

Changing the Conflict Pattern

An essential task of a leader is to make accurate, objective assessments of their own interactions. Our motto at Change Masters is that *“We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behaviors.”*



We all have filters through which we view others, and so do they. Some filters we're aware of, some we're not. They can be things like your interpretation of the other person, how patient you're feeling that day or whether you like or trust who you're dealing with. Some filters are delivery choices such as vocal tone, visual expression and the words you choose to use. All of these filters color your message and those of the other person.

One error people make in conflict is trying to change the filters of the other person. ***The only filters you can change are your own***. You can't change anyone else's filters but you can influence them. Learning to manage the filters you have absolute control over can help you heal the rift instead of making it worse.

In any conflict communication there is a predictable cycle:

1. Behavior
2. Interpretation of behavior (based on filters)
3. Reaction

In a conflict situation, you can never trust your own interpretation of another's behavior. This is because your assumptions and interpretations of behavior may not be based on all of the facts. For example: While you are presenting an idea during a meeting you see a peer who you've had problems dealing with in the past, roll their eyes. Now, the possibility exists that the other person's reaction has nothing to do with you, but most of us skip that situational possibility and jump straight into what is called ***character flaw thinking***. We make the assumption that the person is disrespectful and blowing us off. With this thinking

pattern, you immediately have a knee-jerk reaction. If respect is your hot button, your reaction to the other person may be *much* larger than the event deserves.

Character flaw thinking is happening if you are labeling the other person's behavior as one of three P's:

- o **Personal**
- o **Permanent**
- o **Pervasive**

Personal character flaws are labels like, "He is so *lazy*", "She is too *stupid* to figure that out", the kinds of things kids say to each other on the playground. (Remember, the average emotional age in the workplace is 13!) **Permanent** character flaws are heard as, "He'll *never* change - you can't teach an old dog new tricks." or "It's *always* going to be nuts around here." **Pervasive** character flaws refer to the all-encompassing nature of the characteristic: "*Every time* he gets stressed he blows up." Or "There are no good managers *anywhere* in this company anymore."

Admit it - you've indulged in character flaw thinking. We all do, because it's fun! It can be temporarily very gratifying to trash someone. But it won't make you very effective as a leader. It keeps you stuck in the rut the relationship has been forever. Let's see how this works in real life conflict situations. Our colleague, Anna Marevalas has adapted this **Cycle of Mistrust** from *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace* by Ryan and Oestreich.

Cycle of Mistrust

- Identify a negative assumption (character flaw) about another person or group.
- What is your self-protection behavior - how do you react?
- How does this behavior appear to the other person?
- What is the negative conclusion they make about you?
- How do they protect themselves from you?
- How do you interpret that behavior?

This cycle is a circle that continues indefinitely, if no one steps out of the pattern. It takes the bigger person to make that change, to be sure. If you can do so, however, you can clear up long term conflict and save yourself a lot of frustration.

To change the pattern of conflict, you'll need to:

- stop the character flaw thinking

EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE/ CYCLE OF MISTRUST

- assess, instead, the **situation** the person is in at present - give them the benefit of the doubt based on that

Go through the above as a **cycle of trust** by first giving the person the benefit of the doubt. As you move through the rest of the cycle, see how your reactions to others change, how your behavior appears to others, and what conclusions they make about you. To give them the benefit of the doubt without violating your values, and get the conflict pattern “unstuck”, focus instead on whether the other person lacks **insight, self-confidence or skill** as a communicator or leader, and how can you help them gain competence in these areas. Now, some people *are* manipulative, have hidden agendas and are only out for themselves, but those people are in the minority. After working with hundreds of business people, we can tell you that most individuals in the workplace lack awareness or skill but have good intentions, and it creates enormous misinterpretations and conflict. Learning to first assess the situation the other person is in instead of instantly assuming the worst will make you far more effective long term in the workplace.
