. And you are not alone. We've heard so many stories of conflict with managers in the WWCCS. We want to encourage you to know that there is hope. Many times, we can talk ourselves into helplessness and feel like a victim of circumstances before we try having a conversation and asking for what we want.

It's easy to create stories about the other person and wonder how they could be so clueless, selfish, or inconsiderate, when really, they're just doing the best they can. Our conversation creates a chance for change. Nothing changes if you stay silent.

True, you can speak up and the circumstances might not change. But you still come out ahead in three ways. First, you have developed your skill and courage. Both improve with practice. The next time you need to have a conversation like this, you'll be more ready for it.

The second benefit is that you may learn something you didn't know. Maybe that person isn't inconsiderate. Maybe they have a competing set of priorities you didn't understand (and yes, there's a Powerful Phrase for that—see chapter 12). The third change when you learn nothing new, and circumstances don't change, is that now you have real data about your workplace and you learn that it may not be a good fit for you. Sometimes removing yourself is the best solution (see chapter 7 for more). Now you know.

Expert Insight: Liane Davey

Should you mind your own business when you see conflict on your team? In most cases, the answer is no. So, how can you justify poking your nose in?

First, if there is a conflict that is affecting your team or affecting your company, I would argue that it is your business. When your boss is unwilling to prioritize, it's you that must stretch yourself across too many projects. When your teammates are passive-aggressive, it's you who must deal with the unresolved issues and the inefficient work-arounds. When individuals fail to

stand up for themselves, it's you who must listen to their pessimistic views on the world. The majority of conflict on your team becomes your business.

A second reason to ignore the "mind your own business" mantra is that you might actually be in a much better position to help with the conflict if you aren't directly involved.

I first started thinking about this when I heard parenting expert Barbara Coloroso talk about the Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander. It's research that shows that bullying is a dynamic among three parties. We all wish the bully would behave differently and we hope the bullied will stand up for himself, but the person with the best chance to end bullying in the moment is the bystander.

The same is true in teams. I use different terms, but the idea is the same. There are certainly wicked people (or at least people who behave wickedly). There are also wounded people; the ones who feel victimized and are beyond doing anything to make the situation better. In these situations, it's the witness—the one with some emotional distance—who has the best chance to intervene constructively.

—Liane Davey, author of *The Good Fight: Use Productive Conflict to Get Your Team and Organization Back on Track*

I can't change an entire culture by myself—does everyone in my workplace need to read this to make it work?

Yes, everyone needs to read this book. Please contact us for bulk discounts.

Just kidding. Sort of.

While we would love everyone at work to read and use these Powerful Phrases, you can absolutely use them on your own, whether or not the other person knows them. We will walk you through the process of conflict conversations, give you the words to use, and explain the reasons to use them. These aren't hacks or manipulations. They always maintain the dignity and humanity of everyone involved. And yes, when the other person also knows these techniques, you'll both be able to work through meaningful conflict more quickly.

There are so many Powerful Phrases in this book. How can I possibly remember them all and use them when I need them?

Short answer: you can't remember them all (unless you're Italian Andrea Muzii, current World Memory Champion) and you don't need to. Use the book as a reference and plan your strategy. If you want to memorize a few Powerful Phrases, the twelve greatest of all time in chapter 3 will serve you well.

II

GETTING STARTED
Practical Approaches for
Every Workplace Conflict

3

Start Here
The Four Dimensions of Constructive Conflict

"Be the bigger person and talk about it."

—Nonbinary, 37, South Africa

We've established that you can't script influence and we can't possibly give you a phrase for every single workplace conflict. But no matter what conflict you face, there will always be four dimensions that will make it productive. Every Powerful Phrase in this book addresses one of these dimensions. And, when you run into a challenging situation or coworker conflict that's not in the book, you can start with one of these four dimensions to figure out what to say next. Let's look at each one and how it shows up in your conflicts.

The Four Dimensions of Constructive Conflict

1. Connection—Do we know one another as human beings?
2. Clarity—Do we have a shared understanding of success?
3. Curiosity—Are we genuinely interested in other perspectives and what's possible?
4. Commitment—Do we have a clear agreement?

1. Connection—Do We Know One Another as Human Beings?

Workplace conflict always involves people—and every conflict gets easier the more you know one another, understand one another's perspectives, and see one another as human beings. Imagine that you're in a clash with a coworker named Joe. You've come together to talk about it. Joe opens the conversation with a Powerful Phrase: "I really care about you and this project, and I'm confident we can find a solution we can all work with."

Well, if Joe's basically a good guy, who got you out of a bind last year when your little boy was sick . . . and, oh yeah, just last week he told your boss you're a rock star at pivot tables (that sure was nice of him), that's a solid way for Joe to start the conversation. You might think, "Well, I'm frustrated, but come to think of it, Joe always seems fair. Let me listen to what he has to say. He's right. I bet we can work this out."

Now imagine the same conflict, different Joe. This Joe recently threw you under the bus and took credit for your work. Oh yeah, and last week he laughed at your idea during the staff meeting. In front of your boss and all the people. Now, if Joe starts the conversation the same way, by saying, "I really care about you and this project . . ." you might think, "Nice try, Joe, but that's a hard stop. I don't trust you."

That's the power of connection. The more connection you can build before you need it, the easier conflict becomes. And yeah, for many people, connection feels challenging right now because of lingering pandemic hangover, hybrid or remote work, and cross–time zone teams. As you seed the ground for easier collaboration, influence, and trust, one of the best things you can do is get to know the people you work

with as people, not just their function. Treat them with dignity and be trustworthy. It takes extra time, but you'll earn it back many times over when you work through conflict. If you've not invested in the relationship, or the other person doesn't trust your intentions, even the most carefully chosen words will fall flat.

And speaking of connection—there's one more person to connect with: you. Constructive conflict requires you to know your values, your goals, what you need, and what you want. You'll see several connection Powerful Phrases throughout the book that ask you to connect to yourself.

2. Clarity—Do We Have a Shared Understanding of Success?

Think about any significant conflict you have now or had in the past. We're willing to bet that the source of that conflict includes an expectation violation. You thought they'd clean up their coffee mugs after the meeting. They thought the magic coffee mug fairy would take care of it. Everyone carries around expectations of one another. And sometimes, you don't even know you have an expectation until someone doesn't live up to it. So, the second dimension of constructive conflict is to get on the same page: create clarity about outcomes and expectations.

One of the common mistakes we see people make in workplace conflict is that they don't clearly understand what success looks like. So, you get conversations like this:

Jack: "I don't like this."
Jill: "Okay, what would you like to see happen?"
Jack: "I don't know. I'm not sure what I want."

Can you feel the frustration? That's a conversation that can't go anywhere. (And before you feel bad when you show up like Jack . . . listen, we do it too.)

When you get clear for yourself and help other people find their clarity, *now* you can have a more productive conflict conversation.

3. Curiosity—Are We Genuinely Interested in Other Perspectives and What's Possible?

One of the fastest ways to get to the root cause of a workplace conflict is to show up genuinely curious about the other person's perspective. Your sincere curiosity helps people feel seen and gives you a better understanding of what it will take to solve a problem.

This is often the hardest part of constructive conflict because you have your point of view for a reason. It's hard to be curious when you feel angry or disrespected. And yet . . . the cool thing about curiosity is that when you ask a good question, it automatically helps pull you out of that reactivity. It's hard to be angry and genuinely curious at the same time.

Now you might think, "Oh, I'm curious all right. I want to know, 'What's wrong with them? How can they be so freakin' stupid?'" Those are questions, of course, but they are extensions of your frustration and won't help you understand the other person's point of view. And that's why we specify *good* questions. Questions that increase understanding. That help you build on another's ideas. Questions with answers that make you say, "Huh, you know, I never thought of it that way." And we'll give you plenty of these effective curiosity questions throughout the book.

4. Commitment—Do We Have a Clear Agreement?

One of the most frustrating aspects of workplace conflict conversations is that it seems like they'll never end. As you connect, get curious, and build on one another's suggestions, your conversation needs to produce action, or nothing changes. And if nothing changes, it's *worse* than if you never had a conversation. Now you've wasted time, trust drips away, and people lose hope. Commitment is the answer and the key to move you from words to action.

There are two keys to a useful commitment. The first is to get specific. You want specific actions with specific owners who have specific finish lines. The second key to an effective commitment is to schedule a time to review your agreement. Let's look at an example.

Say you have a peer you rely on for data, let's call him Don. And the two of you are in conflict because Don's not giving you the reports you need for your team members to do their jobs. You have a friendly conversation, and because Don's team is drowning in work, you agree your team will request the data only once a week.

That's good so far, but that's not a commitment. You still need specific actions, specific owners, and specific finish lines, with a specific time to review your commitment. So, you build the following agreement: This Friday, you will explain the new process to your team. Your team members will get data requests to Don's team by 3:00 p.m. on Tuesday. Don will explain the new process to his team at their meeting tomorrow morning. Don's team will supply the requested data on Wednesdays by noon. You and Don will meet in two weeks on Monday at 4:30 p.m. to see how it's going.

The specificity makes it clear what everyone will do. You don't leave it up to good intentions. The follow-up meeting makes it more likely that you will both keep your commitments, and it creates time to deal with the inevitable challenges that will disrupt your new plan.

The Greatest of All Time (GOAT) Powerful Phrases

Now, you might be thinking, "Okay: Connection, Clarity, Curiosity, and Commitment, I get it. They're important. But how do you do these in the middle of a conflict?" That's a good question. We've got you.

Enter Powerful Phrases. Throughout the book, you'll get specific phrases that will help build connection, establish clarity, cultivate curiosity, and create commitments in many specific conflict scenarios. But what if you had go-to Powerful Phrases that you could use in almost any situation? That would be helpful, right? We've chosen twelve go-to, all-purpose Powerful Phrases that are the GOAT (greatest of all time) because you can use them in many different conflict conversations. There are three for each of the dimensions of constructive conflict.

The Twelve Greatest of All Time Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Workplace Conflict

CONNECTION

1. "I care about (you, this team, this project) and I'm confident we can find a solution we can all work with."

2. "Tell me more."

3. "It sounds like you're feeling ___, is that right?"

CLARITY

4. "What would a successful outcome do for you?"

5. "Let's start with what we agree on."

6. "What I'm hearing you say is _____. Do I have that right?"

CURIOSITY

7. "I'm curious how this looks from your perspective?"

8. "What do you suggest we do next?"

9. "What can I do to support you right now?"

COMMITMENT

10. "What's one action we can both agree to as a next step?"

11. "To recap, we've agreed to ___. Is that your understanding?

12. "Let's schedule time to talk about this again and see how our solution is working."

CONNECTION
These phrases help you start a human-centered conversation:

1. "I care about _____ (you, this team, this project) and I'm confident we can find a solution that we can all work with."

Acknowledge the challenge, your difference of opinions, and your confidence that you can work through it together. If your past behavior makes this statement questionable, you'll want to add a sincere apology as you state your intent for your future relationship.

2. "Tell me more."

Nothing builds connection like being seen, and this Powerful Phrase gets there in just three words. See the sidebar for more.

Expert Insight: Justin Jones-Fosu

"Tell me more."

These three words provide context and help you better understand what people are saying—and what they mean by what they say. When we don't understand context, we make our own conclusions. That is catastrophic.

"Tell me more" helps you listen deeply and lessens the chance of conflicts based on misunderstandings. In a conflict conversation or a conversation with people who differ from you, you can use this kind of follow-up question once or twice to get past the surface question and into what's real for that other person.

—Justin Jones-Fosu, CEO of Work. Meaningful. and author of *The Inclusive Mindset: How to Cultivate Diversity in Your Everyday Life*

3. "It sounds like you're feeling _____. Is that right? [pause for affirmation]. Thank you for letting me know how you feel."
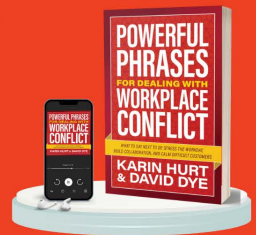
This Powerful Phrase is a tried-and-true relationship-building technique called "reflect to connect." When you "reflect to connect," you're not agreeing with what they've said or telling them you agree with their emotion. Rather, you're acknowledging how they feel. You see them. When you reflect, you create a common starting place for the conversation.

When they know you've seen and heard them, it diffuses some of the emotional intensity and builds a connection that allows you to move to constructive next steps. Checking in with the other person to validate their feelings can also help de-escalate a conflict at any point in the conversation.

Here's an example of this one in use: "It sounds like you're really frustrated with the lack of response from marketing and that's draining your motivation. Do I have that right?"

"Buy a copy for every co-worker you interact with.
It's that essential. The 12 GOATS alone are
worth the cost of the book."

—**Seth Godin,** Author *The Song of Significance*

**The essential guide to master any workplace conflict with confidence
and ease, have less drama, better results, and thrive at work.**

In many workplaces today, conflict is an escalating issue. The shift to remote work and hybrid
teams has left many people longing for deeper human connection. On top of this, add a younger
generation clamoring for more feedback and impatient for change, steady advances in technology
that can feel threatening to job security, or people reexamining priorities and quietly quitting. Take
the increase in anxiety, stress, and depression, mix in the loss of human relationships, and you
get less tolerance and understanding leading, ultimately, to more unresolved workplace conflict.

Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Workplace Conflict is an essential resource for all employees
(and their managers) who are looking for help on how to navigate frequent workplace conflicts,
including with their boss and other difficult people, so they can rebuild trust, collaboration, and
ultimately enjoy more influence at work.

Leadership and workplace culture experts Karin Hurt and David Dye share practical and easy-to-
follow tactics such as:

- Over 300 actual phrases you can use to deescalate common workplace conflict situations,
  build trust, and make better decisions.

- Clear examples and explanations of how phrasing will improve interactions.

- Critical communication tools to ensure workplace issues are addressed before they fester
  and become more difficult to manage.

- Findings, real-world cases, and inspiring stories from the World Workplace Conflict and
  Collaboration Survey of 5000+ people in more than 45 countries conducted by the authors.

KARIN HURT and **DAVID DYE** help human-centered leaders find clarity in uncertainty,
drive innovation, and achieve breakthrough results. As CEO and President of Let's Grow
Leaders, they are known for practical tools and leadership development programs that stick.
They've worked with leaders on every continent (except Antarctica) through their leadership
development programs, executive strategic planning, and keynote presentations. They are the
award-winning authors of five books including *Courageous Cultures: How to Build Teams of
Micro-Innovators, Problem Solvers and Customer Advocates.*