Beyond Blame

Exploring the Origins and Causes of Your Conflicts

Jeffrey A. Kottler

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Each chapter in this book represents a connected step in an overall program to help you identify and work through core issues that lie at the heart of conflict with others. After you have become aware of the kinds of situations and individuals that most consistently trigger unpleasant reactions in you, the next logical stage in the process is to come to terms with what has created these problems for you.

What is it about interpersonal conflict in general that is so personally threatening? I believe one thing; you believe another. I try to convince you that I am right, and you attempt to do the same from your point of view. So what is the big deal? How do our emotions, even our personal self-worth, get caught up in the struggle? And why do particular kinds of argumentative interactions get to us more than others?

Conflicts in relationships are among the most stressful experiences you will ever live through because there is so much at stake, some of it real, some of it mostly illusion. Whether the potential loss is a significant forfeiture of your

resources or only the perception that you are diminished in status, basically all of the stress comes down to anticipating either a loss of territory (position, power, money) or a loss of face.

To manage the side effects of conflict you must choose different ways of responding to the stress of these critical encounters. This involves recognizing what is really in jeopardy for you: are the risks real or are they distortions based on overreactions? Naturally, blame plays a major role in this scenario. The more you assign guilt outside of yourself, the more stress levels initially will be reduced; since you are not at fault, you do not have to feel the least bit responsible. Eventually, however, this strategy will come back to haunt you as you consider your own sense of powerlessness—you will come to feel that conflicts are circumstances that are thrust upon you rather than situations in which you are an active participant.

The Conflicts in Your Life

It is important for you to realize how and why certain kinds of conflicts get to you more than others. Once you recognize and can anticipate your vulnerable areas, you can be ready to bolster them with added reinforcements. Say, for example, you notice that your first line of counterattack (in your head or out loud) in conflict situations is to offer a feeble denial—"I didn't do it. It wasn't me."—only to be met with more vigorous, convincing arguments that you did in

fact play a role (an easy task since it is true). You can short-circuit this normally ineffective coping style and try something else: "It is beside the point as to who did what. Let's try to figure out what we can do to repair the damage."

Before you can ever solve a problem you first must have an accurate diagnosis. To say that you are involved in a conflicted relationship is about as informative as telling a doctor that you don't feel well. The doctor would want to know where it hurts, when it hurts, what the pain feels like, what you have discovered that seems to lessen the discomfort, and so on. Unfortunately for us, although physicians have magnetic imagery, computer simulations, and other technological wizardry to aid them in identifying problems, we are left to speculate and draw conclusions based on intuition and reasoning. Nevertheless, I suspect you already have some solid clues as to what the characteristic patterns of the conflicts in your life are all about.

If you spend a few hours musing about the troubled relationships you have encountered, they may, at first, seem quite different from one another. One was with a childhood friend who betrayed you. Perhaps another involves chronic tension with a parent or child. A third is with somebody at work. But although the kinds of relationships involved may be different, the patterns of the conflicts may be essentially the same.

Some Questions to Ask Yourself

It makes sense that in the process of discovering the patterns of your conflicts you also will uncover their origins; in some ways, it is impossible to look at one without the other. As you begin to recognize a consistent picture, one in which you consistently fall for the same traps and engage in the same ineffective attempts to rectify matters, you cannot help but muse about how and why this pattern developed.

Go back to your personal collection of significantly conflicted relationships that have occurred throughout your life. Whether you complete this task on paper or address these issues inside your head, you will find it helpful to ask yourself a number of questions in order to help make the patterns more clear.

1. What Were the Initial Triggers for the Relationship Turning Sour?

Think back to what sparked your most significant current conflict. It was probably not so much a single incident as it was a series of misunderstandings over time, eventually culminating in an explosion of outrage, frustration, or indignation. If you attempt to recreate the sequence of events you may find a scenario unfolding similar to the following described by a mother who is estranged from one of her daughters. The mother was especially vulnerable to that type of situation mentioned in the previous chapter in which someone she loved withheld affection and approval.

"I suppose our troubles first began after the divorce; she had a lot of

resentment toward me for leaving her father. Perhaps she had harbored some strong negative feelings even before then, but I am most aware that the conflict between us started to intensify at about the time we relocated to a new area. It was as if she hated me for disrupting her life that had been going so smoothly at the time.

"There had always been a degree of competition between us—not so much an oedipal thing, competing for her father's attention, as an insecurity on my part that maybe I wasn't a good enough mother. My own mother was so negligent when I was a child that I vowed to be different. I think my daughter sensed this vulnerability in me, and at times she would exploit it to get what she wanted. I don't mean to imply that this freeze between us is all her fault; quite the contrary, I know that because I tried so hard to be the perfect mother for her I didn't draw the line when I should have.

"Anyway, we patched things up for a while after the divorce, got along all right except for the normal squabbles that parents and children have. Then I started to worry about her, maybe even feeling guilty for doing what I wanted at the expense of my children. I started to give in to her more when I know I should have stood my ground. That is exactly what I had done before—with my ex-husband, with one of my sisters, certainly with my boss. I give in to them hoping that they will then back off and let me be. But now I realize that I just end up appearing weak and spineless.

"The pattern that has emerged for me is that in my effort to avoid confrontation, I give in to people. I so badly want to be liked that I don't stand up for myself; that has been especially true with my daughter. Now she respects me so little that we hardly ever talk at all. When we do speak, I can hear her voice dripping with sarcasm. I then become even more contrite and apologetic. Before we know it, we both can't wait to hang up.

"I now realize that the origin of most of my conflicts is lodged in this need I have for others' validation and approval. Until I am willing to face up to the responsibility that comes with being in a relationship, including telling others what I want, I know that I will continue to have problems."

Before this woman can expect to change the patterns of conflicted relationships in her life, she needs to not only identify what sets her off but figure out the origins and causes of these dysfunctional interactions. By recognizing how the pattern of conflict with her daughter paralleled that of other disagreements she had experienced during her life—all in an effort to gain the approval and validation she could never get from her own mother—she was able to loosen the hold of this habitual behavior.

Likewise, before you can change an enduring pattern in your life, you must have some understanding as to how and why things developed the way they did. This is especially true with regard to why you experience such strong

emotional reactions to certain people and situations and not to others.

2. What Are Your Strongest Emotional Reactions and Fears Sparked by These Conflicts?

What is at stake for you that feels so threatening, so anxiety provoking, that you can hardly think straight, much less respond in a calm, deliberate manner?

As you increase your awareness of your characteristic reactions during conflicts, as well as what kinds of disputes trigger which emotional responses in you, you increase the likelihood that you can do something different from what you normally would do in those situations. An internal dialogue along these lines might go something like this:

Wait a minute. What's going on? Why am I feeling so threatened right now? What reason might I have to be so defensive? What do I believe is at stake that makes me willing to become so heated over a seemingly inconsequential matter? How is this situation similar to others that I have experienced? What do I normally do in such predicaments that I want to avoid doing this time?

The answers to these questions can be found in the personal conceptions you have formulated as to what you are really arguing about. It is not just a matter of which of us will make a decision this time, or who will get his or her

way, or whether we will eat in this restaurant or that one; there are much larger issues at stake, concerns that reach into the heart of your very being and threaten your sense of self-worth. As one man I interviewed explained:

"To most of the people who know me I seem very secure. I have cultivated this image carefully. It's not really an image. I mean, I *am* secure most of the time. But underneath my calm exterior there is a very fragile child. I take criticism very personally. The strongest message I learned from my father growing up was to never let people get the best of me. The times I can recall when I disappointed my father in school or sports, he made it very clear that what I had done previously meant absolutely nothing. Forget that I scored two touchdowns in the last game; what had I done in *this* game?

"As much as I have accomplished in my career, with friends, with my wife and children, I still hear my father's voice, which now sounds suspiciously like my own asking myself what I have done lately. Maybe I don't have it anymore. Maybe I lost my power.

"What this means is that after all these years I am still trying to prove myself. I can't seem to let go. I'm still on probation in my own mind. When someone questions something that I said or did, I just have to take that person on. I know this means that I find myself in quite a number of arguments, but I don't feel I have much choice. If I don't defend myself I will look bad to others,

and also to me."

This fear of losing face is what nudges him to stay in conflict far longer than he needs or wishes to. He has told himself that he cannot afford to shoulder any blame whatsoever because then others might think less of him. At the very least, he will feel diminished in his own eyes. Now imagine the kind of stress this man puts himself through during the most pedestrian of disagreements—who bought lunch last time or who was primarily responsible for that lost account. Think about what it would be like for you to try to settle an argument with this fellow. There is no way that he will ever give in. That is but one reason why conflicts arise, escalate, and continue on toward destructive proportions.

The key to diminishing the control that your deepest fears and threats to your internal security have over you involves, first of all, understanding exactly which feats in you are being massaged by others. Two of the most common are the need for control and the need for acceptance.

The need for control. Each of us was born out of control, completely at the mercy of others to feed us, keep us warm and dry, protect us, and keep us safe. As we grew older and more self-sufficient, we struggled with our parents, teachers, and other adults for the right to make our own decisions and control our own destiny. There was usually some disagreement between our own

perceptions of what we were capable of doing and what others, who held the power, believed we ought to be doing.

Now you are an adult, perfectly capable of making decisions concerning any aspect of your life. Yet there are other people- family and friends—who have strong preferences regarding what they believe you should be doing. Also wanting to control you are people who have some authority (legitimate or self-imposed) to influence and guide you in particular directions that they feel are most appropriate.

The struggle for your independence, freedom, and autonomy is thus a major force in your life. Anyone who is in a position to restrict your movements, any situation in which you feel less freedom than you would prefer, is likely to elicit your fear of losing control.

This is the single most powerful fear that I struggle with on a daily basis. It not only sparks my most intense emotional reactions during interpersonal encounters, but it also lurks just beneath the surface during most of my waking moments. Thus when somebody else attempts to tell me what to do, to exercise some authority over me, to control me in any way, I react most vehemently to resist their efforts. This rebelliousness can easily be traced to my earliest years, and it has abated minimally during the decades since then. But it is surprising, even to me, to realize the extent to which my need for control or, more

accurately, my fear of losing control, operates in my daily life.

When I stand on a balcony, or the side of a cliff, I sometimes feel an irresistible urge to jump off—not because I want to die; on the contrary, I love life so much that I try to squeeze out of it every moment of satisfaction that I possibly can—but because I wonder what it would be like to lose control, just for a moment, and go flying off the edge. That's all it would take, a single instant of decision, and I would be sailing into oblivion. I have similar thoughts during many other daily encounters in which I flirt with the idea that the control I work so hard to maintain is a very tenuous condition indeed.

Knowing this about myself helps me maintain a degree of vigilance over how my control issues are triggered by the actions of others. Having felt very little control as a child, I am unwilling to surrender any part of the autonomy that I have worked so hard to achieve. I could not stop my parents from divorcing. I could not join the most popular groups in school. I could not stop my body from expressing its needs in ways that left me feeling more like a passenger than the one in charge. I could not have the kinds of relationships that I wanted with people growing up. Most of the time, I did not feel like I had the slightest control over what I was feeling. But as an adult in the prime of life, nobody will tell me what to do ever again.

Do you think this propensity of mine to maintain control in my life has

something to do with overreacting to situations in which conflict results?

The need for acceptance. Beneath the veneer of self-assurance and the image of competence we present to the world, most of us feel unworthy of others' respect and affection. You may appear quite confident, handling situations as if you know exactly what you are doing and where you are headed, but there are always nagging doubts whispering in your ear:

"You don't really know what you are doing. You are just pretending."

"People don't really like and respect you as much as you think they do. You are just blind to their true feelings about you."

"What you have accomplished in life is not all that important. You are deluding yourself if you think that anything you do really makes a difference in the big scheme of things."

You may act as if what people think about you really does not matter, that your own opinion is all that counts. You may pretend to be oblivious to others' disapproval, as long as you know that you are right. You may tell yourself that being accepted by others is nice but not really necessary. The truth of the matter is that you desperately want to be accepted and valued by others. Losing the support of the people you are closest to would leave you floating through life completely on your own, with nobody you could count on but yourself. This

might satisfy your need for control, but it would foster feelings of alienation and isolation.

Some of your most intense emotional reactions and deepest fears are therefore lodged in your strong desire to be accepted by others. You will sometimes compromise your most sacred beliefs, back down from a dispute, or initiate a conflict with someone, all in the name of maintaining your stature in other people's eyes as well as your own self-image. This definitely proved to be the case with Susan, a woman in her forties who found herself involved in a number of disagreements but unable to figure out what they were really about.

An accomplished business woman, Susan often finds herself embroiled in disputes both with her colleagues and with her friends. These conflicts drain a lot of her physical, emotional, and creative energy. She claims that she hates arguing with others, yet she can think of three different relationships in her life in which that is all they do. After an encounter with any one of these people, Susan feels depleted, frustrated, abused, and angry.

For a long time Susan blamed others for treating her with insufficient respect and regard. She held strongly to the belief that she was getting a rotten deal from others who did not appreciate her.

But recently she had begun to recognize a pattern: certain themes had been playing themselves out since she was very young. As a child, she had

worked very hard to be the perfect little girl. Her parents doted on her, as long as she was compliant and did what they said. She was comfortable in the role of teacher's pet at school, which meant that she worked very hard to figure out what adults wanted from her and then delivered what was expected without a whimper of protest.

Throughout her life, Susan had looked toward external sources to validate her worth as a human being. As long as she was getting "A's" in school and was the favorite of her parents, teachers, and supervisors, as long as she was the most popular or competent person in a group, she felt just fine about herself. But whenever this image of perfection was jeopardized and she sensed the slightest disappointment or disapproval from others, the only way she could live with herself was to convince those around her that she really was the absolute best. Of course, she was not so much convincing them as she was reassuring herself. The effect, however, was the same: whenever Susan felt that she was not thoroughly and completely accepted by the people whose opinions mattered the most (especially a particular colleague and the two friends with whom she was most often in conflict), she would push things to the point where they would become quite heated.

"So, what you are saying is that you think I don't know what I am doing? I'll have you know… Oh, you didn't mean that? Well, then what *did* you mean? You do have this tendency, after all, to start fights when you don't get your

way…. What do you mean I am the one who is always starting the arguments? I would never…"

Susan and her associate at work are now engaged in a familiar struggle, one that has repeated throughout her life whenever somebody did not endorse completely what she was doing and communicate that she was being "the perfect little girl," the "teacher's pet," the consummate professional. What is at stake for Susan is the fear that unless she counteracts every perceived criticism, she will be written off by others as unworthy as a friend or colleague. She has kept herself on probation her whole life, feeling that she is only as good as the wonderful things she has done lately. So what if she put four successful deals together without a glitch, or that she has been consistently responsive in a friendship for years? It is her misguided belief that if she messes up just one time, everything goes down the tubes. That is why certain relationships evoked such strong, threatening feelings in her, why she was prone to externalize the blame and direct responsibility elsewhere if at all possible. Creating conflict became a way for her to convince others to back down and not attack her credibility or her delusions of perfection. She would inadvertently—if not deliberately—find herself escalating minor disagreements into full-fledged conflicts because of her fear of compromising her image of perfection.

3. What Expectations Do You Hold That May Be Escalating the Conflict?

The next logical area to explore, after you have begun to identify the patterns of your disputes and their origins and causes, is to consider as honestly as possible what specific things you are doing to make matters worse. Much of the problem, you will find, is centered in the often unrealistic and unreasonable expectations you hold for others.

When you hold certain assumptions that seem quite reasonable to you but that others are not willing or able to abide by, you are likely to feel disappointed and find yourself in conflict situations. Some of the expectations that are most likely to land you in trouble or escalate conflicts are those in which you make demands of other people based on the standards you apply to yourself:

> *I am willing to go this far and give this much, so he should do the same.*
>
> *Unless she recognizes how hard I have worked on this, then there is no sense in my continuing.*
>
> *Why doesn't he see that I am not trying to hurt him? I am*
>
> *just trying to help.*
>
> *I did my part; now it is her turn to do just as much.*

The problem with expectations such as these is that: (1) other people cannot read our minds and know what we expect, (2) just because we live by certain rules does not mean that others must do so as well, and (3) such expectations set things up so that blame can be placed elsewhere when things

do not work out.

Ironically, this last cause of conflict is both the most painful and the one you are in the most powerful position to do something about. This category of conflict is essentially self- inflicted: by holding certain expectations of others, and making demands that they are unwilling to meet (because they have a different set of expectations for *you* that *you* are not meeting), disputes over responsibility and fault are highly likely.

The logical antidote for resolving these kinds of disputes involves checking out your expectations for others, holding them up to the clear light of day to assess their appropriateness, and then making them explicit. When the other person is willing to articulate just as clearly what it is that he or she expects from you, then you are well on your way to negotiating some common ground.

This means that when you become aware that there is tension between yourself and someone else, an alternative choice to blaming that person for being unreasonable is to check out what it is that you are expecting that he or she may not be willing or able to do. This is highlighted in the following example of a couple who had been married for fifteen years but who had continued to fight with one another over seemingly inconsequential matters. Both Joan and Jason shared their different expectations for one another and for the marriage.

Jason: A marriage is a partnership in which two people have made a commitment to one another to work toward common goals. I don't mean to include just large-scale goals such as raising a family or putting away a retirement fund, but also doing things together. I know Joan thinks that I smother her, that I demand too much of her. But she is my best friend. I just want to be with her as much as possible, to share our lives together. As my wife, she should want to spend as much time as possible with me, to be available so that we can do things together. If only she would spend more time at home I think we could get along much better.

Jason expects marriage to be a close relationship in which the partners do as much as possible together. They not only have common interests, but they also make an effort to accommodate the other rather than going off on their own. Jason believes that if only Joan would be more attentive, more available to meet his needs, more accommodating to what he expects of her, then they would not have any disagreements. This perspective is quite different from Joan's ideas.

Joan: I feel smothered by him. He wants me at his beck and call. I love the man, I really do. But I will not live my life for him; I have my own interests, some of which are quite different from his. I don't think a marriage can or should meet all of one's needs. If only Jason would back off and not push me so much, if only he would give me some space and time to pursue my own interests, then I wouldn't have to bicker with him so much.

Jason and Joan have differing expectations for their marriage and their mates. When each of them was helped to discover the origins of these ideas about what a good marriage should be, both were able to see how and why their different assumptions were exacerbating their mutual feelings of resentment. Joan came from a home in which she had watched helplessly as her mother had

been beaten down and humiliated by her father. Although their relationship did not follow a parallel pattern, Joan had resolved long ago that she would never give away her power the way her mother had. By contrast, Jason defined his notions of marriage based on what he had grown up with. His parents had modeled a very close, perhaps even enmeshed relationship. They did everything together and spent every waking moment in each other's company. It was not unusual, therefore, that Jason would expect that he and Joan would negotiate similar roles.

The problem was that Jason and Joan had no intention or inclination to satisfy each other's expectations. Conflict between them was inevitable, at least until they stopped asking for things that were not going to be responded to in the ways they expected. When the texture of their interactions changed to an emphasis on finding out what the other partner was willing to do rather than making demands, they found considerable room for negotiation. Jason realized that he was, in fact, open to renegotiating a different relationship from the one they had originally created fifteen years earlier. Joan, in turn, felt much more inclined to spend quality time with her husband when it felt like it was her choice to do so rather than giving in to emotional blackmail.

Stay with the Real Issue

The object in figuring out the real issues that underlie your *apparent*

disagreements is so that you may more accurately target your efforts toward dealing with what is really bothersome rather than with elements that are superficial, distracting, or otherwise irrelevant to the important issues at hand. We have discussed, for example, how your conflicts may represent your attempts to relive dysfunctional patterns that were programmed in the past—when you learned to be dependent on others, to keep people at a distance, or to avoid being hurt. There also may be behaviors that were part of growing up in your family and that you still use in relating to others—playing a subservient role, being a go-between for others in conflict, or having to fight furiously for attention, approval, or control.

It should be apparent by now that most of the things you fight about are not what you are really concerned with; there are other issues, some readily apparent and some buried from view, that drive your behavior. There is no way that you can ever truly resolve disputes until you know what it is that you are actually fighting and feeling upset about.

For example, two friends appear to be having an argument about who will pick up whom to attend a function together. Their underlying issues are noted in italics.

Sara: I guess I could drive. *I don't want to drive. I always drive.*

Tina: Fine. If you don't mind. *What is* her *problem? She acts like she is doing me a favor.*

Sara: No big deal. I will have to… oh, never mind. I'll pick you up. *I don't have any gas. She never offers gas money, either.*

Tina: No maybe I should drive this time. You drove last time. *She probably keeps score.*

Sara: *True. I did drive last time. I drive every time. But if I let her drive, she will get on my case about something else.* Hey, I *said* I would drive. Just tell me what time to pick you up.

Tina: *No way am I going to be indebted to her for this. She'll make me pay.* I think I'll go by myself since I have to do some errands along the way.

Sara: Fine. Maybe I'll see you there. *Not if I can help it.*

As in so many conflicts, these friends are not talking about what the real issues are. They have no idea about the origins and causes of their intense emotional reactions. They appear to be negotiating about who will drive to the function, but each person is really harboring resentments about perceived inequities from the past. If they were able to stop the exchange long enough to ask themselves, "What are we really fighting about?," there is a greater likelihood that they would be able to identify and address their underlying issues and find a mutual solution.

A Summary of Major Themes

There is more to a conflict than just the interactional issues between people: you are also carrying around your own deep-seated issues. To find out what you are fighting about with another person you must be sure of which of

your own issues are at stake. The focus of this chapter has been to help you recognize variations of the following themes:

> *Problems of authority.* People who have been in positions of power over you (parents, teachers, bosses) may have exploited or abused you in the past. As a result, you now tend to overreact to anyone you perceive to be in a controlling role.

> *Problems of personal freedom.* You may have an unusually great need for autonomy and independence. You will oppose any effort to restrict your freedom of movement or limit your choices.

> *Problems of intimacy.* You have suffered deep wounds earlier in life that now predispose you to overprotect yourself against hurt or rejection. You are unwilling to allow yourself to get close to people and so use conflict as a way to maintain a safe distance.

> *Problems of enmeshment.* You allow yourself to become overly entangled, perhaps even dependent, on a few people you are close to. You feel both grateful for them and resentful that you are so needy.

> *Problems of the need for approval.* Throughout your life you have been searching for validation, a state that is always short-lived. Since you hang in the balance of how others judge you, conflicts result when you feel disappointed by their assessments.

Of course, this is hardly an exhaustive list of the possibilities; rather, it is a mere sampling of the themes you may have discovered are operative for you. These are the problems you will need to monitor most closely during times of greatest stress, for nothing will escalate a conflict faster than plugging in to your old unresolved issues.

Keep in mind that some degree of discomfort is not altogether a bad thing. In the next stage of the process, described in Chapter Three, you will learn how pain can be harnessed as a force that motivates you to take constructive action.

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