



# Bridging Digital Divides

**Navigating Conflict Online**



Image: [Warren Wong](#)



## Bridging Digital Divides

It's 4.45pm and you're in your last Zoom call for the day. You're tired, work has been busy, and you're ticking things off a little quicker than usual. Seemingly out of nowhere, an argument escalates with your colleague in another country, who is just beginning their workday. While you manage through, you both log off with a heaviness and the situation unresolved. You ask yourself what could you have done differently?

Given how widespread conflict is in the workplace, many of us will have experienced moments like these. In fact, it's said that leaders can spend up to 90% of their time managing disagreements. If unaddressed, conflict can drive teams apart, and 50% of unresolved conflicts lead to resignations<sup>1</sup>. This is an issue we can't simply ignore.

Unfortunately, online work environments make conflict more likely to occur and harder to resolve.

***“It takes both sides to build a bridge.”***

- Frederik Nael

## Why Conflict May Escalate

### Online

Research<sup>5</sup> suggests that conflict among virtual teams can intensify more quickly than in-person teams. We can no longer rely on being in the same room to hash out our issues because our team and business partners are more than likely on the other side of the city, country, or world. When we do speak to them, they may be dealing with issues and challenges that have nothing to do with us, and yet often we have little information to contextualise their situation. Through digital screens, we can't necessarily read body language or recognise situations nearly as well to assess their “VIBE.”

What may, in one moment, appear to be a small grievance, can escalate through conflict contagion<sup>3</sup>, where people take sides and lines are drawn. This may be because “virtual teams featuring high geographical dispersion have higher perceptions of unfairness, which also leads to internal conflict.”<sup>2</sup> This can result in geographical divisions and is an argument for minimising meetings after the meeting. Keep locationally disparate workforces connected and communicating in one place. Evidence reveals that remote teams also suffer from the “online disinhibition effect.”<sup>4</sup> This inclines them to exhibit higher risk taking and show less consideration for others.

So, for us to come together successfully in this new world of remote and asynchronous work life, to build bridges instead of burning them down, how do we need to adapt our behaviour?

## Creating a Constructive

### Conflict Culture

Being strategic can remove a lot of the potential for conflict. Stanford Business School recommends the following general preventative action tips.

- Set clear goals – Expectations are more likely to be met when a team has a clear direction
- Set interdependent tasks – Endorse the idea of relying on each other to get tasks done
- Reward teamwork – Meeting team goals should mean the team is rewarded

With remote teams though, it's critical that they:

- Make time and space for all voices to be heard – It is much easier to overlook or stifle contributions from more reticent employees in virtual interactions
- Use streamlined communication channels e.g. Slack or Teams – Centralise communications to avoid fragmentation and conflict spurring from a lack of context
- Adapt psychological safety practices for the online environment – Consider creating a charter for behaviour and managing conflict
- Recognise that avoidance is a situational tactic – Sometimes it is appropriate and other times it is detrimental

## Negotiating Conflict

Still, even with the best intent and some solid preventative processes in place, conflict may arise. Below are some strategies to navigate well.

### Considerations for Online Environments

When we meet online, we spend more energy trying to interpret meaning because we are missing body language. So it can be helpful to think about where you are positioned on the camera – what might look like a small gesture could seem huge if you are closer to the camera than other colleagues in the room.

Also, think about micro expressions, and how you can look into the camera, rather than to the side where you've got your zoom window. Minimise or hide self-view to create a more natural conversation (your brain is chewing up energy looking at itself on camera, which can cause you to come across less authentically.)

### Tactics to Navigate Constructively

- Slow things down<sup>6</sup> – Take a deep breath before you speak. This will remind you not to talk over someone else or raise your voice and is an indicator that you don't want to fight. When things feel like they're escalating, don't be afraid to pause or speak slowly.
- Affirm intent – It's important to be clear about your positive intent and the mutually positive outcome you are seeking by exploring the issue. Use this intent as a touchstone to remind you both if things become heated.
- Warm up your voice and body language – Try an upward inflection in your voice - this sends a subliminal message that you are open-minded and conciliatory. Whereas downward vocal inflections suggest you are digging in and trying to take charge. Keep your body language open and receptive (nodding, facing toward, offering gestures), rather than closed (arms crossed, eye roll/glaze, facing away).

- Genuinely empathise - Consider their perspective and where they are coming from. Ask questions as much as possible. These should come from a place that belies assumptions and is a sincere attempt to learn more about another person beliefs. You may like to walk the [Experience Cube](#)<sup>7</sup> together - What do you both feel, think, observe, and want in the situation?
- “Yes, and...” or “Yes, but...” - Any small increment of agreement can be used to build a bridge. Validation is very powerful.

### Advanced Tactics

- Try the [Socratic method](#)<sup>8</sup> - This is a way of asking non-accusatory questions that draw out underlying assumptions and ideas, revealing any inconsistencies. This can unearth a deeper understanding of the truth, points of agreement, and lead to more collaborative outcomes. Note: This method can be tricky at first, uncomfortable, and takes a lot of practice.
- If appropriate, [use humour](#)<sup>9</sup> – This can be an effective way to connect with others and defuse a situation. Self-aware or self-deprecating humour, in particular, can de-escalate tension as it cools our in-built threat detectors that gear us up for a fight and reminds the other person of your shared humanity. This tactic should be used sparingly, and works best if deployed early, when first detecting “prickliness”. Remember, “laugh with” not “laugh at”

If all else fails, be open to the possibility of discussion on another day. Sometimes, it’s all about timing.

## Co-create a Conflict

### Charter

Another proactive way to handle tensions in blended working environments is to set up a conflict charter. This should be less a set of rules, and more a roadmap. Though the charter can be tailored to individual team needs, we suggest starting by asking some general questions such as:

- **What conflicts could arise?**
- **How can we frame conflict as an opportunity for better communication? e.g. divergence of opinions can be productive**
- **What boundaries and processes can we put in place to navigate existing tensions and triggers?**
- **How can we practice better perspective taking?**
- **What informal and formal support is available when conflicts are not easily solved?**

When the charter is agreed upon, it is an anchor that the team can refer to and ground themselves in when tensions heighten. The co-creation process is also more likely to engender commitment and buy-in to the rules. Team members will take responsibility for their behaviour as a result of having a shared context and identity.

## Key Takeaway

In every disagreement, it's important to recognise that you're not necessarily right, that changing your mind doesn't diminish you as a person, and that the person you are in conflict with is not bad or evil; they are human and are experiencing their own valid version of reality, just as you are.

Conflict well-handled can have a surprisingly positive impact, sparking creativity, innovation, and energy within the team. What begins as a disagreement, could end up being a blueprint for innovation and positive change.

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