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Negotiating The Nonnegotiable: How To Understand Conflict And Resolve Yours Successfully



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Part of the series Today's True Leadership

Conflict is everywhere. We cannot live our lives, communicate powerfully, share our diverse opinions, support our divergent agendas, or honor our own deepest values without some degree or form of conflict emerging. The question is: How can we address our conflict with others in ways that are mutually beneficial, supportive and positive, rather than damaging and bridge-burning, leaving body parts in our wake?



Photo Courtesy: iStock

To answer that question, I caught up recently with [Daniel Shapiro](#), Ph.D., author of the new book *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts*. A world-renowned expert on negotiation and conflict resolution, Dan is deeply experienced in working in the realm of negotiation, with clients ranging from hostage negotiators to world leaders. He founded and directs the Harvard International Negotiation Program, which has pioneered innovative strategies and teaching methodologies to address the human dimensions of conflict resolution. His book explores the unconscious forces that cause human conflict — from war-torn nations to divisive party politics to workplace disagreement — and how can we better resolve them.





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Here's what Daniel shared:

Kathy Caprino: Daniel, why are some conflicts seemingly unresolvable?



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Daniel Shapiro: The moment you feel threatened in a conflict, a whole set of emotional forces turn your conflict into an adversarial battle: It becomes *you vs. them*. Suddenly the problem *feels* nonnegotiable, because you can't imagine working things out with the other side.

Consider this example. Have you ever gotten into a fight with a family member over a straightforward issue – such as a financial decision—and all of a sudden it mushrooms into a big fight? The conflict should rationally take two minutes to resolve but takes two

hours. This experience is what I call *vertigo* – when you get so emotionally consumed in a conflict that you can't see beyond it. There are a bunch of these forces that I talk about in my book, and the more aware you are of these forces, the more you can retake control of your own relationships.

Caprino: What is our personal part in a conflict that's reached a stalemate with a colleague or a boss? How is our identity involved?

Shapiro: We don't like to feel rejected in the workplace – and this feeling of disaffiliation turns out to have a huge influence on productivity, morale, and retention. You might feel overlooked in meetings based upon your age, gender, or race—getting the sinking feeling that you are not part of the inner circle. The problem is doubly difficult to deal

with, because it can feel taboo to even talk about these kinds of issues without facing some sort of potential social punishment for threatening the status quo. We end up whispering our grievances behind closed doors—but the organization never learns from our frustrations and productivity deteriorates.

Caprino: What is at the heart of human conflict and why do rational approaches so rarely work?

Shapiro: Rationality is critical to effective negotiation – but it's just not enough. For example, when two spouses argue over finances, one accuses the other of spending too much. They need to figure out their budget rationally – but is their problem just about money? Of course not. It's also about each one of them wanting to feel respected and free to

make decisions. If they don't deal with those emotional issues, their conflict persists.

Caprino: What do hostage negotiators in life-or-death situations know that leaders and managers can learn from?

Shapiro: Imagine a father holes himself up in his own home, along with his 5-year-old daughter – and then calls his ex-wife and says he will kill the daughter unless he can have the daughter live with him for good. In this kind of situation, it's tempting to bring in the SWAT team and the guns and just aim to incapacitate the father and save the child. That's Hollywood. In the real world, things are not so simple. The bullet might accidentally hit the child – and even if it wounds the father, think about the trauma it will impose on the little girl sitting there watching her father

get shot and bleeding.

In the early 1970s, the New York Police Department realized the power of another approach: [Hostage Negotiation](#), and they started up their inspiring unit. I've worked with some of their team, and they are utterly impressive. They've discovered that the most powerful weapon for rescuing hostages may not be the gun, but the ability to talk, listen, and persuade. It's saved thousands of people's lives in NYC alone.

Hostage negotiators are some of the best listeners I've ever seen. And they have to be. Life is on the line.

But it's a skill that I think the manager can learn from. Every department has its share of political crisis and turf wars. At the least, everyone wants to feel heard, understood, and appreciated. As you

listen, you gain the power of information and affiliation. The other side starts to trust you, and you start to understand what is motivating the other side to act. You are in a better place to influence.

But listening in a high-stakes conflict is not easy. I often role play hostage negotiation situations in my courses. When students have to figure out what to say to a hostage taker, these normally talkative students look at me blankly, unsure how to respond. Listening and asking good open-ended questions may *seem* like easy things to do – we do them all the time—but not nearly as well as we could.

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