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ARTICLE **CONFLICT**

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or Cold?

by Mark Gerzon

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To Resolve a Conflict, First Decide: Is It Hot or Cold?

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As a leader, you're going to face conflict. It comes with the territory. But before you try to deal with a conflict, you first need to stop and ask yourself the following question:

Is it *hot* or *cold*?

To help you answer this vital question, consider these two definitions:

Hot conflict is when one or more parties are highly emotional and doing one or more of the following: speaking loudly or shouting; being physically aggressive, wild or threatening; using language that is incendiary; appearing out of control and potentially explosive.

Cold conflict is when one or more parties seem to be suppressing emotions, or actually appear “unemotional,” and are doing one or more of the following: muttering under their breath or pursing their lips; being physically withdrawn or controlled; turning away or otherwise deflecting contact; remaining silent or speaking in a tone that is passively aggressive; appearing shut down or somehow frozen.

Neither of these types of conflict is constructive. Conflicts that are warm — that is, already open for discussion but not inflamed with intense hostility — are far more likely to be productive. So, if you're dealing with cold conflict, you need skills to “warm it up.” If you're dealing with hot conflict, you need skills to “cool it down.”

Conflict resolution, like cooking, works best at the optimal temperature. If too hot, your conflict may explode, burning your deal or causing your relationship to flame out in anger or overt hostility. Cold, and your deal may be frozen, not moving forward at all, or the relationship may become icy with

unexpressed emotions and withheld concerns. As a leader, you want to bring conflict into a temperature zone where it can become useful and productive.

In the twenty years that I've been dealing with conflict professionally, I've operated in both hot and cold settings. In my work with companies, educational institutions, and faith-based organizations in the U.S., I have generally found cold conflict. However, in my work with politicians both in the U.S. and in conflict zones around the world as a UN mediator, I have often dealt with hot conflict. And I've learned firsthand that understanding this hot/cold distinction is a crucial first step before you start trying to act like a mediator in any organization. Once you've made a definitive hot/cold diagnosis, you'll need to understand what some of the dynamics behind each situation might be:

If the conflict is hot: You don't want to bring participants in a hot conflict together in the same room without settings ground rules that are strong enough to contain the potentially explosive energy. For example, if you are dealing with a conflict between two board members who have already attacked each other verbally, you would set clear ground rules — *and obtain agreement to them* — at the outset of your board meeting before anyone has a chance to speak.

Try this approach. Have everyone sit in a circle, and then ask each person to speak in turn with strict limits (e.g. 3 minutes each). Pick a question for everyone to address that requires that they speak about themselves and their own feelings. For example, when I worked with members of the House of Representatives, the question that opened the retreats I designed was: *"How does the way the House deals with its differences affect you and your family personally?"* The result of this sort of question and answer session is an opening round of conversation that avoids personal attacks, allows everyone to speak, and ideally deepens trust before entering more difficult territory.

If the conflict is cold: You can usually go ahead and bring the participants or stakeholders in the conflict together, engaging them in constructive communication. That dialogue, if properly facilitated, should "warm up" the conflict enough so that it can begin to thaw out and start the process of transformation. But you will still need to be vigilant and prepared. Conflict is often cold precisely because so much feeling is being repressed. So you need to skillfully know how to warm it up without the temperature unexpectedly skyrocketing.

Use debate and dialogue. If a group is avoiding tackling a tough issue, frame the difference as a polarized debate. Form two (or, if necessary, more) teams and hold an actual debate. This will accentuate the differences and inspire the group to recognize the conflict that is under the surface.

Whether the conflict is hot or cold, the goal is not compromise, but rather *bridging* the divide and *innovating* new options or solutions. Bridging means creating stronger ties and deeper trust between the former antagonists. Innovating — which is distinct from compromise — means that some new resolution or possibility has emerged.

Conflict resolution isn't something you learn overnight — it takes time, practice, and reflection. If you find yourself in the middle of a conflict and you haven't yet developed the skills to address it, consider bringing in a third party or a professional mediator to help. With that said, if you're reading this in the middle of an intense, immediate conflict that requires urgent action, keep the following advice in mind:

1. Make time your ally. Don't rush to act. Unless you're in danger, take stock of your options. Otherwise you might say or do something you regret.
2. Determine your goal and focus on it. Don't get distracted; stick to what matters.
3. Avoid name-calling and finger-pointing. Focus on the problem, not the people.
4. Beware of self-righteousness. Keep an open mind; you may find that you can learn something of value.
5. Listen to everything, but respond selectively. You don't have to address every point — just the ones that make a difference.
6. Take stock before you take sides. Don't speak — or take any other action — until you've really heard the other person out. Don't leap to conclusions before you have a firm grasp of the situation at hand.
7. Consider calling in a third party. Someone who is not involved in the conflict may be able to provide vital perspective for both parties.
8. Let your adversary know you. Letting down your guard and letting the other person in may help them understand your point of view.
9. Check the temperature gauge. If the conflict is still too hot, don't try to resolve it right away. Agree to come back when things have cooled.
10. Observe the Golden Rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Be polite. Be compassionate. It may inspire your adversary to do the same.

Keep in mind that your ability to navigate conflict is one of the primary ways that you reveal your character as a leader. The best time to learn is when conflict is neither too hot nor too cold. By learning to control the temperature, you make it much more likely that you'll be well positioned to deal creatively with the next conflict that's inevitably coming your way.

Mark Gerzon is the author of [Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences Into Opportunities](#), and is the president of the [Mediators Foundation](#).
