



# The Look & Sound of Leadership™

Executive Coaching Tips

SINCE 1990

## CONFLICT

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Conflict is inevitable. But most of us were never taught the skills that would help us find our way through the dark corridors of this house called 'Conflict.' This month's coaching conversation illuminates predictable patterns and practical tools to navigate successfully through Conflict House.

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### A house with two doors

Ashley was fed up with two of her direct reports. A bubble of anger between the pair seemed in constant danger of exploding. Their conflict had impacted productivity and quality, and she wanted it to end.

I asked how each direct report approached conflict.

"Nita's thorny," she said. "Very defensive. Accusatory. She's better than she was, but she ain't no buttercup."

She went on. "Jay is an avoider. He'll tell *me* the problem. And I'm pretty certain he talks to others, but he doesn't talk to Nita. He does a lot of pouting and fuming."

"When Jay talks to you, what kind of story is he telling?"

"Oh, it's a big victim story. And she's the big bad wolf."

"And vice versa, I'm guessing."



She laughed. “Oh, yes, she’s got it in for him, too. Hence the conflict!” She shook her head. “So what do I do?”

As if marking the edges of a large box, I spread my hands out on the conference table. “Here’s this thing called conflict. It’s actually a big house. It’s got a name. Conflict House. Like something out of Dickens. Anyone with a conflict has to come to Conflict House and work out their conflict inside.

“Most people enter through the front door over here.” I indicated my outstretched left hand. “This door is marked ‘Right-Wrong.’ When I enter through this door, I know I’m right and the other person’s wrong. It’s powerful.”

“But there’s a *second* door,” she said eagerly.

“Yes,” I agreed, tapping my right hand. “This other door is called ‘Curiosity.’ Not as many people use it, but oh, my, approaching Conflict House through this door makes everything inside so much easier.”

Ashley shook her head. “There’s certainly no curiosity between Nita and Jay. Lots of blaming. Lots of playing the victim. But curiosity? I don’t think so! Is that something I could influence?”

“Sure. Ask questions. That’s where curiosity starts.”

“Questions like what?”

“Three kinds. But wait. I’m getting ahead of myself.”

### **The first of three rooms**

I settled back and changed tone. “What’s great about Conflict House is that everything that happens inside is predictable, because, no matter which of the two doors you come through, once you’re inside, there are only three rooms.

“Regardless of who you have a conflict with, or what your issue is, everything that gets said will happen in one of those three rooms. You and I could watch Jay and Nita, or any random couple, and call it out.



'Oh! They're in room two now.' 'Whoa! She just flipped back to room one.' I'm telling you, you could score a conflict conversation like you were calling balls and strikes. It's not a hard pattern to recognize."

"I love things like this. So what's room one?" she asked.

"Room one is the 'What Happened' conversation. This is where you both try to discover where your stories overlap and where they diverge. And they're going to diverge. If they didn't, you probably wouldn't be in Conflict House."

"Five people, seven opinions. Like that?" she asked with a big grin.

"Right! Disagreeing about 'what happened' is inevitable."

"So the 'what happened' conversation is when you get to make your case for what you think happened."

I nodded agreement with regret. "That's the way the conversation might go if you came in through the 'Right-Wrong' door."

"Did I just do that? Oh, I did. OK, let me see. What would 'what happened' sound like if I were curious? Uh, how about, uh, 'What do you think happened?' How would that be?"

"Sounds pretty curious to me!"

"But do I ever get to make my case?"

"Well, if what you mean is to prove you're 'right,' then no. Ideally *both* people will engage in the 'what happened' conversation. And, ideally, you'll both be curious."

"Even if we don't agree?"

"Agreement isn't the point. Hearing each other is the point. It may be that both versions will have to co-exist – even if they contradict."

"No proving my point?" she asked in exaggerated disappointment.



I laughed. "It's not a wrestling match where one person wins and the other loses. The 'what happened' conversation is a chance to see the other person's perspective."

She laughed. "I actually did this last week with a guy. I don't like this guy very much, so I'm super cautious what I say to him. Well, he told me something had happened that I just couldn't imagine. The instant he said it, I got angry. But because I go so slowly with him, I asked him to explain what he meant. And when I heard his explanation of what happened, I realized there was no issue there at all. I'd thought there was going to be conflict, but it just vanished."

"Because you heard his 'what happened' story?" I asked.

"Yep! Talking about what happened saved me." She smiled. "So what's room number two? Ha! Sounds like a game show. 'I'll take what's behind door number two!'"

### **The second of three rooms**

"Room two is called, 'Feelings.'"

"Ugh! I'm going hate this room." Feelings were not Ashley's forte. She liked things concrete.

I shrugged, saying "If there weren't feelings, you wouldn't be in Conflict House. It's the feelings that turn a normal, everyday conversation into a difficult conversation. Just like it's inevitable in Conflict House that there will be different 'what happened' stories, it's inevitable that there will be feelings. They're going to come out one way or another. It's better to have a conversation about them than act them out."

She smiled. "Can't I just avoid them altogether?"

"Lots of people do," I said. "But some people can't. I was never very good at masking my feelings. People knew when I was upset. But I didn't know how to talk about my feelings. So they just leaked out all over the place. It didn't earn me a lot of respect. I think people felt I was pretty insecure. And I was!"

"Well, Jay's feelings are sure leaking out all over the place," she said. "Nita's, too, in her own way. But I've really had enough of all their feelings. I really don't want to talk about them, Tom."



“But they’re there, Ashley. The feelings are part of what’s keeping Jay and Nita stuck in Conflict House. They’ll get out a lot sooner if you could help them name their feelings.”

“Are you joking? How would I possibly help them name their feelings?”

“Be curious. Ask about them. Feelings exist. They’re real. You can talk about them.”

She was skeptical. “Suppose I do. Suppose Jay tells me that – I don’t know – that he’s pissed. What do I say to that? ‘Thanks for sharing?’”

“You go to room number three,” I said.

“Good! Anything’s better than the ‘Feelings’ room! Well, wait. Maybe I’ll hate this one more. What is it?”

### **The third of three rooms**

“It’s the ‘Identity’ room. Somewhere, somehow, your identity is tied up in all this, which is what landed you in Conflict House in the first place. Identity is the root cause.”

“How do you mean identity? I’m picturing like Diana Prince and Wonder Woman. Like a secret identity.”

“That’s interesting, but I didn’t mean it that way. I meant ‘identity’ as what we think about ourselves. Like, I think I’m a good coach. I think I’m a good dad. What I think about myself.”

She gave a little laugh. “Funny that those are yours. Sometimes what I think about myself sounds pretty critical. ‘I’m an idiot,’ or ‘I should’ve done better’.”

I nodded in understanding, saying, “Whatever we think about ourselves is our identity. And when we sense our identity is threatened, it provokes a feeling. And it’s likely our feelings will skew how we act or how we experience things. And suddenly, boom! we find ourselves in one of these rooms in Conflict House.”

She considered this whole idea. Then she said, “It’s like there’s a connecting door between the ‘Identity’ room and the ‘Feelings’ room. They feed on each other.”



I waited.

“I see it in Jay,” she said. “Nita makes him feel stupid. That’s his identity under attack, right?”

“Sounds like it.”

“And that identity attack immediately puts him into the ‘Feelings’ room, where he gets angry and storms off and pouts.”

She continued, saying, “This explains why, when people get upset, they start talking about things like respect and integrity and honor. It starts with identity – they feel threatened – then they have feelings about things like respect. Sound right?”

I nodded.

She exhaled. “Oh, boy, I can so see myself in that.” Then she shook her head. “But what about Jay and Nita? How do I help them out?”

### **Calling balls and strikes**

“Here are two ideas you might consider,” I offered. “One is to start listening for the three conversations. Just learn to recognize them. So you’d listen and say to yourself, ‘She’s explaining her ‘what happened’ story.’ Or ‘He’s talking about his identity.’ You’ll hear them in a different way.”

“I suppose,” she said, clearly not hearing an answer. “How does that help them?”

“Well, that’s the second idea you might consider. It’s a little technique to use. Once you hear something that sounds like one of the rooms – like, ‘oh, he just made a feeling statement’ – tell them what you think you heard. ‘Gee, Jay, I’m not sure but it sounds like you have strong feelings about what happened.’”

She looked startled. “Could I really say that? I suppose I could. Wow. OK. That seems so simple. That’s the technique? Just say what I hear?”



I nodded again.

She got a frown. “But what do I say when I think it’s an identity statement? ‘Gee, Jay, sounds like your identity is really wrapped up in that?’”

I laughed. “How about something like, ‘I see why this is so important to you.’ Because you do. You see his identity being attacked.”

She nodded. “Am I going to do this with each of them separately?”

“You could.”

“But at some point, will I do this with them together?”

“You might.”

She smiled. “I’ll be the referee, calling balls and strikes, like you said.”

“Maybe,” I agreed.

Then, more seriously, she asked, “But what about when I’m not the referee?”

“How do you mean?”

“What about when it’s *me* in Conflict House? When I’m the one having feelings? What does that sound like?”

That coaching conversation – exploring what positive behavior in Conflict House actually sounds like – is the topic of next month’s installment of [\*The Look & Sound of Leadership\*](#).



### Core Concepts:

- All conflict has recognizable components
- Approach conflict with curiosity, not “right-wrong”
- Listen to each others’ ‘what happened’ story
- Recognize, and name, your own feelings – and the other person’s, too
- Explore where your identity connects to your feelings

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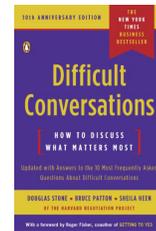
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