

RELATIONSHIP ROADMAP: THROUGH CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION

A Practical Guide To Peace And Productivity
In Your Workplace



Play Nice in the SANDBOX

with Penny Tremblay

Build **Productive, Peaceful and Profitable** Relationships at Work

Relationship Roadmap:

Through Workplace Conflict to Collaboration

A Practical Guide for **Managers and Supervisors** for Peace and Productivity

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There is only one way through conflict and that’s through it; not around it, over it or under it. Sorry to tell you that in the first sentence. People think that “Playing Nice in the Sandbox” is all fun and games, but sometimes there’s a sandstorm, and someone’s gotta be “king or queen of the castle” and take action before the dust will settle.

Most people avoid conflict because it has an awkwardness or discomfort about it. Even the word itself sounds like ‘combat’, but the truth is that healthy teams and partnerships embrace conflict because it makes them stronger.

This roadmap will walk you through the process from conflict to collaboration step by step. Although every conflict is unique, this guide will help you understand and stay the course so you can emerge knowing that you tried your best.

People don’t often quit jobs...they quit managers or teams and leave toxicity for something healthier. Conflict costs corporate North America approximately 359 billion dollars each year, and the stress from mismanaged relationships is the number one reason for mental health issues resulting in lost time from work.

Have no fear, this roadmap is here. These 8 steps will help you PLAY NICE when the going gets tough.

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Step 1 - Position Yourself for Success

Congratulations, you have authority! Maybe you've just been promoted, or you've been directing your organization's human resources like a traffic cop with 8 arms. The common denominator that those with authority must stand in, is their **posture**. Repositioning yourself from a colleague of a work team to a leader or supervisor poses problems when the new manager doesn't stand strong in the new role. Yes, it's difficult to supervise those who used to be 'friends'. It's a tough job but someone's got to do it, and because of your promotion, that someone is you. Step into role and take the reins, but check your ego at the door. It will get you in trouble. Put your humble hat on and seek to understand, guide and support; rather than to rule. King or queen of the castle is just a figure of speech.

I always say, you can't build a castle on quicksand, meaning that you've got to be solid. Personal leadership is foundational to professional development. This is thinking 'inside the box', which is probably the most useful posturing work you'll ever invest in. Using books, audio, attending seminars and education to get a regular dose of leading yourself, and working on your inner strength will increase your self-worth and confidence.

Keep in mind that no matter what the circumstance or conflict, you have the ability to choose your response to it. Know that you are response-able. Your behavior is a choice. You get to decide what you want, and then act accordingly. (Sounds so easy on paper, but it's difficult because when our emotions get rocked, we usually forget all logic and act from our reptile brain that wants to fight, flight or freeze.) If you have a clear vision of what you want, and you envision it often (daily), then you're very likely to create it. Be response-able, humble, and stand strong in your vision of how you see this role of leadership.

Step 2 - Lighten Your Load

The most stressful part of being in conflict or building up to a challenging conversation is before you begin to move through the resolution stage. Talking

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about it is less stressful than spinning in it, because your mind will spiral off on many trails of thought which evoke emotions, based on fear. (Fear is most often False Experiences Appearing Real). It takes a lot of energy to conjure up all those fear-based guesses of what the real issues even are, so until you get talking about it with the right person(s), you're spinning and stressed. The best person to talk about it with, is the person that you're having conflict with. If you don't feel safe or prepared to do that, reach out to a trusted professional, HR manager, or someone who will help you develop a plan of action.

Invite the other party to the conversation. "Can we talk?" is the easiest approach. Your goal is to get them to the conversation, so choose friendly words and an inviting voice tone. I used to say "We need to talk" And it got me nowhere. Simple as well, but it sounded more like an order than an invitation. Here are some other options:

"I have an idea that I think will help us work together more effectively."

"I'd like to talk about _____ with you to get your point of view."

"Do you have a few minutes to chat? I need your help with what just happened."

"I think we have different perspectives on _____ and I'd like to hear your thoughts on this."

"Would you agree to talk with me about _____ until we find solution that we both feel good about?"

When you do get the chance to talk, try to listen and speak (in that order if possible) from the present, not the past. We all have old programming and attachment to old experiences, unresolved conflict, emotions and stories (mostly fiction) that we bring to current time. I call this your 'suitcase' and it comes with us where ever we go. Make sure that you're listening and speaking from the present situation, and not from an old wound or story. I've had oodles of workplace conflict resolution assignments where people get clear on how the stories of their past are limiting their potential.

While doing a two-day workplace restoration circle with a health centre team, I noticed a quiet woman, Charlene, listening and attentive, but not speaking up. On the second day, she arrived with such enthusiasm to share the results of her

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homework. When Charlene was seven years old, her father, one of her most trusted protectors and teachers, quickly tapped her mouth with the back of his fingers to shush her. Charlene couldn't remember why or what she had said or any of the details, other than ... from that day forward, she stopped talking.

When Charlene came to understand what was in her suitcase...what she was packing around all these years that was preventing her from speaking up, her transformation was instant. She realized she was speaking and listening from a 7-year-old perspective, but she was 49! Just in the realization; the unpacking of what was holding her back, she stepped into present time thinking with a renewed perspective. Within a few weeks, Charlene applied for and was promoted to the organization's general manager position that extended far beyond her department, to lead a team of several departments.

Lighten your load by talking about issues as they arise, with the people involved, and also by paying attention to the way you're showing up or not showing up to present situations. Most of the work involved in conflict resolution is an inside job. The good news is...you're in the driver's seat, and you get to live out that vision of yours.

Step 3 - *Actively Listen*

When people come together to have difficult conversations, they tend to be thinking more about what they're going to say, versus what they're going to learn. Active listening gets you in the mindset that you are seeking to understand the situation from the other person's perspective, and then you can feedback what you heard so that they can learn what you understood. Period. Simple. But...Not easy. Trust me, this works. If you have the chance to be the first listener, take it! Say nothing, hear everything, including what is not being said (feelings, behavior) and then tell the person what you understood them to say. Here's how I do it. While they're talking, I am focused on them, making eye contact, nodding or gesturing that I am with their every word. When they're finished talking, I say "If I understood you correctly, you think that...or you feel that..." They feel relief when they feel understood. You'll be the king or queen of the conversation for being the listener who focuses on the facts and is seeking to understand the other person's perspective without making it about you... yet, you'll get your chance to talk after you understand them. This is sometimes where I see a conflict dissolve. Poof! People feel understood, and sometimes that's enough.

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They say that there are three sides to every story. My side, their side and the right side. There's some merit to that. I call it *the third story*. To listen while in conflict, you almost have to take yourself out of character so you can filter the emotions from the facts. Try finding the third story by thinking about how things would look from the perspective of the teacher at the youngster's sandbox. She's impartial, neutral and is helping kids sort out issues based on facts.

Listening from an objective (hard facts) posture rather than a subjective (personal perspective) posture will be beneficial to guide the dance through conflict to cooperation.

Step 4 – Yield to Your WHY

Is this issue worth the energy? If it's keeping you up at night, renting space in your head, or percolating inside you like an old pot of coffee, then yes! Decide whether you're going to address the issue or not. Is it a big deal? Can you let it go? Should you let it go? You may want to think about it from the professional standards or ethical framework of your profession. Is this against the integrity of who we are and what we stand for?

Get to your WHY. Why does it matter to you? What value is causing you discomfort and ultimately, driving you into action. 'Why power' is stronger than will power. Leveraging this *WHY* power can create a sense of obligation to speak up.

Also, helping all those involved understand 'why' the issue is important is valuable. People (especially Millennial and Centennial generations) are curious to know the bigger picture of how their roles and behaviours matter in the grand scheme of things.

You're halfway there already PLAY is done! Now, onto NICE ...

Step 5 - Nurture Relationships

It's easy (and important) to nurture relationships when things are going well, but what about when they're not? We can still find the good in people or circumstances if we look for it. Try looking back on the relationship before the conflict and recall respect back into the present. There is a big difference between people and

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problems. Looking for the good qualities and respect for people, helps us gain momentum toward finding solutions.

When preparing for or in a challenging conversation, take inventory of the things you agree on, and the things you don't agree on (Don't draw a line to separate these lists...I made that mistake while role playing and learning mediation techniques at Harvard. The instructors helped me see that the line was representing a division, which was contrary to my goal).

Use the inventory of agreements as momentum that you 'agree' on some things. Those are openings. Look for the openings while you are communicating. Better yet, create them by giving a little bit, admitting to a mistake, or moving toward the other party's views or ideas in some way.

Step 6 - Include Everyone Involved

When teammates are in conflict with each other, they may not have the skills to resolve it on their own. If they need help, invite them to a conversation with you (their manager) and guide them through the same strategy that I've provided you with in the PLAY section above. Tell them they'll have a fair opportunity to speak and listen to each other. Be vigilant on the active listening part. If someone starts talking when they should be listening, remind them to let the other person finish what they have to say first, and then guide them to share what was understood to complete the first person's turn, before they take theirs.

Once people are feeling understood because they've been heard, you can move toward making new commitments. Consensus means that a general agreement has been reached. Even if you don't agree with the group, you go along with the consensus.

Inclusion for collaboration will provide epic results when you gather people together to brain storm or give input on ideas because people value feeling 'in on things'. When I do team work for improving morale, solving problems or turning a toxic culture around, I use a circle format. I get all people who are involved to join in, no one is left out, the process is mandatory participation and we have authentic conversations. Invite the team to co-create a plan to work better together.

Inclusion is the new sexy. Can the workplace be sexy? Sure...in the interest of 'stylish', it can be 'sexy'. Workplaces that include the diversity of generations,

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cultures, personality styles, genders, morals, values are those that will attract and retain employees.

Step 7 - Challenge Conflict

If you've followed the steps, you've already challenged conflict by embracing it and moving through it. Sometimes, we have tougher knots to untangle, but it's worth the effort to try harder if things are more challenging.

When my kids were toddlers and preschoolers, mealtime was not peaceful. There was conflict because I wanted them to eat what the adults were eating, and they wanted what they wanted. There was a revolt. I won, or shall I say, we ended up with a win/win. I adopted the 3-bite rule. I made one meal, and they had to try 3 honest bites. If they didn't like it, they didn't have to eat anymore but there was no substitute. They learned to eat everything the adults were eating within a short time. Relationships can use the same approach. I know we're not eating our teammates but sometimes they're tough, sour or downright bitter! Try 3 bites before you give up, and if you really want to improve your sandbox factor, try 3 more! Three bites is not 30 bites. As Kenny Rogers says, "you gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em". Don't be afraid to set boundaries for yourself of what you will and won't accept from others who aren't adapting to your attempts to get along. Let people know that you're interested in a respectful relationship, and that when they're ready to meet you in that place, your door is open.

Follow through with commitments that are made for change. Employees want boundaries, they want managers to manage poor performance or hold people accountable for change and commitments. Back to my preschoolers...had I not held down that 3-bite rule through the uncomfortable period of change, I wouldn't have had the results.

Follow up sessions are always a part of my process with work teams. They need time to implement, and time to gather again and recalibrate, to get back on track.

Don't be afraid to agitate people to get the results that you need. Agitate means to 'set into motion'. Sometimes the greatest gifts come in the most uncomfortable wrapping paper. You can agitate respectfully by setting boundaries and asking people if they can commit to them, and by supporting them along the way with check-in points. They'll know you care when you have approached it with a willingness to help them.

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Step 8 - *Empathize*

Humans are human. We have ups and downs, good points and not so good points. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, but it's difficult to empathize with the large part of someone that you don't even know or see. Someone in your workplace is like seeing the tip of an iceberg. You see what they want you to see above the surface, but underneath there is probably a huge part of them that you don't know. Everyone is fighting a tough battle, beyond what you may see or know because intimacy (seeing that deep into someone) isn't necessarily a part of workplace relations.

For the need to be perfect in the eyes of other people, we often put on a façade, or build walls to protect ourselves. When we erect walls, people can't get in, and we can't get out. Vulnerability is very attractive. People connect with reality. Reality TV is the rage right now. People want to see into the lives of humans because that's where they connect.

If you want to see more of others, don't be afraid to be vulnerable yourself. I've witnessed hundreds of workplace conflict resolutions unfolding because people just got real honest with each other, and shared their imperfect selves.

One of the biggest obstacles to connection in workplaces today is technology. The more connected we are with keyboards and screens, the more disconnected we're becoming as a human race. When the subject matter is fragile, when there is even a whiff of conflict in the air or the conversation, that's a big clue that you need to get face to face or on the phone at minimum and let the magic of human connection do its work.

You've Got This!

Use this roadmap to move through conflict toward improved cooperation and collaboration in your workplace. Every conflict is unique. Communication is an art, not a science so don't expect perfection. Just keep trying with more face-to-face interactions based in good posture rooted in your WHY power!

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Relationships are important. There are times when entanglements require intervention. Reach out to an HR person, Conflict Resolution Specialist, or Mediator. I am enthusiastic and interested in helping you restore your workplace to peace and productivity. Call me if you need help because your greatest leadership day is with Penny Tremblay.



I've made it easy to **book a discovery call** with this link to my calendar.
<https://bookme.name/PennyTremblay/lite/30-min-discovery-call>
I'm looking forward to listening!

Penny Tremblay

Workplace Relationships Expert

Founder of *The Sandbox System™ A Playful Approach to Relationship Management & Conflict Resolution*

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