



Conflict resolution: Why it's no fairy tale

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The Joy of Conflict Resolution

By Gary Harper

New Society Press,

194 pages, \$21.95

Crucial Confrontations

By Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny,

Ron McMillan and Al Switzler

McGraw-Hill, 284 pages, \$24.95

Gary Harper begins his book on conflict resolution with three fairy tales -- one of a beautiful princess, an evil dragon and the noble prince who saves her, and two others from the modern workplace.

The link is that the fairy tales of our youth play a crucial role in the conflicts we face today in the office. They promote a simplistic, black-and-white world of conflict with larger-than-life characters.

Unfortunately, the "drama triangle" of victim, hero and villain is a psychological barrier to resolving real-life conflicts.

The victim, naturally, is us -- under attack, powerless and inclined to withdraw, although quite willing to accept sympathy.

"By playing the victim, we also absolve ourselves of responsibility," he writes.

"After all, we are innocent and the conflict is not our fault. Rather than meeting the situation head-on, we justify inaction by telling ourselves that the other person is the one who needs to change."

Sometimes, we shift into hero mode to protect ourselves, defend our interests and even the score. It's a lovely role: courageous, selfless, noble -- dramatically seeking justice.

Of course, the darker side is that we can become self-righteous, manipulative and controlling, and our efforts generally sputter ineffectively, heightening the conflict.

We have no difficulty determining the villain when we find ourselves in conflict.

But the important point, Mr. Harper stresses, is that villains actually view themselves as the victim in the conflict, and perhaps a hero determined to fight back.

The key to resolving conflict is to transcend the drama triangle, becoming partners with the other individual in a patient, creative search for a solution.

"This doesn't mean 'splitting the difference.' It means telling them our story (in a way they will be able to hear it) and listening to their story with curiosity. Such open communication fosters mutual understanding. This understanding provides a bridge over which we can exit the drama triangle and enter the circle of resolution," Mr. Harper writes.

Mr. Harper illustrates how to seek solutions, using examples from a fictional workplace that show how to sidestep defensiveness, as well as handle anger and probe the depths of conflict with a curious, open, communicative manner.

While his book is valuable and instructive, I found myself more drawn for solutions to *Crucial Confrontations*, which offers a step-by-step model for putting those ideas into action and resolving the broken promises, violated expectations and bad behaviour that force us to confront others.

It starts by making sure that you are dealing with the right violation -- which can be difficult, when a bundle of them are tied together or when, as you start to confront the other person, another, worse offence occurs.

Before opening your mouth, you need to get your head right, since your behaviour in the first few seconds of an interaction sets the tone for everything that follows.

The difficulty is that you have already developed judgmental stories in your mind about what the other person has been doing that may be based on wrong assumptions and certainly won't open you up to a constructive discussion.

To overcome that tendency, you have to remind yourself of the humanity of the other individual by asking yourself: "Why would a reasonable, rational and decent person do that?" That will help you gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances.

Throughout the confrontation, you have to ensure safety of the other person, signalling from the start this is not an attack but a discussion in search of a mutual solution. That involves calmly stating the gap between expected and actual behaviour, as well as indicating your respect for the other person and your mutual purpose in needing to solve the problem.

It helps to apply a process the authors call "contrasting" -- assuring the person what the conversation is not intended to do. For example, "I'd like to come up with a simple solution that won't add to your burden." Finally, you close with a question, genuinely seeking their explanation for the situation.

That's just a sample of how the authors guide you through the pitfalls of such conversations. In the foreword, management guru Tom Peters suggests the authors deserve the Nobel prize for discovering the DNA of handling the many crucial confrontation needed to be productive in today's workplace.

As always, Mr. Peters is hyperbolic but the book is an excellent take on a vital area of interpersonal relationships. hschachter@globeandmail.ca

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