Conflict Mastery: Questions to Guide You

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Before Conflict

Before Conflict—Some Preliminary Thoughts to Consider

An interpersonal dispute is often evident not just after it percolates, but while it is brewing. At these times, our increasing awareness about things that provoke us about another person's actions, words, manner, or attitude begin to take hold. The reasons they irritate us are not necessarily clear at these times. However, we still experience some form of inner conflict. That is, at some level of consciousness, we process thoughts and emotions about the other person and the things that are arousing a negative reaction in us. This internal conflict has the potential for erupting in a nanosecond, or it may linger indefinitely. Or, our feelings may surface intermittently in a variety of ways that alert us to ongoing and unsettling discord.

The fact is, it is not unusual to feel we are in conflict even when the other person has no inkling of what we are experiencing. While we are not directly conveying our viewpoints or disgruntled feelings, the inner disharmony is usually more overt than we think, and may be observed and sensed by the other person and those around us. This occurs not only through our body and facial language, but also by the aura we transmit.

Inner conflict is insidious and has a way of creeping slowly into our consciousness. Perhaps we are aware of our growing irritation about things another person says or does, or is not saying or doing. We may have been provoked about these things for a long time, and find ourselves becoming more and more annoyed and on edge around her or him. We may outwardly or inwardly cringe when we observe the particular actions, attitudes, and words that bother us. We may have begun to conduct ourselves in uncharacteristic ways around her or him—being curt, sarcastic, hostile, disdainful, and abrasive. We may have started to ignore this person, act aloof, or walk away when we see her or him near us.

Whether these sorts of responses emanate from us about another person or from someone else about us, they not only provide a sign that something is amiss between us; they actually signal, too, that we have a choice about how to proceed and manage ourselves and the situation before things unnecessarily escalate.

Conflict mastery, as discussed in Chapter 1, is not just about engaging effectively in a conflict once it has evolved. When we become masterful at conflict we are proactive and tap into our feelings and thoughts early on. We consider the reality of what we are sensing. We use our learned and innate abilities to reflect on what is going on for us and with the other person as soon as we sense discord. We consider whether to address the perceived dissension at this point. We assess whether the conflict is likely to evolve if we do not share what we are experiencing.

When we achieve conflict intelligence and mastery, we also contemplate how best to prepare for the possibility or inevitability of things materializing. We think out the optimal approach for initiating a discussion—to discuss what we perceive, gain clarity, and check out our assumptions. And we think out ways of responding in conflict-masterful ways in the event the other person raises related concerns with us.

There are many reasons we may be reluctant to bring up issues early on about things that offend us and stir up negative feelings. Certainly, some situations are best left alone. Others are not. Though we do not always know the optimal tact when we experience inner conflict, we know we do not feel good about a situation, the other person's actions, views, words, and so on, and our own reactions. These are pivotal clues that provide us with the opportunity to think out the conflict dynamic and consider the best way forward.

The thing is, generally speaking, it is not an easy task for many of us to address brewing conflict in its early stages (at least until we have gained conflict mastery). Rather, it is more often a time we tend to wait, hoping the disturbing behavior will stop, improve, or not continue to bother us. Or, we may expect our demeanor will alert the other person to cease the words or conduct we find noxious. Or, we make an off-hand remark, anticipating that she or he will get our indirect message to do so. We may hope, too, that our ongoing negative feelings will subside and not adversely affect the relationship.

During the sorts of machinations just described, we may engage in some self-blame and even some wishful thinking. We may misplace or displace what we are feeling onto unrelated matters or other people. If we do nothing, we may experience a cloud hovering over

our personal or professional lives. Doing nothing about what is perturbing us often results, too, in unnecessary conflict surfacing somewhere along the way, propelled by a build-up of disconcerting emotions and assumptions.

This chapter is about the occasions we internally acknowledge that something is going on within us, and between us and another person, that is adversely affecting us. We sense it may evolve and become a challenge for our relationship, and affect something important to us. The topics that follow here therefore invite readers to be alert to those moments when unproductive thoughts, emotions, and assumptions begin to enter our consciousness—before they become externalized.

As conflict intelligence develops, it will be increasingly apparent how these sorts of indicators are gifts. They present us with the chance early on to gain an understanding of the dynamic that is leading to inner discomfort and tension—to take stock of what is going on for us and what we are experiencing in relation to the other person. They urge us to gain perspective and consider the other person's, too. They provide us with the opportunity to be proactive. They signal this is a time to decide how to facilitate a positive conflict experience. They also help define the conflict-mastery skills required to preempt the unnecessary escalation of conflict.

As you begin to explore in this chapter a range of circumstances, emotions, and tendencies that arise before conflict, it helps—as suggested in Chapter 1—to bring to mind specific real-life situations when answering the questions. Doing so provides a context that will increase your insights and learning.

Our Conflict Habits

As you read in Chapter 1, one of the ten premises of this book is that we have the ability to learn new conflict habits. Habits we rely on when it comes to interpersonal conflicts are like other habits that become rote—that we repeat without much thought. In addition to learning them from our families of origin, and our teachers, religious leaders, cultures, peers, bosses, and others, we often learn conflict habits from our various attempts to manage situations based on a range of experiences and observations over time. Some of us also take related courses, or read about recommended techniques that we try to incorporate. Or, we act on someone's advice. Mostly, though, repeated attempts to discover what works and what does not guide our conflict journeys, and we tend to develop and rely on some methods more than others. These are the ones that seem to form our conflict habits.

In whatever ways they have become part of our being, conflict habits reflect the idiosyncratic ways each of us has learned to cope with the sorts of scenarios that adversely affect us and our relationships. And they show up in how we interact and communicate, how we defend things that are important to us, and how we otherwise approach internal and interpersonal conflict. It is an understatement to say some habits work for us better than others.

Whether or not they serve us well, we may not recognize that our particular ways of addressing conflict are habits we can shift. They somehow feel a part of who we are, and so we may resist trying to change them or the notion that we are able to do so. Whether and how to find different ways of engaging in conflict are not possibilities about which many of us give much thought. At least not until, for any number of reasons, we realize our relationships and our well-being are struggling as a consequence of our conflict management style. We may have become increasingly aware of which habits are unproductive or unhealthy. Or, we may experience pressure placed on us in this regard by life or business partners, family members, friends, bosses, peers, and others.

As with other habits, we have the ability to change them, and in the case of conflict engagement, to develop new ways of interacting that reflect how we prefer to be and respond when we encounter discord. And though it takes time, energy, focus, and motivation, the journey to conflict mastery starts with willingness to change.

If you are willing to change one or more of your conflict habits, the first step suggested here is to identify one habit you know is counter-productive, and answer the following questions about it. The same questions may be repeated for other habits you wish to improve.

QUESTIONS

- How do you describe one of your conflict habits you want to change, that is, how is it manifested?

- What might caring friends or family who know you, and have observed you demonstrate this habit, add to your description (your response to the previous question), if anything? What, if anything, might they say differently?

- What is the impact that using this habit has on you? How do others experience it, that is, those on the receiving end?

- What appears to be the impact on caring others who have observed you using this habit? What might they suggest as alternative ways to be and interact?

- How do you think you developed this habit? Under what circumstances have you *not* used it? What accounts for the difference?

- How do you prefer to be, and be seen, regarding this habit?

- How do you expect your conflict interactions will be different when you interact in the manner you prefer (as you described in the previous question)?

- How, specifically, do you want people with whom you have conflict to experience your preferred way of interacting? What would you most like your caring others to compliment you on when you interact in the way you prefer?

- How much do you want to change this habit on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being "very much"? If you scored 4 or lower, what reservations do you have about changing this habit?

- How may you be getting in your own way from beginning to change the habit? How might you overcome that? What is one step to take immediately to make a positive change regarding this habit?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Hot Buttons

Hot buttons, also called trigger points, may be generally defined as actions, words, and attitudes of others that evoke a negative reaction in us—inner, external, or both. It may be what someone says or does, or does not say or do. It may be a mood, a way of acting, or facial and body language that triggers us.

We are not usually aware, at least consciously, of what other people's hot buttons are. Exceptions are likely those of our life partners, family, friends, and colleagues and co-workers whom we come to know well. New relationships start with a clean slate. In any case, it is common that we discover another's trigger points, and they ours, the hard way. That is, generally speaking, we do not know what offends or irritates us or others—including the effects—until hot buttons are pushed.

Depending on numerous factors, there are various ways we react to the experience of others pushing our hot buttons. The first time someone pushes one, we may choose not to get upset about what is provoking us. It may take repeated times until our discomfort grows and we say anything—if we decide to say anything at all.

Whether we react early on or after several incidents, some of us let the person know directly that she or he is irritating us, and sometimes with strong emotions that fuel a conflict. Others of us are more covert or indirect—showing signs of being disgruntled without really saying what is happening. Our reactions may be so indirect that they are missed altogether.

Not all situations in which we or others are triggered necessarily lead to conflict. However, once our tempers rise and we "lose our cool," we are usually unable to effectively contemplate and identify what specifically contributed to the escalation in the first place.

In the quest for conflict mastery, whenever it is evident that something is creating internal discord for us, it helps to take some time to step back, remain curious about the specific irritant, and consider why

it bothers us. As discussed in Chapter 1 and in this chapter, determining what we ourselves are saying or doing that may be contributing to the dynamic is also part of a conflict analysis. Such an examination is paramount in our efforts to become increasingly proficient in engaging in conflict.

Here are some pertinent questions that aim to heighten awareness about your hot buttons, including what it may take to cool it down. Some questions ask you to consider the other person's hot buttons in the same situation, too.

QUESTIONS

- In one interaction between you and the other person, what, specifically, did she or he say or do that pushed your hot button? Or, what did she or he not say or do? Or, how did she or he act that triggered you?

- If you identified more than one trigger point here, select one to start with. What makes that a hot button for you? What value or values did you perceive being undermined, if any, when the person pushed your hot button? What did you need from her or him? What aspect or aspects of your identity, if any, may have felt challenged?

- For what reasons do you think the other person pushed your hot button? What other reasons might she or he give that are different from what you are thinking?

- What do you think you were letting the other person do that is actually within your control?

- If the other person reacted to something you said or did (or did not say or do, or the way you acted) in the same scenario, what reaction did you see or hear? To what specifically was she or he reacting, from what you could tell?

- What might make that a hot button for the other person— such as what value might she or he have perceived as being undermined? What aspect of her or his identity might have felt challenged? What did the other person need from you?

- What reason or reasons motivated you to say or do whatever triggered the other person? From what you can tell, how might she or he have interpreted your reason or reasons that may be different from what you intended?

- What are three conflict-masterful ways to respond when someone pushes your buttons? What are three conflict-masterful ways to prevent pushing someone else's buttons?

- What are you learning about possible ways to cool your hot buttons in your conflict interactions? What else do you want to learn on this topic?

- What has occurred to you about hot buttons now that did not occur to you when you started this series of questions?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Picking Up the Conflict Vibes

Before conflict emerges we often pick up "vibrations," or "vibes," that signal dissension within ourselves or in what we sense coming from another person. Picking up such vibes provides a prompt for us to step back and contemplate what is occurring. They alert us to pay attention to our observations and instincts to explore what seems to be igniting us, or the other person, or both. Similarly, the vibes urge us to check out what we are sensing to be able to gain clarity and focus—qualities that have the potential for getting lost when we begin to experience unsettling feelings.

Essentially, then, vibes reflect our sense that there is disharmony when the signals and other signs described above appear. And whether we pick up someone else's or we are putting out vibrations ourselves, it is evident that things are amiss and adversely affecting our interactions.

Often, we pick up vibes and react, at least internally, when we perceive that the other person is relating to us differently. Clues may be that she or he appears distant, does not engage us in conversation, makes off-hand or sarcastic remarks, or looks away or avoids us when we try to connect. We pick up subtle and not so subtle signs, too, from the other person's body and facial language that convey her or his negative feelings toward us.

Paying attention to conflict vibes when they arise not only provides an opportunity to consider what is occurring. The experience also gives us a chance to choose whether it is prudent to address the dynamic at this time—and if so, how to proceed. Such a proactive approach helps us to prevent unnecessary conflict from escalating (a concept discussed in Chapter 1). It prepares us, too, for the possibility of necessary conflict, including constructive ways to bring matters that need to be aired to the surface for discussion.

The following self-reflective questions concentrate on what is occurring within a situation in which you are picking up vibes. Also, some questions focus on a situation in which you are putting out

conflict vibes. It could be the same situation or another. The next topic in this chapter, **Acting on Simmering Signs**, develops these concepts in a different way.

QUESTIONS

- To start with, how do you describe the vibes you sense that the other person is putting out, that is, her or his actions, attitude, and so on?

- How are you experiencing the vibes?

- What does your intuition tell you about the reason(s) the other person is putting out these vibes (your answer to the first question)? Why that reason or those reasons?

- What do you trust about your instincts here? What do you not trust about your instincts, if that is the case?

- In what ways may you have contributed to the other person's putting out vibes toward you (things you might not have already considered in your previous answers)?

- What is keeping you from checking out—with the other person—the vibes you are experiencing? What conflict-masterful approach might work if you decide to do this? If you prefer not to, why is that so?

- How do you describe the sorts of vibes you are putting out in this interaction (or another interaction, if you do not think you are doing so in this one)? How might the other person describe your vibes in the conflict you have in mind? How might she or he be experiencing them?

- For what reasons are you putting out those vibes? What, specifically, do you think you are conveying through your actions, words, demeanor, and so on that the other person is likely picking up?

- What is keeping you from more directly expressing to the other person what is bothering you? What might be keeping the other person from asking you?

- What would you like to have happen between you and the other person in the interaction in which you are putting out vibes? What might you say or do to achieve that outcome?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Acting on Simmering Signs

Starting as children and over the years of interacting in a wide range of contexts, we learn and develop views about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable actions, words, attitudes, styles of communicating, ways of treating others, and so on. We aim to demonstrate the behaviors we consider appropriate, and we generally expect others to share our ideas of what appropriate is. However, there are times when our actions do not align with our values or those of others with whom we interact. Similarly, there are times people act in ways that are not compatible with their values or ours.

When we are on the receiving end of someone's behaviors that do not fit with our beliefs about what is acceptable, many of us tend to make judgments about the person and her or his character and motives. We may also have developed stereotypes and biases that we apply at these times. The thing is—though some behaviors are inexcusable—in many of our day-to-day interactions we do not always understand that our rulebooks on what constitutes acceptable behavior and communication are different from others' rulebooks. Or, that the meaning we give another person's deeds and words does not accurately reflect her or his intent.

Simmering signs that things are amiss between oneself and another person are detected as soon as we sense some internal upset and begin to judge the other person—or even ourselves. Signs may include physical reactions such as a churning stomach, increased heart rate, red face, fidgeting, and so on. Or, they may be general negative thoughts and feelings, or specifically ones about the other person. In any case, the reasons for whatever we are experiencing are not always easily identifiable. As with **Picking Up the Conflict Vibes**, the previous topic, this is an opportune time—when we start to feel things simmering inside us—to probe our thinking and emotions to be able to gain an understanding of what seems to be happening.

Your answers to the following questions will yield some other ways of viewing yourself, the situation, and the other person when simmering signs appear.

QUESTIONS

- Try to imagine a scenario or person about which you are sensing at least one simmering sign that things are amiss. What specifically seems to be simmering that is arousing that inner reaction in you?

- How do you describe your inner reaction? In what way(s) might the other person notice that?

- What do you think initiated the simmering? If you do not know, what possibilities occur to you? Or, what possibilities might someone observing the dynamics between you suggest?

- What could boil over that worries you most? If things continue to simmer to the point of boiling over, what would you look back at and wish you had said or done?

- If what worries you does happen, what positive outcome might you want to strive for?

- How will you respond and make that outcome happen in a conflict-masterful way if what concerns you does occur? What will your conflict-masterful approach be like in more detail?

- How is that response and approach different from what you usually do at such times?

- What do you imagine it will feel like to take this different approach? How do you hope it will be for the other person?

- What challenges do you want to be prepared for? How will you handle those?

- Now that you are thinking this matter through, what opportunities have the simmering signs provided for you and the other person?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Thinking About Whether to Raise the Issue

Many of us grapple with when or whether to raise a potentially contentious issue with another. The opportunity to make this determination commonly presents itself when we notice some internal or external sense of unrest about an interaction, such as those described in **Picking Up the Conflict Vibes** and **Acting on Simmering Signs**. Sometimes when our gut instincts alert us that something is off, we may question them and wonder, "Is it really worth it to bring up this matter?," or "Am I making a big deal out of nothing?," and other such self-inquiry. Uncertainties of all sorts contribute to tentativeness, and we face indecision about whether to attend to what we sense or leave it alone.

Deciding what makes a seemingly or potentially conflictual matter worth raising is a tough call—especially when emotions begin to prevail. However, under most circumstances, exploring what the issue or issues mean to us and the benefits and disadvantages of addressing them is a good starting point. Doing so usually gives us a better understanding of what we are experiencing regarding any fears, ambivalences, worries, and our motivations, expectations, and hopes. Possible challenges to the relationship and our well-being are also considerations in an analysis of this nature.

Reflective queries about whether to raise an issue that may be contentious, then, not only help us to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of initiating a discussion about what we perceive is happening. They also invite an exploration of whether we are prepared to face the potential risks that may emerge as part of our analysis.

There may be occasions, of course, when we decide that it is not prudent, smart, or appropriate to raise a matter. But if we are reluctant because we tend to avoid conflict or are experiencing fears or other emotions that impede us, it is important to contemplate how such factors negatively contribute to the dynamic and the way forward.

The next series of questions provide another approach when thinking about whether to raise with another person a specific conflict issue. (The word "issue" is singularized in these questions. If there are a number of matters you are considering raising, it helps to explore one at a time, as the responses often vary from one issue to another.)

QUESTIONS

- What is the issue you are thinking about raising? What makes it contentious?

- What are the risks of raising the issue for you? What are the risks of your raising the issue for the other person? What else worries you about bringing it up?

- What are the opportunities for you if you raise the issue? What are the opportunities for the other person?

- If you decide not to raise the issue, what then?

- How would you like things to be between you and the other person, instead of what is currently happening because of the conflict between you?

- How important is the relationship to you on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being "extremely important" and 1 being "not at all"? How important is the issue in dispute on the same scale?

- If the relationship is more important to you than the issue (or even if you've given them the same rating), what do you need or want from the other person so as not to let the conflict damage your relationship? What may she or he need from you?

- If the issue is more important to you than the relationship (or even if you've given them the same rating), what are the options for settling it? What are the advantages and disadvantages of those options for you? For the other person?

- When you have raised issues with others in the past and had a successful outcome, what have you done well in your communications? What has not worked well that you will not repeat?

- What are you thinking now about whether to raise the issue?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

The Platinum Moment of Choice in Conflict

As just discussed, it is common that at times we are reticent to initiate a dialogue about things that have the potential for leading to conflict, or escalating existing discord. Apprehensions may include possible retaliation, encountering some sort of confrontational reaction, becoming more upset, chancing a threat to the relationship, or the fear that nothing positive will come from raising the matter or matters.

We may know that suppressing our feelings as a consequence of not dealing with interpersonal conflict has an adverse impact on our physical and emotional health. We may realize, too, from experience, that unresolved thoughts and feelings often erupt somewhere else. For instance, they may continually emerge in repeated negative interactions with the same person or others, and can be just as, or even more, unsettling.

The fact is, we have choices about how to manage ourselves and our reactions when conflict presents itself, and considering what they are at these times is an indicator of conflict intelligence. Other indicators include being clear on what we intend to accomplish if we proceed, contemplating what is important to us and the other person, determining the optimal timing, and preparing effective ways to communicate.

What this means, essentially, is that we have a choice as to when and how we initiate a conversation about perceived dissension—with the goal of short-circuiting unnecessary conflict. These moments are referred to here as "platinum moments of choice," and there are many possibilities. For instance, we have a choice about how to facilitate a thoughtful and conciliatory discussion about what is happening. We have a choice not to demonize the person or ourselves. We have choices about how we want to be in our conflict interactions. And we have a choice, upon reflection, to decide that it is not appropriate for us to say or do anything. (In Chapter 3, this aspect is explored in the topic **Choices About Responding When in Conflict**.)

The following questions invite you to consider the ideal moments that arise for exploring signs of conflict before you and the other person become involved in an unnecessary negative dynamic.

QUESTIONS

- Based on the concept of platinum moment of choice as described above, how else might you describe what this expression means—as you interpret it?

- Try to imagine an interaction about which you are currently experiencing tension. What was your first internal indication that discord exists—emotionally, cognitively, or in your body?

- What makes that indication (your answer to the previous question) especially disconcerting for you? To what, specifically, do you attribute that reaction?

- What might have made that a platinum moment for letting the other person know that you are reacting to something she or he said or did—or did not say or do?

- In what ways might it have also been a platinum moment of choice for the other person, if you had raised it with her or him at that time?

- How might that *not* have been a platinum moment of choice for you? In what ways may it not have been platinum for her or him?

- At what other point or points within the relationship or before the interaction—or even since—may there have been platinum moments of choice to do or say something regarding your sense of the tension between you? What could you have said or done at one or more of these points? What makes each of those points platinum?

- What specifically stopped you from saying something?

- Now that you have thought about this, what, in your view, makes something a platinum moment of choice that you had not considered before?

- In the future, how will you choose your platinum moments of choice before acting or reacting?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Picking Fights

Sometimes we get into a cranky mood for no apparent reason. We may be bored, feeling unwell, or lacking energy, or we may be generally unhappy with work, events occurring in our lives, or one or more relationships. We may be out of sorts because we have onerous things on our minds, or people are pressuring us about a myriad of matters. Personal and professional obligations also cause us stress and weigh us down. Or, we do not set boundaries. Or, we feel hurt by a lingering or current situation in which someone's actions or words upset us.

As we know, these and other types of happenings in our everyday lives contribute to a state of mind and heart that negatively affects us and those around us. Such dynamics often form at least some of the variables that ultimately lead to conflict. Common responses when conflict emerges are to flee, to fight, or to freeze. This topic is about a tendency to fight, and for some of us, this may be a habit.

In situations that affect our sense of well-being, especially when we feel bogged down by life's travails, we may be more reactive, vulnerable, and overly sensitive to others' comments and actions. We may judge and find fault easily. We may act in ways in which we are untrue to ourselves. We may project or impose our views, and take strong and even unreasonable stands on issues. We may take out our emotions on someone who becomes the target of our state of mind and heart, and pick fights.

Picking a fight is a deliberate act, and this point resonates with the notion of platinum moment of choice, just discussed. That is, we are able to choose not to fight. This is an important message to tell ourselves when we are becoming defensive and beginning to react in ways that are counterproductive—and which in other circumstances result in picking a fight.

The following line of inquiry helps to examine in more detail what is happening for you when you find yourself about to pick a fight, and what options may exist. (More on this conflict area is discussed in Chapter 3 under the topic **Fighting When in Conflict**.)

QUESTIONS

- Try to imagine a specific situation in which you are tending to pick a fight. What is compelling you to do so? What is happening in your life that may also be contributing to your inclination to pick a fight?

- What may compel the other person to engage in the fight with you, if that is applicable?

- What would be a successful outcome for you if you picked a fight?

- What if you choose to fight and you "win" according to what you were hoping to achieve as a successful outcome—how would that be for you? How might it be for the other person?

- In what ways might things change between you and the other person in a positive way as a result of your picking a fight? How might it change things in not so positive ways?

- What might be an unsuccessful outcome for you in this situation, if you pick a fight—other than what you may already have referred to in the previous question?

- What might picking a fight achieve that other options are not likely to achieve? Why is that the case?

- Besides picking a fight, what other possible choice(s) might work? What might make such a choice or choices workable? How might such a choice or choices be workable for the other person, too?

- What else do you need to know or learn that will influence your choice of whether or not to pick a fight? What are the conflict-masterful options when it comes to what you might do other than pick a fight?

- In what ways does the idea of picking a fight become stronger in answering the questions here? Why is that so? How has the idea of picking a fight decreased in strength? Why is that so?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Freezing

What does freezing mean in the context of conflict? Freezing is one reaction to being provoked during a conflict—fighting and fleeing are two other common responses. It has been suggested that freezing is different from "being stuck" (see the topic **Getting Unstuck When in Conflict** in Chapter 3). This suggestion is based on the notion that being stuck is a more transient state of being during conflict, whereas freezing, as it is described here, is more like being unable to engage at all when provoked. That is, freezing is immobilizing.

Freezing may be a reaction to conflict that reflects helplessness and powerlessness to know what to say or do. It may be a fear response, a shutdown of our usual skills and ability to process information and emotions, or both. It may be a matter of becoming cold internally or toward the other person (or both) as a way to stave off tension and the depth of our emotions.

These and other ways in which freezing affects us have a huge impact on the course our interpersonal conflicts take and the outcomes. In an effort to thaw out a freeze response, it helps to deconstruct what is happening at the times when we freeze or the other person does so. The following questions facilitate such a process.

QUESTIONS

- Try to imagine a conflict when you froze. How would you describe what freezing was like?

- What specifically felt "frozen" for you?

- What impact did your freezing have on the other person? How did freezing affect the specific conflict interaction?

- With what would you want to replace freezing in the context of this conflict? What would be different about the interaction if that occurred?

- If you do not want to thaw out, why is that so?

- How do you describe what you have observed when the other person in a conflict with you freezes? What is the impact on you at these times?

- How do you suppose you might help the other person in a conflict interaction to thaw out, if you want or wanted to? What difference might that make?

- Generally, what positive outcomes come from freezing? What not so positive ones?

- Generally, when you have reacted to being provoked in other conflict interactions—without freezing—what was different in that situation or those situations? What did you do differently? What different outcomes resulted?

- What learning might you apply from your previous experiences (your answer to the question above) in the future? What else do you think it would take for you to thaw out, if you wanted to, when you freeze in response to a conflict?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Avoiding Interpersonal Conflict

Our ways of engaging in conflict depend on many factors, and we choose a variety of methods—consciously or not—that help us find our way through it. Some variables influencing how we react and interact include our relationship with the other person, our history with them, the timing, and our mood at the time. Determinants also include the degree of offense we are experiencing, what is at stake if we avoid or do not avoid the situation, the emotional impact of the dispute on each of us and others, and what we are feeling in the moment about our lives.

Many of us have a conflict management style that has not worked well for us but becomes our default approach when we are under stress. That is, even when we learn constructive ways of being in conflict, we may at times rely on time-worn habits that have proven—from past experiences—to serve us poorly. It seems that overcoming the common tendency to *avoid* can be a challenge for many of us.

Avoiding conflict is somewhat akin to fleeing—one of the three common responses to provocation. Like fighting and freezing, avoiding or fleeing is one choice we have when faced with conflict, and sometimes it works as the optimal approach. Other times, we avoid conflict to our detriment. There are possible advantages and disadvantages in all decisions we make about whether to step up to dissension we are experiencing. The thing is, one of the results of avoiding conflict is that it leads to *a void* that is often filled with continuing feelings of confusion and upset.

We may know intellectually that the potential for resolving the issues, gaining a better understanding of what is happening, reconciling the relationship, and improving communications exists if we face the conflict. The unknown and lack of certainty, however, often create unsettling feelings, and we choose avoidance. For instance, we may fear the relationship will suffer, that we will lose control, or that our hopes and needs will not be met. We may worry, too, about a range of other possible repercussions, such as harsh words, hostility, ongoing negativity, and alienation, and that emotions will take over such

that nothing will be reconciled. We may avoid also because we are overwhelmed and just want to get away from the tension.

In the end, it takes courage to learn and use effective ways to engage in conflict if we tend to avoid it. And it takes courage to discern when avoidance is the optimal response, and learn and use effective ways to walk away from conflict. That said, a pattern in which the consistent choice is to avoid conflict is not compatible with efforts to learn what it takes to be with the discord in conflict-masterful ways. So, examining when and why we avoid conflict is a helpful exercise in the quest for conflict mastery. Here are some relevant questions about this topic.

QUESTIONS

- Under what circumstances do you usually avoid conflict? Generally speaking, what is it that you are avoiding in these circumstances? With regard to a conflict you are avoiding, what specifically are you avoiding in that one? Why are you doing so?

- What are the advantages for you of avoiding that situation? What are the disadvantages for you? What are the advantages for the other person that you are avoiding this situation? What are the disadvantages for her or him?

- How might the other person interpret your avoidance in a way that you prefer she or he does not?

- If you have not yet answered these questions, what will it be like for you if you continue to avoid the conflict? What is likely to happen with the conflict? What is likely to occur in your relationship with the other person?

- If you experience *a void* when you avoid conflict, how else might you describe the void or other feelings you experience?

- If the concept of fleeing applies to you and the ways in which you avoid conflict, what would you say you are fleeing from? What are you fleeing to?

- When someone else avoids a conflict with you, what do you observe about her or him? What is it like to be on the receiving end of someone's avoiding conflict?

- What do you suppose it would take for you to stop avoiding?

- What approach or approaches to conflict do you want to master that will work more effectively than avoiding?

- If you reconsider the current situation that you are avoiding, in what ways would that approach or approaches work for you (your answer to the previous question)? In what ways would that approach or approaches work for the other person?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Bottling Things Up

"Bottling things up" essentially refers to the inclination to keep things inside—to contain our thoughts and feelings with a reluctance to share them. When it comes to conflict, decisions about whether to raise a potentially contentious issue with someone, and how and when to do so, are especially complicated for those who have a tendency to keep things inside. Similarly, if we tend to bottle things up, we may be reluctant to respond when someone else brings up a matter with us.

We may be well aware that discussing issues that are in dispute with a view to resolving them and healing the relationship is a good idea. However, fears that things may get worse, past experiences that have resulted in negative outcomes, time-worn habits, the inclination to avoid or flee from conflict, and other reasons contribute to bottling things up.

To take the imagery of bottling things up a little further, if this phrase describes you and you want to explore this tendency, it helps to begin by picturing the bottle. Depending on the situation and the other person, you may view what is in it as inconsequential. This may mean you see some stuff in the bottle, but not much to fuss about. You may think the stuff smells a bit, but you can live with it.

As thoughts and emotions begin to grow—through repeated and noxious interactions with the other person—picture the bottle becoming fuller. The contents are murky, smelly, and not very appetizing, and the impact is becoming more toxic. When this occurs it is likely evident to the other person, and even to bystanders, that things are building up for you. That is, you may look and feel as though you are on the brink of overflowing—in a not very pleasant way.

This series of questions asks you to consider a situation in which this expression, "bottling things up," applies to you. Your answers will hopefully facilitate the decision about whether to say something about a situation that is bothering you. The questions and your answers may also help you consider conflict-masterful responses to someone else's efforts to raise matters when you are inclined to bottle things up.

QUESTIONS

- If you tend to bottle things up, what does the bottle represent (that is, in what place are you containing your thoughts and feelings)?

- What emotions are you bottling up about the specific situation you have in mind? What percentage of the bottle is consumed with these emotions? What thoughts are you bottling up regarding that same situation? What percentage of the bottle is consumed with your thoughts?

- If you were to draw the bottle showing the part and percentage that represent your emotions and the part and percentage that represent your thoughts, what would that look like?

- Which of your emotions might you pour out at this time because, as you think about it now, they really do not belong in the bottle? What else could you say or do at this point to reduce the build-up of your negative emotions about the situation or the other person?

- What thoughts might you pour out now because, as you think about it, they really do not belong in the bottle? What else could you say or do at this time to reduce the build-up of your unproductive thoughts?

- What else that you have not mentioned yet is contained in the bottle that is unhealthy? What will it take for you to pour those contents out?

- If you prefer to keep things bottled up and contain your thoughts and feelings and anything else inside, why is that so?

- If you ultimately decide to empty the bottle, what will be the last thought, feeling, or other ingredient that you will pour out? What is healthy in there that you will retain?

- What do you think it will feel like to empty the bottle?

- When you begin to bottle things up at a future time, what might you do differently if you don't want to repeat this response?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

What Is Your Achilles Heel?

The derivation of the expression "Achilles heel"[1] dates back to an ancient legend. The story goes that Achilles' mother, Thetis, dipped him into the river Styx to make him invulnerable. One of his heels was not covered by the water, though, and he was later killed by an arrow wound to the heel that was exposed. The expression "Achilles heel" is still used today as a metaphor for vulnerability and may be compared—to some extent—to **Hot Buttons**, discussed earlier in this chapter.

Our vulnerabilities often become exposed when we are in conflict. Or, they may lead to the initial discord. For example, if another person knows our area of vulnerability and wants to hurt us, she or he may purposely say or do something to wound our Achilles heel. Sometimes, of course, there is no intent, but our Achilles heel may be struck inadvertently, too. In any case, taking time to reflect on what is happening in the interrelational dynamic, and why, helps in the effort to build conflict intelligence.

Here is a series of questions to help you consider your Achilles heel and the area of vulnerability that results in conflict for you. The questions are designed also to help you gain a better understanding about the exposure you experience at these times, and what positive things your sensitive spots may represent. (If you have more than one area you consider your Achilles heel, it is suggested that you answer the questions by considering one area at a time.)

QUESTIONS

- What would you say is your Achilles heel—an area of vulnerability that is likely to result in conflict when touched?

- What makes this your Achilles heel?

- What, specifically, feels wounded when someone touches your Achilles heel? How does it feel?

- In what ways do you expose your Achilles heel, if you are aware of doing so? How do you appear or act when it feels wounded?

- If you try to hide your vulnerable point, how do you do this?

- What do you *not* know about your Achilles heel?

- What helps diminish the impact on you when you sense someone coming close to touching your Achilles heel? How else may you respond when someone touches your Achilles heel that shows you are well able to manage the provocation?

- How might you strengthen your Achilles heel so that you feel less vulnerable? How will you appear differently if you strengthen your Achilles heel?

- What about your Achilles heel actually represents one or more of your strengths? How will you appear differently if you accept that your vulnerability is a strength?

- How may the knowledge that your Achilles heel represents one or more of your strengths (your answers to the previous questions) help you in your quest for conflict mastery?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Conflict Jitters

In addition to the other responses to possible conflict discussed so far, when we expect that an interaction is likely to be contentious, the chances are that many of us get the "jitters." This means we may feel anxious, nervous, fidgety, and generally unsettled. We may fret and become preoccupied about what the other person may say or do, how we will cope, whether things will get out of hand, and so on. It is an understatement to say that jitter-causing stimuli get in the way of engaging effectively in conflict. It may be why some people choose to avoid interactions that are potentially discordant, or bottle things up.

Often the reasons for jitters have to do with fears that do not necessarily have a basis in reality. However, previous experiences, others' narratives about what has happened to them in like circumstances, and a wide range of other influences may result in our dreading conflict. The jitters may even contribute to the negative course the conflict takes, because we lose our equilibrium at these times. None of these reactions, of course, facilitates our efforts to become conflict masterful.

To alleviate conflict jitters, it helps to literally and figuratively step back as much as possible before engaging in an interaction about which we feel flustered and anxious. By doing so, we are more likely to figure out what is needed to manage the situation effectively and preempt unnecessary conflict. The following questions encourage the sorts of reflections that may enable you to do so, if this notion of conflict jitters applies to you. (More on the subject of fears is discussed in Chapter 1 and in the topic **Fears About Being in Conflict** in Chapter 3.)

QUESTIONS

- Under what sorts of circumstances do you get the conflict jitters?
- Try to imagine a specific conflict situation that is giving you the jitters. For what reasons are you experiencing them? How would you describe the jitters?
- What fears, if any, are you experiencing regarding this situation, if you have not yet mentioned them?
- If applicable, how realistic are the fears in the situation you have in mind, rating each on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being "absolutely realistic" and 1 being "not realistic at all"? If you rated 4 or less, what is not absolutely realistic?
- How are the jitters helping you be proactive and effective about the situation? How are the jitters not helping you? What are you forfeiting by having the jitters? If you did not have jitters about this conflict, what would you be saying or doing differently?
- What is within your control regarding this conflict? What are your strengths when it comes to managing conflict that you might use in this situation?
- How else might you look at this situation to help reduce the jitters? For instance, a year from now, what learning do you want to be able to say you gained from it?
- How are you viewing the other person in this situation? How might you look at her or him differently to take back the power you may be handing over?
- Who will you be in this situation without the jitters? How will you be?
- When you reach a place where the jitters will not interfere with how you proceed with this potential conflict or others, what will you say or do differently (or how will you otherwise be different)? With what will you have replaced the jitters?
- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?
- What insights do you have?

Chip on the Shoulder

According to Wikipedia, the expression that someone has a "chip on the shoulder" has a rich history dating back to 1756 and an incident at the Royal Navy Dockyards. There was apparently a requirement for shipwrights to carry timber chips under their arms, rather than their shoulders, because they could transport more that way. The story goes that one shipwright, John Miller, refused an order to carry timber chips under his arms and the master shipwright tried to physically force Miller to do so. Miller and others pushed the master and first assistant out of the gateway while keeping the chips on their shoulders. Accordingly, the phrase "chip on the shoulder" came to mean an attitude that dares the other person to refute a challenge on a matter.[2]

These days, if we say someone has a chip on her or his shoulder we are using the expression in much the same way, and also to refer to people who appear to be defensive, angry, bitter, and resentful, who bear grudges and act like victims. Such impressions may be interpreted from a person's demeanor, attitude, tone of voice, facial expressions, and body and verbal language.

Seeing and communicating with people who have a chip on their shoulder, as we perceive them, can be an off-putting and challenging experience. The interrelational dynamic that evolves as a consequence may even lead to conflict.

If you find yourself reacting to another person who, in your view, has a chip on her or his shoulder, the following questions may assist your quest for conflict mastery to be able to be proactive and manage this facade. (This topic and the next two—**The Cold Shoulder** and **That Put My Back Up**—all discuss the body language of conflict. Chapter 3 contains several more topics on this aspect of how we manifest emotions, namely, **Body and Facial Language of Conflict** and **Getting Your Nose Out of Joint**. Chapter 4 discusses this area under the topic **Observing Ourselves Through Someone Else's Eyes**.)

QUESTIONS

- Try to imagine a particular situation in which someone appears to have a chip on her or his shoulder toward you. How would you describe what that looks like?

- What impact does the perceived chip on this person's shoulder have on you?

- What do you suppose that chip is made of to have that sort of impact (your response to the previous question)?

- What about the chip on this person's shoulder contributes to the possibility of a conflict evolving between you?

- What, if anything, may you have said (or may be saying) or have done (or may be doing) that is contributing to her or his chip on the shoulder?

- What do you not know about the person who is carrying a chip on her or his shoulder that you would like to know?

- If you have observed a chip on someone else's shoulder that is not directed at you, what do you see—more objectively— that conjures up different responses in you (if it does)? What are those responses?

- For a minute, picture yourself as someone who is carrying a chip on your shoulder. What is that experience like as you imagine it? What do you imagine you need from others at this time (if you are carrying a chip on your shoulder)?

- What do you think there is to learn from people who carry chips on their shoulders?

- Going forward, how might you respond to the person in the particular situation you discussed here—or generally to people who carry chips on their shoulders—in a way that reflects conflict mastery?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

The Cold Shoulder

One of the many possible reactions to people who provoke us is to give them "the cold shoulder." This is another metaphor referring to the shoulder that provides a visual description of the ways in which emotions during interpersonal conflicts may be conveyed. Like the phrase "chip on the shoulder," a "cold shoulder" conjures up a vivid image that expresses a great deal in a few words about body language that is sometimes demonstrated in conflict situations. The exact origin of this phrase is not definitive, but it is typically used to express an act of dismissing or disregarding someone.

The first occurrence of the phrase "cold shoulder" in print was apparently by Sir Walter Scott in *The Antiquary*.[3] Descriptors include aloofness and disdain. Another explanation is that the term stems from a direct yet subtle way to serve food to an unwanted guest, that is, by serving an inferior cut of meat ("cold shoulder of mutton") as opposed to a hot meal or a roast fresh out of the oven,[4] which was customary hospitality at the time. A third source claims it is a literal action: placing one's back toward, or at least keeping a shoulder between, a person one is trying to avoid.[5]

When it comes to conflict, the physical representation of a cold shoulder, then, may refer to literally turning away from and avoiding the other person in a dismissive or contemptuous way. Or, it may be an obvious lack of warmth and openness demonstrated by minimal, if any, communications.

We know that when we experience negative emotions toward someone, such as when a conflict is brewing, we typically show we are upset in various ways besides what comes out of our mouths. Our facial and body language speak volumes, and we pick up signals of other people's negative feelings, too, when we observe their physical reactions. We may not always correctly identify what we are seeing and sensing. However, many of us are able to interpret somatic messages, such as a cold shoulder, with some degree of accuracy. It does not mean, however, that we know the reasons for such behavior.

For this set of questions, it helps to consider two situations—one in which you are experiencing or have experienced someone giving you the cold shoulder. The other involves giving someone else the cold shoulder, if you have ever done so. As with many behaviors, this one may happen at various stages of conflict, and whenever it occurs it is an opportune time to engage with the other person. If the engagement is initiated as soon as it happens—which is commonly before conflict emerges—the timing is ripe to prevent unnecessary escalation of a dispute.

QUESTIONS

- How would you describe the cold shoulder you are experiencing from another person? What is the coldest part about it?

- What messages are you inferring from the other person's cold shoulder? What is her or his cold shoulder accomplishing? What is it not accomplishing?

- What do you think the person's reasons are for giving you the cold shoulder? What reasons do you know for certain? If you do not know the reasons, what are some possibilities?

- What would it take for you to engage the other person in conversation to be able to find out what is happening? What concerns do you have about doing so, if you feel reluctant?

- To look at this another way, generally speaking, under what circumstances, if any, have you given someone else the cold shoulder, in this or another conflict? What does it feel like?

- If you are or were giving the cold shoulder to another person in a specific situation, how would you describe what you are or were doing? How do you think the other person might describe your cold shoulder? What might it feel like to her or him?

- For what reasons are you choosing, or did you choose, to give the cold shoulder?

- What message(s) are you, or were you, meaning to convey by giving the other person the cold shoulder? What messages do you think the other person is receiving, or received, that align with your intent? What messages might she or he be receiving, or have received, that do not align with your intent?

- What would it take for you to give a "warm shoulder" instead of a cold one in this situation? Generally, what would a warm shoulder look like as compared to a cold shoulder, whether it is you or the other person giving it?

- What is a conflict-masterful response to another person—rather than giving the cold shoulder—when in conflict? How might you respond in conflict-masterful ways to people with whom you are in conflict, who demonstrate a cold shoulder toward you?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

That Put My Back Up

According to one source, the derivation of the term "that put my back up" came into being in Britain in the 18th century and is derived from cats' habit of arching their backs when threatened or annoyed.[6] The expression continues to be used to describe the impact of being provoked by certain acts or deeds of another person. That is, not just cats, but some of us humans also demonstrate angry responses to perceived threats and things that annoy us, and so "put our backs up." As with the phrases "cold shoulder" and "chip on the shoulder," this one also reflects the fact that our bodies reveal our emotional reactions. It similarly conjures up a vivid image that provides different language to describe another somatic reaction to provocation.

Literally speaking, some of us react to something that challenges or provokes us by raising our shoulders, rounding or straightening our backs, and otherwise showing bodily reactions. There is usually no mistaking the posture, when observed, as anything but a defensive reaction. We may also use the expression "that put my back up" when we experience anger or other emotions internally in reaction to something another person says or does that offends us. So, we may not always show the impact outwardly at these times.

Though our backs may go up at any time in the conflict sequence, this reaction often appears early on when things begin to ignite. In any case, it is a good time to take the opportunity and examine what is happening. If this expression resonates for you—whether you are aware of your back going up when in conflict, or you have observed it in others—this series of questions will help to explore that experience.

QUESTIONS

- When your back goes up in conflict—literally or figuratively—what are you experiencing at these times?

- How would you describe how you appear at these times?

- How might a friend or family member who observes your back go up describe what they see?

- How do you think your reaction appears to the other person with whom there is discord that is different from your answers to the two previous questions? What may be the same?

- What sort of things put your back up? When answering this question, think of the last two or three times you could have used, or did use, this expression.

- When your back goes up, where does your heart go?

- When you have observed other people put their backs up when in conflict, how would you describe what you saw?

- What is the impact on you at these times (your answer to the above question)?

- How is putting your back up a useful conflict management technique? How is it not?

- If you want to stop putting your back up as a reaction to the other person or potential conflict situation, what might you do instead?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Making a Mountain Out of a Molehill

When we begin to experience irritation about something happening between another person and ourselves, our thoughts and feelings sometimes go to places that are not helpful for the situation and relationship. At these times, we are not always fully aware of what is happening, or the fact that our reactions may be escalating things. However, before we know it, our initial responses may take twists and turns that end up complicating matters. As they grow, our evolving perceptions may change from what they were in the beginning. And as things expand in our minds and hearts, we find ourselves more and more conflicted, confused, and upset.

Such a situation illustrates the essence of the expression "making a mountain out of a molehill." According to Wikipedia, the earliest recorded use of this phrase was in 1548, in a book by Nicholas Udall—thought to be one of the first people to use the expression. The historical meaning of this idiom had to do with "responding disproportionately to something—where a person exaggerates or makes too much of a minor issue."[7] This usage is generally consistent with the current meaning ascribed to this idiom.

Making a mountain out of a molehill is sometimes a reaction that we are aware of at some level of consciousness. Other times, we are not fully cognizant of how or why matters are growing bigger in our thoughts and feelings, and why we are becoming increasingly upset.

If you have a general tendency to exaggerate and imagine things being and becoming bigger than they are, you will find the questions on this topic especially pertinent. Even if you do not typically react this way, you may have done so in the past, and the topic arouses your curiosity. Or perhaps, this sort of reaction is happening at the current time, which is how the following questions are framed (though it is still helpful to consider past events to deconstruct this concept). In any case, it will help, when responding to these questions,

to consider a specific situation about which something that started small is growing out of proportion.

QUESTIONS

- In the conflict you have in mind, what first provoked you (that is, what did the other person say or do, or not say or do, that led to an inner, negative reaction in you)?

- More specifically, what about that experience aroused your inner reaction?

- What is, or was, your inner reaction?

- Imagine that the initial provocation is an actual molehill. How would you describe what the molehill is, or was, made of? How else might you describe how it looks, or looked, when it began?

- What changed in your internal processing of things, or between you and the other person, that is resulting in the molehill's growth into a mountain?

- What is the mountain made of that the molehill wasn't?

- How are you experiencing the growth of the mountain that is different from your reaction to the molehill you described? In what ways is your reaction the same?

- Under what circumstances are you not as inclined to make a mountain out of a molehill? What relevance does your answer have to do with the particular situation you brought to mind?

- How might you stop the molehill from growing into a mountain? What conflict-masterful things could you do at this point if the mountain is appearing?

- How might you, in the future, stop yourself from making a mountain out of a molehill?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Jumping to Conclusions

The idiom "jumping to conclusions" essentially refers to a tendency to assume something as fact when there is not a clear reason to do so. Jumping to conclusions can easily exacerbate a conflict because we are operating on assumptions we do not know to be factual.

Conclusions may be about our perceptions of people's character, motives, attitude, and so on, based on their actions that irritate us. This sort of response—in which we attribute things to people without sure knowledge—may be due to factors such as our history with them or with similar situations or relationship dynamics. It may come from biases or stereotypes we have developed. It may be due to the habitual inclination to find fault or think the worst of people. We may tend to be negative and pessimistic in general, or be untrusting of others. Or, we may let our vulnerabilities, insecurities, and fears determine our interpretations.

Such variables as these and others tend to fuel the inclination to make meaning of something that is not necessarily applicable or possibly even relevant. Whatever the reasons, when we do not have facts to support the conclusions we reach, conflict often arises.

The following questions are designed to help bring to the surface whatever lies beneath your conclusions regarding another person in a specific situation. The questions will be especially useful if you are aware of a tendency to jump to conclusions, or if you are currently doing so about an interaction.

QUESTIONS

- In a situation in which you are jumping to a conclusion, what is your conclusion about the other person?

- What was the starting point before you reached that conclusion (your answer to the previous question)? What propelled the jump to the conclusion you reached?

- What makes your conclusion a realistic possibility? How may it not be absolutely realistic?

- If the conclusion you determined is correct, what does that mean for you? What does it mean for your relationship with the other person?

- If your conclusion is not correct, what does that mean for you? What does it mean for your relationship with the other person?

- What other possible conclusions might there be other than what you have considered so far?

- If this situation was told to you by someone else going through this experience, what thoughts, or what other conclusions, may occur to you to suggest that you have not contemplated as yet?

- What do you think occupies the space between your starting point and the conclusion you reached? How does what is in the space change your conclusion, if it does?

- What is your preferred conclusion? In what ways, if any, may that conclusion be possible despite the determination you initially made?

- What are some ways you can think of to refrain from jumping to conclusions in the future if you think there is benefit in doing so?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Making Assumptions

As with the tendency to jump to conclusions, figuring out from where and how our assumptions arise is not a straightforward exercise. Undoubtedly, our life experiences over time, our instincts, reasons why we say or do related things, explanations provided by family, friends, and colleagues, and other rationales have an impact on our interpretations.

Further, gossip we hear or participate in, the closeness of the particular relationship, the understanding and trust between us, how empathetic we are in general and specifically about the other person in this scenario, the degree to which we tend to judge others, how attuned we are to ourselves, and a wide range of other variables also influence our thinking and contribute to what we read into people's words, actions, behaviors, attitudes, and more.

Sometimes the meaning we give and what we assume about a statement or action by one person may differ from similar experiences with another person who says or does the same thing. That is, we may overlook, make excuses for, or smile at something done or said by a dear friend and not make negative assumptions about her or his motives, whereas we may read ill intent into the same statement or action by someone we don't know or like for some reason. Whatever the case, conflict easily arises from misinterpretations, and misinterpretations may even turn into accusations.

We know that unexplored attributions do not foster conflict intelligence and that this aspect of conflict, like others, has many layers to it. The next series of questions provide an opportunity to examine some of those attributions if you have a tendency to make assumptions or assign motives to others, or are doing so in a particular situation. (This topic has some similarities to **Jumping to Conclusions,** and the questions there may also help in your reflections here.)

QUESTIONS

- In a specific interaction in which you are interpreting someone's words or actions in negative ways, what did the person specifically say or do (or not say or do) that is having an adverse impact on you?

- For what reasons do you think she or he is saying or doing that?

- What is leading you to believe this is what she or he intended?

- What explanation might the other person provide about those actions or words that may not be consistent with the reasons you named (your answer to the second question, above)?

- If you have observed a friend saying or doing these same things or something similar, what other reason or reasons, if any, occur to you? If you have said or done the same sort of thing, what other reasons arise?

- What do you think would surprise the other person most about what you have assumed about her or his actions or words? What may surprise you about other possible explanations that she or he, or someone else, might suggest?

- If you think the person in this situation intended to cause a negative impact on you, why would that be the case?

- What do you suppose keeps you from checking out your assumptions with her or him? What is that hesitation about? What is likely to happen if you do not check out your assumptions?

- If you do check out your assumptions and find you accurately identified them, what impact will that have on you and your relationship with the other person? What may be the impact on you and the relationship if you are not accurate about your assumptions?

- What is your learning here about making assumptions that will help you in your efforts to strengthen your conflict intelligence?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

More Explorations of Conflict Perceptions

Once we become irritated by another person, and especially if our feelings escalate with repeated interactions, it is challenging to drop the negative assumptions we conjure up about her or him and the motives we attribute. What also happens in many cases is that we get stuck in our positions and do not hear or clearly understand what is being said and why. Our assumptions grow as we become further entrenched and we lose perspective and a grasp on our feelings and thoughts—and what is going on for the other person. We do that and the other person does that, limiting the possibilities for clarifying, understanding, and possibly reconciling our differences.

As with making assumptions and jumping to conclusions, the quest for conflict mastery benefits from an exploration of any tendency to attribute negative interpretations of others and their words and deeds as soon as we are provoked. The objective of exploring this subject further here is to encourage consideration of other ways that help increase awareness about perceptions before acting on them—and to consider how you may be perceived too, to be able to unravel more effectively the ways in which perceptions impede the way forward.

For this set of questions, it is suggested that you examine a specific situation to which you are reacting and you are not sure whether your perceptions are 100 percent correct. Although there is no obligation to do so, if you select the scenario you explored for one or both of the previous topics (**Making Assumptions**, **Jumping to Conclusions**), this set of questions takes a slightly different approach and may further add to your exploration of conflict perceptions.

QUESTIONS

- What are your perceptions about the other person's contribution to the situation that has the potential for evolving between you?

- About what are you 100 percent certain regarding the other person's contribution? What part or parts of your perceptions about her or him may not be absolutely accurate?

- What negative motives may account for her or his actions or words? What positive ones may there be?

- What may the other person's perceptions be of you and your part in the conflict?

- What negative motives may she or he be attributing to you?

- With which part or parts of the other person's possible perceptions of you and your motives in the situation do you agree? With which part or parts of her or his possible perceptions of you and your motives do you disagree?

- What positive motives for your actions or words may she or he be unaware of or missing?

- If you were to start anew regarding the dynamic between you, what would you do differently? How would that change the other person's perceptions? What might she or he have done differently that would have changed your perceptions of her or him?

- What do you not know about the other person that, if you did know, might be helpful to better manage things between you? How might your answer(s) here be relevant to the assumptions you are making?

- What do you want to have happen in this situation that is not likely to happen because of your current perceptions of each other? How might you influence a more positive outcome?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Giving People the Benefit of the Doubt

One of the options we have about how to react to someone who provokes us is to give the person "the benefit of the doubt." This expression is reportedly derived from the legal phrase "reasonable doubt" first documented in 17th-century English law.[8] The phrase was said to refer to the degree of doubt required to acquit a criminal defendant, and was defined in terms of moral certainty. This expression continues to be commonly used when assessing criminal culpability. It is used in other contexts, too, such as when we are experiencing interpersonal conflict and attributing blame.

How does giving another person the benefit of the doubt apply in conflict situations? The expression may be relevant, for instance, when it comes to whether or not we blame the other person for something that offends us. If we give her or him the benefit of the doubt, we are being open to the possibility that maybe we are not absolutely correct in our fault-finding, and that there may be understandable and forgivable reasons for what is provoking us. Or, as discussed in **Jumping to Conclusions**, **Making Assumptions**, and **More Explorations of Conflict Perceptions**, it may be we attribute negative interpretations, make assumptions, or jump to conclusions based on our perceptions of others' actions, words, and motives, although we do not know for sure that they apply.

If we give the benefit of the doubt, we are able to reframe what we are attributing or, at least, to drop our attachment to our initial assumptions. In essence, we can consider other possible reasons for people's conduct.

The following questions will help to flush out a tendency to blame where there is a lack of absolute certainty about the reasons for the other person's actions or words. These questions will also help to generate thinking about alternative rationales that may be feasible— giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. Doing so may ultimately prevent escalation of unnecessary conflict. **Understanding Why**

We Blame in Chapter 4 also explores aspects of fault-finding that are relevant here.

- When you consider a situation in which you are blaming another person for something, with what specifically are you finding fault?

- Why do you suppose she or he is doing or saying that?

- If the other person overheard your response, with what do you know for sure she or he would disagree? With what are you certain she or he would agree?

- What alternative or additional reasons might the other person give you for saying or doing what was said or done?

- What sounds reasonable about the other person's possible answer(s) to the previous question? What does not resonate?

- What other plausible reasons might you suggest to someone else in this situation?

- If you were to give the other person the benefit of the doubt for anything, what might that be?

- Why that or those things?

- What positive feelings do you experience, if any, when you consider giving her or him the benefit of the doubt? What about giving the benefit of the doubt does not work for you? Why is that so?

- Under what circumstances do you usually give people the benefit of the doubt? What difference does it make whether or not you give the other person the benefit of the doubt?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Speaking Up

One of the things that complicates conflict and leads to bad experiences is the inability to speak up, voice our needs, stand up for ourselves, express our feelings, and explain or defend our perspective. Even if we usually have the ability to do any of these things, the nature of some conflicts, and the dynamics between certain people and ourselves, may impede our confidence and courage at times.

Though a fear of conflict, possible repercussions, and other reasons get in the way of effectively initiating and engaging in potentially difficult discussions, not speaking up can lead to discord. At the very least, when we do not speak up we experience internal dissension, and that has a negative impact on us and our relationship with the other person. And these sorts of feelings tend to build up over time.

In reality, certain situations and dynamics between us and others are more challenging to manage. For some of us, speaking up does not come easily under most circumstances, much less a potentially fractious interaction. Our emotions, individual conflict styles and experiences, and self-limiting beliefs and behaviors all add other layers of complexity. Composure and confidence typically plummet at these times along with self-esteem, such that speaking up becomes even less likely.

If you have challenges finding and keeping your voice when in conflict, these questions will help you explore these and other possible ways to overcome them. Being able to speak up is undoubtedly to our benefit if we use the pertinent skills before conflict emerges. However, honing proficiencies for effectively expressing ourselves is a good plan for use anywhere along the conflict trajectory.

QUESTIONS

- What does the expression "speaking up" mean to you? In your view, what three words best describe what you experience when you do not speak up when there is growing discord between you and another person? What sorts of things go through your head at these times?

- When you consider a particular situation in which you are not speaking up, what specifically is keeping you from doing so? Why is that so?

- What is not speaking up costing you?

- What is the worst thing you can imagine happening if you do speak up?

- On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being "absolutely" and 1 being "absolutely not," how realistic is the possibility that the worst thing you just described could happen if you speak up? If your answer is 5, what makes it so? If your answer is 4 or less, what does the rating mean?

- In the particular situation you are considering here, what three words describe how you will feel if you express what you want to say and your messages get across? What do you envision as the best-case scenario if you speak up?

- What are the main messages you would express if you did speak up in that situation? How might you begin a dialogue, if you gain more skills and confidence to speak up, that is most likely to lead toward the feelings and best-case scenario you just described (your answers to the previous question)?

- What skills and abilities do you want to work on to help carry through this conversation? What else do you think would help you find your voice?

- What do you want to learn about yourself to facilitate your proficiency in this area in future conflicts?

- What inner resources do you know you already have to be able to express yourself in this and future conflicts, based on previous experiences when you have been able to speak up?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

You Make Me So Angry

For a number of reasons, the expression, "You make me so angry" (or sad, disappointed, depressed, and so on) does not quite work. Sentences that begin this way indicate that the speaker believes the other person has the power and ability to cause the emotions the speaker feels. Such statements essentially blame someone else for something only we have the power and ability to control and regulate. This topic explores our own power when it comes to emotions we experience in conflict.

This by no means suggests that it is not necessary to explore the feelings we experience in response to another person's actions or words. Our negative reactions to what someone does or says usually reflect that we perceive something meaningful to us is being challenged. By examining these reactions, we are better able to identify and understand what needs, values, and beliefs are of such major importance that they motivate strong emotions in us when we sense another person challenges or threatens them. Further, thinking out what drives our emotions, in each of our conflicts, strengthens our ability to regulate them through increased awareness about what we are experiencing and why.

The level of consciousness that arises from exploring what lies beneath our emotional reactions also helps to preempt forays into unnecessary conflict and interactions that may be managed more effectively. We may accomplish this, for instance, not only by gaining more clarity about what incites our reactions, but also by considering what is driving the other person's reactions. Insights such as these—about why certain actions compel strong feelings in us and the other person—facilitate the route to conflict mastery.

Here are some questions that help such an exploration by focusing on a specific emotion you are experiencing, or have experienced, in a conflict. (This aspect is further explored in Chapter 3 under the topic **Understanding Heightened Emotions When in Conflict**.)

QUESTIONS

- If you are making a statement that begins with, "She or he makes me so _____ (angry, upset, sad…)" about a person's words, actions, and so on in a specific conflict, what is one emotion you might use to fill in this blank?

- What happened, or is happening, that resulted in that emotion?

- In what way(s) does the other person cause _____ (whatever emotion you answered in the first question)?

- What part or parts of your previous answer describes your perception of the other person's intention(s)? Or, if your perception about the other person's intention(s) is not included in your answer to the previous question, what do you think it is (or they are)?

- If you do not think the other person intended to cause the emotions you referred to (in the first question in this series), what reasons might there be for her or his actions or words?

- What emotion, if any, comes up for you when you consider those possible reasons (your answer to the previous question)?

- If you believe the other person has the ability and power to "make" you feel what you did, what sorts of things foster this belief?

- If you believe the other person did not actually *make* you feel what you experienced, how does that belief change things, if at all?

- What ability and power do you believe you have regarding your reactions to the other person in this scenario? What other strengths do you already have to be able to respond in conflict-masterful ways?

- Generally speaking, what sorts of abilities and power do you have and intend to use going forward when other people's actions and words negatively affect you?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Preparing to Initiate a Conflict Conversation

Being involved in conflict-related conversations is a common happenstance. Whether we initiate them or others do, many of us experience some degree of angst in anticipation of communications perceived to be potentially contentious. Fears often surface, as does a range of other unsettling reactions that relate to our insecurities and vulnerabilities. Whatever we dread about such conversations has the potential for reducing our confidence and ability to communicate.

One of the other consequences of being apprehensive about raising conflictual matters (even ones that may only possibly be so) is that we tend to put them off. Or, we blurt out something hurtful, in awkward ways, or at inappropriate times, or when the other person is not ready and open to listen. Because one or more of these approaches may result in counterproductive communications and unnecessary conflict, it helps to give careful consideration about how best to proceed.

Preparation is key. That is, becoming masterful at initiating (or responding to) communications when we begin to notice dissension requires stepping back early on and engaging in thoughtful preparation. It means being purposeful about what we are hoping to achieve and what it takes to do so. It means thinking out what we want to be most prepared for. It means facing our fears about the situation, including our worries about how the other person may react and how we will manage such reactions if our concerns become reality. It means considering what other variables need to be contemplated to be able to plan the optimal interaction, as much as possible.

Taking a methodical and reflective approach before entering into conversations that may become problematic, then, helps in many ways. For instance, by doing so we gain distance from the situation and the emotions that drive us to react. We take time to consider different perspectives, and get clearer on our perceptions and assumptions including those we need to check out. We envision and practice optional responses in the event we are challenged. We consider

possible solutions to the issues in dispute. And with all this focused preparation, we build conflict intelligence and mastery.

The following questions are designed to help you prepare for a potentially challenging conversation that you aim to initiate and engage in with conflict mastery.

QUESTIONS

- What is the outcome you want to achieve in this conversation? What are the key messages you want to convey to be able to achieve that outcome? What else do you intend to say or do to help facilitate reaching the result you want?

- What outcome may the other person want?

- What of the other person's messages do you want to be most prepared for? How do you want to respond to those messages in a way that reflects conflict mastery?

- To what extent do you want to strive for a result that is mutually acceptable? What result might that be?

- If you want things to resolve in a mutually satisfactory way, what will a collaborative approach sound like?

- How do you want to be, and be perceived, during this conversation? What tone, manner, or body language do you intend to have in order to come across the way you want? What will you *not* say or do in this conversation because it is not aligned with your intentions?

- What is your biggest fear about initiating this conversation? What is likely *not* realistic about that happening? What is likely realistic about that fear? What is the optimal way to prepare for that possibility?

- How do you want to be in relation to the other person when this conversation is over? How do you want to feel about yourself?

- What do you know from observing others and your own positive experiences with other interpersonal conflicts that will help you interact the way you want to in this conversation?

- What other conflict-masterful ways of being will guide you to interact in this conversation the way you want?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Boundary Considerations in a Conflict Conversation

This topic is linked to the previous one—the intention-setting nature of planning a conflict-related conversation. Boundary considerations require giving even more thought to the approaches that will help achieve your desired outcome, and more particularly, what you plan to stay away from saying or doing. That is, as discussed in Chapter 1 and in the topic **The Platinum Moment of Choice in Conflict** in this chapter, our reactions, attitudes, and manner are all choices we have. Considering what not do or say—because it could cross a line for the other person and derail the dialogue altogether—is therefore crucial.

We all have limits of tolerance—referred to here as "boundaries"—regarding what constitutes acceptable ways of interacting. Sometimes when others cross our boundaries, or we cross theirs, the result is a breakdown of communications, negatively affecting the discussion, including how to reconcile matters, if that is the objective (or part) of the conversation. Even when we know there is a risk of crossing a line, being well prepared to deliver difficult messages and effectively receive and respond to the other person's reaction remains a conflict-mastery objective. Much of the time, we are not aware of what may push things too far, and this means striving as best we can to anticipate and prepare for a range of possibilities.

The following questions invite you to consider the other person's possible limits of tolerance to be able to keep a pending conversation on track, even if crossing a line is inevitable and necessary. (Reconsidering the questions in **Preparing to Initiate a Conflict Conversation** may help as you further explore the elements of effective conflict conversations here.)

QUESTIONS

- When you consider the communication you are planning, what might you say or do, based on your knowledge of the other person, that may push her or him too far? If you do not know (or cannot speculate possible answers), what sorts of things might cross a boundary if you imagine yourself as the other person in the conversation?

- What may that thing (or those things) say about what is important to the other person that you want to consider in the dialogue?

- What concerns do you have about what may happen if you cross the other person's boundary?

- What do you want to get out in the open that has some boundary risks? How may you best present that (or those)?

- If the other person's boundary is crossed, in what ways might that help things? How might it hurt things?

- What will you do to handle matters—in conflict-masterful ways—if the other person reacts strongly after experiencing that you crossed her or his boundary?

- Regarding the conflict between you, what do you think the other person might say or do in the conversation that would cross your boundary or boundaries?

- How might you describe your boundary or boundaries (from the previous question) in more detail? What does this say about what is important to you?

- How might having your boundary crossed help things? How might it hurt things?

- In what conflict-masterful ways might you respond if the other person's messages or ways of delivering them cross your boundaries?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?

Preparing to Respond in a Conflict Conversation

Because some of us are regularly involved in communications that have the potential for becoming combative, emotional, inflammatory, argumentative, and so on, we know that some responses work better than others. When someone initiates a conversation of this nature, it can catch us off guard to the extent that we do not respond in ways that work well for engaging in a constructive dialogue. Being able to participate effectively in discussions that may become divisive when someone else initiates them is an indicator of conflict mastery, just as it is when we are the initiator. Similarly, postponing the interaction until we are ready, while at the same time not being perceived as ignoring the other person's initiative, is another sign.

Determining the optimal time to engage in communications that someone else initiates can be challenging, and timing is not a choice that we usually think we have. Nevertheless, preparing to respond in a respectful and thoughtful way requires, among other things, being purposeful and careful about when to do so, not only how.

Suggesting alternative timing when not ready, for instance, may sound like, "Thank you for approaching me on this. Let's get a time that works for both of us to do so." Or, "I hear how important this is and I want to talk about it, too. I just need to think things through first. When else are you available?" Statements of this nature—using your words and manner of speaking, of course—often help deflect negative energy and the urgency being experienced if feeling pressed by the other person. This is especially so if her or his approach triggers a negative reaction.

The following questions will help you focus and prepare for the occasions when another person initiates a potentially contentious and challenging conversation. These questions (along with those in **Preparing to Initiate a Conflict Conversation** and **Boundary Considerations in a Conflict Conversation**) will increase awareness about how

to facilitate and participate in a constructive dialogue with the object-
ive of preempting unnecessary conflict.

QUESTIONS

- When you are the initiator of a conversation aiming to
  prevent unnecessary conflict, what is it like for you?
  In what similar ways do you suppose the other person
  who is inviting a dialogue with you may be experiencing
  the role of initiator? What do you imagine may be different
  for her or him?

- What is a conflict-masterful way for you to respond when
  someone else initiates a conversation, if you are not ready
  at the time you are approached?

- If you think about a specific situation where discord is
  present and the other person wants to discuss it, what are
  the possible opportunities for you in having this conversa-
  tion? What opportunities may there be for her or him?

- What risks are possible for you? What risks may there be
  for the other person?

- Related to this specific situation, what would you want to
  clarify? What clarification might the other person want?

- What do you want to be most careful about in your
  response—for instance, approaches that have not worked
  before for you, or for others you have observed, that you do
  not want to repeat? What has worked well for you, or for
  others you have observed, that you want to repeat?

- For this situation, what are the skills you want to hone to be
  able to respond effectively? What else is important that you
  want or need to be most prepared for in this particular
  conversation?

- How will you know when you are ready to engage in this
  conversation?

- Going forward, what do you consider will be the main challenges for you when someone else initiates a conflict-related conversation? How else may you best prepare for these challenges that you have not yet considered here?

- Based on your reflections and answers here, what are some other best practices you plan to use when responding to someone else who initiates a potentially difficult conversation?

- What else occurs to you as you consider these questions?

- What insights do you have?