

The Cure for Conflict by BJ Mann

When you know a conflict is brewing and dealing with it is inevitable, what do you do?

- A) Twitch?
- B) Stop breathing?
- C) Feel like running away?
- D) Enjoy the learning opportunity?

An informal poll reveals that most people would not choose D. The other choices (and you can add your personal favorite) all have one thing in common: some level of dread.

The amazing thing about conflict is it comes in so many shapes and sizes. Conflict is age, race, resource and gender neutral. It is in fact the great equalizer because virtually nothing is immune from the possibility of conflict. A marriage, a classroom, household chores, the style of a dress, the workplace, an organization, the neighborhood, the list goes on and on. You would think that because it is so common, people might get the hang of dealing with it and yet for the most part it is worse than the common cold, you catch it and you want to get rid of it as fast as you can.

As a Mediator, I am the “doctor” of conflict. And fortunately, there are many more remedies for dealing with conflict than that aching, sneezing, coughing-cold that lingers for days and weeks.

There are two types of conflict and they have slightly different prescriptions for healing. The first is “**The Ambush**” and the second is **The Planned Encounter**.

A typical **Ambush** might begin as follows:

“Why aren’t the dishes done?” The Mom screams at her teenager who is watching T.V.
“Did you finish the client’s report, yet?” The boss greets his employee first thing in the morning.

We have all experienced the Ambush, an attack without warning, that overlays someone else’s agenda on your own. What was your reaction the last time you were ambushed? Most likely it was a very defensive comment or explanation. It’s the way most people protect themselves and it generally adds fuel to the attack or blows the attacker away. What might follow is a heated or a very frustrating conversation. The Ambush often ends with an action that is not very satisfying to either party and may include threats, ultimatums and mutterings.

The prescription for healing the Ambush is three-fold but it has to be taken with discipline and practice. I call it “**The Stop, Drop and Roll of Conflict Resolution**” and it works if you use it. Of course the origin of this phrase is the safety drill instructions if you were to be on fire. Most folks can recite this remedy in an instant. You will likely have more chances to practice the Stop, Drop and Roll of conflict than it’s fire counterpart, so you can not only remember it but you can practice it.

1. The first step is to **STOP**. Don't say a word. Control your brain to stop your tongue from uttering those angry and defensive retorts.
2. The second step is to **BREATHE**. I am talking about 4 or 5 seconds, combined with the "Stop" that lets you reset your emotions. This is like breathing in magic. All that you have ever read about how important breathing is to center yourself is true. It works. I am not talking about big, giant meditation breaths, just an awareness that you are breathing.
3. The third step is to **EMPATHIZE**. If the first words out of your mouth are sincere and calm it will do two things immediately 1) diffuse the anger and 2) start the attacker sharing more about his/her issue. Therefore you will learn more and you will have even more time to collect your thoughts. Next steps are to listen carefully and identify opportunities to resolve the conflict. Which leads to the remedies for the second type of conflict resolution.

The Planned Encounter.

"I'd like to share something with you. Is this a good time to chat?" "Unlike the "Ambush", The Planned Encounter always begins with permission. Both parties have to agree that the time is right to discuss the conflict. From this respectful start, the initiator begins the Five Easy Pieces of conflict resolution.

1. **Opening Statement:** It's neutral and very short. It does not start with "you did or you always or I hate when you" "I noticed that the dishes are accumulating from yesterday. That is really bothering me." Can we revisit what happened yesterday at the manager's meeting? It seemed that when I started to speak you interrupted me. I felt stepped on. *Hint:* Be short and do not offer a solution.
2. **Listen and Empathize:** Let the other person comment. Gather information for understanding. Ask what might be possible for the behavior to change. *Hint:* Have the first "solution suggestion" come from the person you are addressing.
3. **Negotiate:** Exchange ideas and build on possible solutions and areas of agreement. Ask for clarification or more details about an idea. See if there is any portion that would work for you. Summarize the possibilities. *Hint:* Avoid words like "but" and "however". Replace these words with the word "and" and you'll notice that you are more accountable for what you are saying.
4. **Agreement:** When agreements emerge be sure to get details and understand the timeframe for implementation. "OK, Mom, I'll do a better job on cleaning my room." What does better mean? When will it be done? What will Mom do in return? What happens if the agreement is not kept? *Hint:* Writing down the points of agreement and action items is a great way to confirm the commitment.
5. **Follow-Up:** Agree in advance to check in with each other see how the agreement is working for both of you. It is a neutral way to re-discuss what is or is not working without one person building up resentments. This is an essential step that precludes festering resentments and strengthens communication between the parties. *Hint:* Designate the future check-in time very specifically and meet that commitment.

The final antidote to resolving conflict is to understand that everyone, in every conversation wants to feel valued, respected and heard. Regardless of the age, the

relationship or the resources of the parties if you keep the dignity of the other person in your mind, as you would care for a fragile egg, your words and tone will lead you toward resolving the conflict. If on the other hand, your intention is to shame or blame or teach or preach when you begin the conversation. If your finger is wagging in someone's face (even if it is hidden in your pocket), your encounter is doomed to failure.

Whether conflict is resolved with or without a mediator the tools are the same. A mediator is a neutral, but skilled professional facilitating the process described above. The magic of mediation is that the mediator is not invested in the outcome, or the agreement, she/he is helping to navigate the system. Mediation means many things. Often the meaning is confused with being a referee or a decision-making or a problem solving. The best most durable resolution to a conflict are the ones that the parties create and voluntarily agree to. Not every conflict can be resolved and not every cold ends without complications. But with the right actions and good intentions conflicts can be managed and turn into personal growth experiences.

BJ Mann is a family mediator who brings 30 years of business, mentoring, coaching and community leadership to her practice of mediation. Her mediation practice includes a wide range of services for families, including divorce, parent/teen, elder care and workplace mediations. She also serves as president of the Rochester Association of Family Mediators. www.bjmediationservices.com, 585-234-8740.