

Andy Crissinger:

Hey, everyone. Welcome to the Reboot Podcast, Wisdom for Work. I'm Andy Crissinger, and I'm here today with my colleague Chris VandenBrink. Chris, good to be with you.

Chris VandenBrink:

Thanks, Andy. Great to be here.

Andy Crissinger:

Today we wanted to do a really short, uh, but hopefully helpful, uh, episode about conflict, navigating conflict. Um, as coaches, as facilitators, this is one of the most prevalent topics that is, um, mentioned when clients reach out to us for help. Um, and it usually goes something like, "Help. I am struggling, or we are struggling as a leadership team, uh, to get along." (laughs) In fact, we just, we had an inquiry just recently that I really appreciated 'cause it was so beautifully honest, and it was something to the effect of, um, "My coworker and I just can't get along. But th-, we're doing such good work, but this is getting in the way. Can you help us?" And, um, so we wanted to share something in the form of a, a short podcast with some of the best practices that we use when we meet those kinds of issues in clients and client organizations.

So Chris, maybe we can start. You and I had talked about before we started recording, just a couple of, uh, common conflict patterns that might present when we're working with conflicts. Maybe we start there, just so people can kind of relate their own experience to those examples. So you wanna share an example or two?

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah. Absolutely. So these are actually, uh, you know, uh, examples, but they are indicative of real-life situations that, that we find ourselves in as coaches at Reboot, and two that maybe will, will weave throughout the conversation today is, um, conflict with co-founders where you have two or three, or four, as the case may be at times, people who all have, uh, a, a really vested interest in the outcomes, the processes of a company, and they are owners of it. Uh, and their relational dynamics which at times come to a head, uh, under, you know, high-pressure situations. So co-founder conflict is one that we see a lot and we'll talk about today. And then, also, team dynamics and especially a-, around something in which there is some pressure like a launch, either a product launch or, um, a feature launch, something in which there's a deadline, and, where there's cross-functional collaboration that needs to happen, and there's potential for disagreement along the way. And those are two that come up quite often that, uh, I think we can focus on today.

Andy Crissinger:

Great. Yep. So, you know, conflict that might be interpersonal between business partners, um, perhaps mixed in there could be things like, um, uh, uh, jealousy, uh, resentment, uh, frustration at one person thinking the other person isn't pulling their weight in the same way. Um, a variety of other things it could be, wrapped up in that. Another example is more of a, I think, sort of group system. So there might be point-to-point conflict among a number of different folks around differing ap-, approaches to, to achieve

an objective, or, um, maybe missteps, uh, or maybe one, one person thinks the other person made a misstep, either relationally or, uh, practically in the execution of a task, and that can create conflict.

So hopefully, as, as our listeners are hearing us describe these things, they're thinking about their own experiences at work. And we are, you know, obviously, conflict is one of these, uh, aspects of the human experience that transcends all domains (laughs). But we're gonna focus specifically on, on the work domain, recognizing that the, the principles of addressing conflict are transferrable across all of our lives, relationships. Uh, we'll be focusing on work, but hopefully you're thinking, if you're listening, about your own experiences of conflict in the workplace and, uh, can begin to apply some of these principles, uh, to your own experience and hopefully see some ways forward. So let's talk first about why these experiences happen at all. Why is it that we find ourselves often, um, caught up in these relational dynamics, conflicts, or even just difficult conversations at work?

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah, Andy, and I think what you just said, uh, you kind of broke it out between conflict and difficult conversations, and what we might notice is that conflict is one type of difficult conversation.

Andy Crissinger:

Right.

Chris VandenBrink

And so if we just zoom out and think about and ask this question, "Why are conversations difficult to begin with," I think we can start to, start, pick apart and understand how we get into conflict. And I think that, for me at least, I know when, when I'm coming up, coming into a difficult conversation, it is most often because there is something at stake for me.

And maybe even more specifically, there is something that is a fear, a worry, or, or a concern for me or a desire that I have that I might feel is at risk. Right?

Andy Crissinger:

Yep. Yep.

Chris VandenBrink:

And so another way to say this is, conversations in which we, we don't have a vested interest, or there's not something at stake, tend not to be difficult for us.

Andy Crissinger:

Right (laughs). Right.

Chris VandenBrink:

(laughs) Right. 'Cause, 'cause we don't care (laughs). And it makes sense that-

Andy Crissinger:

Right.

Chris VandenBrink:

... we don't care if we don't, if there's nothing at stake for us.

Andy Crissinger:

Right. Yep. It just kinda reminds me of, like, um, the way that we can use our emotional experiences that come and go like waves as indicators that our, our ... You know, when we find ourselves feeling big emotions like anger, fear, sadness, it's indicative of something that's at stake, right? Something matters here, and those emotions can become, you know, breadcrumbs back to whatever that thing is that really matters.

Chris VandenBrink:

Absolutely. And so if we map it to the two examples we began with, if you're a co-founder, uh, you just might imagine what might be at stake for you, right? It could be the success of the company. Maybe a ... It might be what presents on the surface level. But it also might be, uh, you know, the fear of feeling like a failure or how you'll, how you will be perceived to your investors, to your peer group, right? There could be some, uh, fear of embarrassment or shame.

Andy Crissinger:

Right. Right.

Chris VandenBrink:

The launch example, there might be, uh, a desire to have your option or the way that you see the product, uh, coming out into the world at risk, right? You want your way to be the right way. Uh, so there's, uh, what we start to see is that there's not only, um, something at stake for us, but there's different ways that it might be at stake for us.

Andy Crissinger:

Right. So that's a great, I think, segue into one of two frames or frameworks that we wanna introduce in starting to get a handle on difficult conversations. And you, you were just setting that up so nicely. Um, let me talk a little bit about why these frames are helpful, and then we'll just go right into the one that you were kind of teeing up for us. Um, often, when we're in these challenging, uh, interactions, conversations, whether it's anywhere on the, you know, the gamut, from just a difficult, awkward conversation to maybe an all-out direct conflict, um, those experiences can be confusing, overwhelming. They can feel muddy, and it can be hard to know, "What is the next right step that I can take here?" And so we often get stuck, and maybe we don't act. Or we stay in a stuck situation longer than we need to. And so it's helpful to have some really basic frameworks to start to apply like lenses through which we can look at a situation, which can then lead us to next actions that might be actually helpful and generative.

So there's two we wanna bring in, uh, and the first one is this idea of it, we, I, the three conversation levels. And we, uh, originally borrowed this from the work of Doug Stone and Sheila Heen. Written a couple of great books. Um, uh, "Thanks for the Feedback" is one of them, and then prior to that, just the book "Difficult Conversations." And this is such a great insight. It, it, and it's the idea that, um, there are multiple, there are things happening on multiple levels when we're in a conversation that matters, right?

So Chris, you wanna talk a little bit about the It-We-I framework and how that can be helpful in starting to suss out what's going on in a conflict?

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah. So the It-We-I framework, like you said, are, uh, is a really helpful frame to understand when we are in a difficult conversation, and when we might feel like we're getting stuck. At what level are we getting stuck? And so the It level is the level that I, I observe most people think they're talking about, uh, or talking at most of the time.

Andy Crissinger ([12:15](#)):

Right.

Chris VandenBrink ([12:16](#)):

So in a, in the context of work, it's the, uh, "What, what products feature are we going to, to prioritize?" It's the thing, the data, the topic. Right. So, as best we can, the it level, uh, wants to be a bit objective, right? L-, less emotional. More, more situ-, more circumstantial. More about the thing itself.

And that tees up the We level, where, okay, if you can think about the It, the thing, the We level now goes into the interrelational dynamics between the human beings that are perhaps talking about the It level, right?

And the ways they are talking about the It level or the ways they are talking about the, the ways they are having the conversation. And I'll also add it's not only how you might be talking about it and the interrelational dynamic that occurs, but also the role that you are in. Right?

And so there are different We level conversations between a manager and their direct report. There are different We level conversations between an intern and the CEO. There, there are these dynamics at play as well. And so it's the quality of the conversation between two people and the roles that they are in.

And then, and then we get into the I level. So the I level is you could also call it the identity level. It's our view, our perspective of ourselves, how we see ourselves, uh, how we believe we should act or behave or, or be in a particular situation.

Oftentimes, you see this with, uh, kind of negative self-images, like, "I am not enough," or "I don't deserve to speak here." But you also see it in the other end of the spectrum, which is, "I'm right here." Right? "There's no way that I'm not right." (laughs)

Andy Crissinger:

Right. Yep. Yep.

Chris VandenBrink:

And you can just imagine as I say that, how that could get one into a difficult conversation that includes conflict. Right?

Andy Crissinger:

Absolutely. Maybe just a few things to build on, uh, what you laid out there so well. Uh, with the It-We-I framework, sometimes I think about the, sort of the cliché of the iceberg, where, you know, as we all know, there's a portion of the iceberg that's visible above the waterline. There's a, there's a, you know,

typically much larger portion that is floating below. It's harder to see. It's invisible unless we, you know, have a way of, of, of, looking at it. And I think that, often, especially in a professional context, the It is the level that's kinda always hanging out there above the waterline. It's a little easier to see. You know, it, it shows up when we're looking at, say, you know, a project plan, planning sheet, y-, you know. And we're disagreeing about how long something's gonna take, uh, you know, some task or some part of the project's gonna take, or, uh, you know, the, the It is right there.

But what, what's challenging about that is that we all see the It through our own lenses, our own ... You know, you might check out the, the episode that we did awhile back on the ladder of inference, and you'll know that, you know, it's not that simple that the It is just objectively there. You know, we're all looking at it from our vantage points. And so, um, that's a helpful thing to remember for it level conflicts.

But then the We and the I can tend to be the part of the iceberg floating below the surface. Um, not always. Sometimes it's super visible. But often, those things are harder to see, and we have to use some intentionality to see them. And, um, so, for instance, if you have two co-founders like we were talking about earlier, maybe that are always, every time it comes, you know, time to plan a project, they're always disagreeing about how to prioritize the work or how to estimate or who does what. That could be, on one level, perceived as an It conflict. But chances are there's something going on at the level of we. There might be a lack of trust. There may be relational ruptures that have not been addressed or repaired. And so this is sort of an example of what we mean when we say, "F-, kind of figure out on what level you're stuck, and then try to address the difficulty or the conflict on that level," is, is one way of using this tool.

Chris VandenBrink:

I think that leads really nicely into the second framework which is the difference between and the combination of impact and intent.

Andy Crissinger:

Yes. Yes. Another tool, by the way, we've borrowed from Stone and Heen. We're grateful to them for that contribution.

Chris VandenBrink:

And I think it, it pairs really nicely with the It-We-I because when we start to ... You know, that example of the co-founders who are always in a disagreement about how to, you know, move forward with something. It's also important to understand what is, what is each one of their intentions in a conversation.

What are their hopes, their aspirations, what they're, what they're trying to accomplish? Right? And then, also, what is the impact that the way the other person is showing up having on them?

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. Yep.

Chris VandenBrink:

Right. So Co-founder A may always start with a disagreement, and Co-founder B may then bristle and say, "Why do we always have to start with a disagreement?" And then this is not said out loud. It's under the surface, to your point, but then it gets to the pre-, the conditions for a disagreement and a conflict.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. Absolutely. So this is such a good one and so important. Often, when we teach disentangling intent and impact, we, we do it as a two by two, where you might envision, you know, one side of the two by two as things that I am aware of, things that, things that I can know. And then the other side are the things that I can't know unless it's, you know, disclosed to me. So what I can know if I'm in a difficult conversation or a conflict, I can know what my intentions are if I'm honest and I self-reflect. And I can know what the impact of the other person's behavior on me is. What I can't know unless it's disclosed is what their intentions are and the, and the impact of my behavior on them. So it sets up this really healthy boundary structure in understanding ways that conflict can go wrong. It's, and it's sort of, it sets up almost a kind of like container of fair communication as well.

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah.

Andy Crissinger:

'Cause if I'm playing within those rules, what I wanna avoid is making quick assumptions about what your intentions are when you said that thing to me yesterday. But our brains can just make up meaning instantaneously and then believe that story. And that gets us into trouble 'cause often the intentions of the other person are different from what the story we're telling ourselves about that. And then they can't know our intentions unless we disclose (laughs) and are, and are, and are open about that. So it sets up this really nice boundary structure for having more, uh, more healthy dialogue when things get difficult.

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah. And I would say we're gonna get a little bit more into conflict, but I would say in that two by two of impact and intent, there's also a path to, uh, a, a resolution or to reducing conflict, which is when, when we do start to get curious about the intention of the other? Then we start to, uh, uh, get to empathy, right?

Andy Crissinger:

Yes.

Chris VandenBrink:

And empathy is a really great way to, um, um, get to repair if there's a rupture in a relationship.

Andy Crissinger:

Absolutely. Maybe that's a great place for us to kinda transition and talk about some conflict tendencies that can show up in the, in the clients that we work with, and just, you know, kind of in our experience. Um, so do you wanna talk a little bit, Chris, about the different categories of conflict tendencies that we see?

Chris VandenBrink:

Yes. So I'm gonna start out making it very binary, and then we'll get a little bit more subtle. But there are two tendencies. There are conflict seekers, and there are conflict avoiders. And I'm sure as I say this, and

you are listening, you might start to, uh, notice what type of conflict, you know, seeker or avoider, you are.

And when I say there's some subtlety, there are different contexts in which we might be a seeker and contexts in which we might be avoider. However, I think we tend to gravitate more towards one side of the spectrum than the other overall.

Andy Crissinger:

And would you say, Chris, that, that, in this seeker and avoider kind of framework, that there are maybe, uh, more healthy, generative, manifestations of each of those?

Chris VandenBrink:

I think it's, number one, really important to understand what type you are coming to the table with if you're a seeker or an avoider. And then doubly important is to understand who, uh, who you are across the table from. Right? Are, are they going to be a seeker or an avoider? And I wouldn't say that being a seeker or being an avoider is necessarily healthy or unhealthy.

Andy Crissinger

Yep.

Chris VandenBrink:

But what I would say is the behavior that you engage in conversation with can create more healthy conversations or situations. So to get even more into the detail, if you are an avoider, it might behoove you to step, lean in a little bit more to not seeking conflict, but to setting yourself up for a conversation in which you've thought about the It-We-I how you've been impacted, and perhaps what the other person's intent are, and maybe you'll need to, um, to, um, step into conflict a bit more than you're comfortable with. Right?

Andy Crissinger:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Chris VandenBrink

And conversely, if you're a seeker, you might need to step out of that direct conflict a bit more to make room for, especially if you're in a conversation with an avoider, to make room for their intentions or how you have impacted them, right? To hear out what's going on on the other side of that table.

Andy Crissinger:

Right. Right. So again, I'm hearing these sort of sub-themes of curiosity and empathy being really, really important here.

Chris VandenBrink:

Yep.

Andy Crissinger:

It might be helpful to name, too, in a positive sense, often, what seekers are after is directness, honesty, wanting to move toward, uh, move away from stuckness and toward some kind of resolution. That can have a very ... That, that is a very positive, um, set of intentions. It can maybe become problematic when it has this sort of shadow component of maybe, uh, control or, you know, power over that might annihilate the other person w-, uh, you know, intentionally or unintentionally.

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah.

Andy Crissinger:

Whereas, the avoider's maybe optimizing for harmony in relationship. And that is not inherently a bad thing, is it? I mean, that's that ... There's a positive aspect of that. But as you said, that avoidance, the shadow of that avoidance, maybe well, we stay stuck and we never actually, you know, lean in and have a hard conversation that could actually make things better.

Chris VandenBrink:

Absolutely. Especially at that We level, right?

Andy Crissinger:

Right.

Chris VandenBrink:

When, when you're dealing with the seeker and avoider dynamic, having a conversation at the We level can really open things up.

Andy Crissinger:

Yep. Maybe that's a good place for us to kind of bring this home with some, um, final recommendations and, uh, may, maybe final best practices. So, um, what are some things, Chris, that you would share with a client who is stuck in a conflict situation or a difficult, difficult conversation that they need to have? Let's say we've walked through these frameworks. They understand it, we, I. They understand kind of the, the groundwork of disentangling intent and impact. They're starting to understand their own conflict patterning, you know, their own response patterning. What are the next set of recommendations that we might give to those folks on how to proceed?

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah. So, I'll use the three levels 'cause I think the three levels are, make ... I might give different, uh, um, advice for each level. So for a lot of my clients, just understanding that there are the lev-, that the levels exist is a huge reframe. And there are some clients who immediately get it and say, "You're right. I'm totally getting stuck at the we or the I. I just need to make this about the It." And so what it can do for some is to compartmentalize where they're getting stuck and then lean in to the It level conversation, which perhaps the other person that they're in dialogue with is, is really trying to have.

That's kinda one level. The next level, at the We level, is perhaps there needs to be an honest and direct conversation about how the way that we are interrelating with each other is having an impact on me. And, and likely, I'm gonna say, use the word negative impact, but really what we're talking about, I used



this term before, is there's perhaps been a rupture in the relationship. "I don't trust you as I, as I want to because of how some of these past interactions have occurred."

And so in those conversations, it's really important to understand how I'm getting triggered or how I'm getting stuck at the We level, what my intentions are when I am coming to talk to you, my colleague who I've lost a little bit of trust, of trust with, uh, might be the impact that the way you show up is on me.

Chris VandenBrink:

And in those situations, I invite them to talk about the situation behavior impacts feedback model.

So, uh, giving that person who you want to build trust with an actual, um, a specific example that they can draw from that could get better. Right?

Andy Crissinger:

Yep. Yep.

Chris VandenBrink:

And then, at the I level, that's where we really get into coaching. And that radical self-inquiry that frequent listeners know so much about.

Andy Crissinger:

Right. Yeah. This is where we can support ourselves in exploring the I level, for sure. But it can be quite helpful to have a skilled coach or a therapist or even friend who is not just going to affirm your frustrations or, you know, tell you to get over it, but someone who can really listen and ask great questions and help you kind of untangle the threads of your own stuckness internally, can be really, really helpful there.

Chris VandenBrink:

Yeah.

Andy Crissinger:

Then maybe just a few things as we wrap it up here that I would say, um, we've done a lot of work, uh, we've shared a lot about curiosity, um, asking great questions, listening as kind of baseline, uh, foundational skillsets for leadership. I think all of those things come into play here as well. Can I, can I stay curious when I'm in that conversation? Can I try to ask questions? Can I try to draw out more of the other person's experience? And then signal that I'm really listening by mirroring back, uh, what I'm hearing. There are certainly frameworks for getting unstuck, and, and, which we may, maybe we'll address that in a future episode. But for now, I think this sets folks up to at least begin taking some really generative, hopefully helpful steps through conflict.

And, and I think maybe as a closing thought, just a reminder that conflict can, can be an opportunity. There is no organizational life without conflict. There's no marriage without conflict, um, that I'm aware of, anyway. Um, and so, really, this becomes about how do we navigate that? How do we move through conflict in a healthy way? Not how do we avoid it, but how do we move through it? And usually, moving through it, in the same way that putting stress on our muscles strengthens them over time, that, the

stress in those relationships and moving through those can actually leave us on the other side with better, more resilient relationships.